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Section Two

NOVEMBER 2025

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First Ice: The Northern Holiday



Setting up extra rods on tip-ups yielded some slabs for the author's friend 'Hammy'.

by Brian 'Bro' Brosdahl

Let's call it what it is: Early ice is a North Country holiday. Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve do not put the same thrill in me as walking on and fishing first ice!

I know I'm not the only one who is wired differently like this. Men and women, young and old, get the same excitement in pursuit of fish on hard water. Our minds are consumed with thoughts of when and where we're hitting the ice. But all lakes do not offer early fishing at the same time. Deep lakes take a lot longer to develop ice. So, our menu for early ice is based on shallow lakes providing the earliest opportunities for a chance to catch fish through the ice.

Upper Red Lake in northern Minnesota is a classic example. The basin is less than 20 feet deep. Early-ice walleyes are catchable in 6 to 10 feet of water, which is the primary break close to shore, reachable in a walkable distance. For a small access fee, resorts check ice, drill and mark stakes where anglers are able to walk safely.

There are hundreds of shallow bodies of water spread throughout northern, western and eastern Minnesota, so there are many early-ice options, but not all lakes are the same. Upper Red Lake offers easy-to-catch, early-ice walleyes. Other shallow lakes may only have northern pike, perch and bass. Some may have a few walleyes or panfish. However, anglers are not exploring uncharted territory like decades ago. Most lakes today are in listed in a database detailing fishing potential or have satellite images available on cell phone.

Before the ice

Part of the fun of pre-ice fishing is researching and creating a list of potential places to fish. I do most of this on my cell phone using One Boat Network, available in the app store. I mark spots on my cell phone which have LakeMaster maps to explore and zoom in, mark waypoints on spots, and potential access points with icons and symbols from waypoint storage. For example, a red icon meaning hot, green is good, and yellow I will think about. Then, using Bluetooth to transfer data from the phone, I can easily download the info to my Humminbird Xplore GPS. With LakeMaster preloaded maps, all icons will be visible on the onscreen map.

On the lake, turn the unit's screen to face the front of the tow sled to: 1) occasionally glance back at the screen map for orientation and 2) plot a trail on your unit on your way out to the spot. Make sure to drill, test and measure ice thickness the entire way out. If a snow squall comes in and turns tracks and holes to a blank sheet, the GPS trail can be followed back to shore. Pack light, and now let's go ice fishing!

Bro Pro Tip: Ice fishing safety is paramount. How do you know if you can make it to a good fishing spot where there is a safe, four inches or more of clear, black ice? Drill and measure. Then drill and measure some more to keep safety protocols at the highest standard. There is a wealth of ice safety information online—but if you don't know, don't go.

Must-haves for first ice

Ice fishing is less complicated than open

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Bro unveils an early-ice beast at sunset. Northern-holiday-goers know it as the 'hour of power'.

water. You don't launch a boat and you don't have trailer bearings to grease. It's as simple as walking out on the ice. Here's what you need:

- A bucket with St. Croix ice combos, a small box of tackle, micro RAZR pucks filled with (1) waxworms, (2) maggots and (3) pre-cut minnow heads.
- RAZR Synthetic Ultra Lite 6inch auger on a 1/2-inch lithium hammer drill
- Humminbird Xplore with MEGA Live 2 on a Fish Armor Shuttle with Amped Outdoor 14.8V 32Ah lithium battery
- Small plastic sled with a *long* rope to pull the sled, and a throw cushion attached to a second rope via speed clips
- Ice picks around your neck and micro spikes on your boots

Keeping everything light, I have no problem walking for miles. And this whole setup for first ice costs less than one captain's suspension chair in a boat. Ice fishing is easy and one of the less-expensive choices in outdoor activities.

Where to begin

On Upper Red Lake, seek out rock clusters and edges on which to set up and ambush walleyes. On most other shallow lakes, it's all about weeds and their correlation to the primary shoreline break. Most of the minnow forage is hiding in the weeds. Walleyes and other predators cruise the edges, hunting for minnows that stray outside the cover. Large northern pike will be in break line weeds for several weeks before they drop out to the basin.

Jumbo perch use the flats adjacent to weed edges; they like to graze in short weeds where they can see predators from a distance. Crappies and bluegills stay buried in the thickest pockets of weeds until sunset when they come out to the weed edge to hunt bloodworms and rising plankton. Psst... some bodies of water that have all these fish species in the same weed beds! You might see me on that lake!

I like action and variety. Finding schools of fish on early ice is the juice! I may visit again but will not fish the same body of water over and over. It is stealthier to move around and better for the fishery. I do like to explore different lakes and unlock their secret schools of fish and bite windows.

If the ice is clear and there is no cover, fishing could be tougher. In these cases, find small snow drifts or opaque ice to fish on. I drill several holes and kick ice shavings around them for concealment, especially on clear lakes. Movement should be kept to a minimum. When fishing with friends and family, spreading the group out and keeping a distance apart will produce more fish. Anglers who are stealthy on the ice don't discourage fish from swimming through naturally while hunting and foraging.

Tools of the trade

- While I pack light, I always bring the necessities for shallow-water ice fishing:
- Northland Buckshot Flutter Spoons which are great for horizontal tumbling and flash
 - Twitchin' Puppets for wider movement
 - Tungsten Forage Spoons, Gill Getters, Mud Bugs and an assortment of plastic baits

If I'm using live minnows, I bring assorted colors of Gamakatsu #4, 6 and 8 Octopus-style hooks, rigged with a single split shot on the line. I also have assorted sizes of Gamakatsu Siwash single hooks to crimp on my ice spoons for jigging a whole minnow, or on a deadstick.

I admit that I've struggled to limit the ice rods that I bring. In fact, I have been known to bring way too many. But now, I have it narrowed to three rods:

- St. Croix Custom Ice 28-inch Perch Eye Spoon Rod
- 28-inch Tungsten Tamer
- 32-inch Dead Eye Deadstick rod

I set all my rods up with SEVIIN GS 750 reels and Sunline 3-, 4- and 6-pound FC Ice fluorocarbon line. I use small clip swivels for tumbling and swimming spoons and lures. And I place my deadstick in an I Fish Pro Tip-Up; when the flag pops up, it helps me to see bites from a distance.

Jigging cadence

Jigging cadence is the last key to making a fish hit after a spoon or lure has been selected and is tipped with bait. On Flutter Spoons, try a sharp, two-foot upswing with the rod tip, followed by short, one-foot jigging strokes, with a long pause 3 to 4 seconds after the double hop. Bites will happen on the pause.

The next time you move the rod tip to jig in a fluid motion, you will feel it and realize that a fish is there. Turn the jig sweep into a hookset sweep!

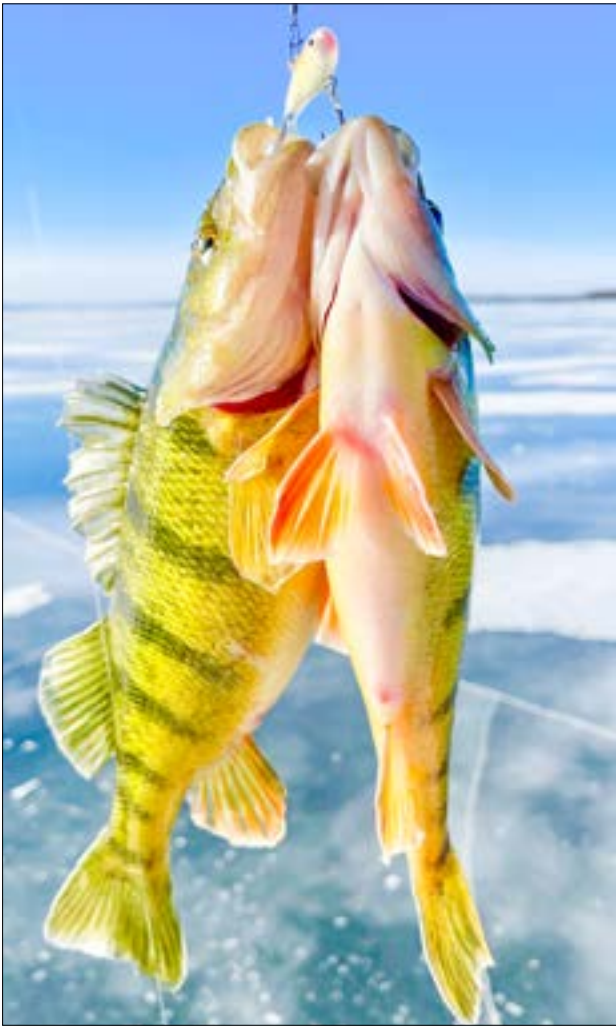
A fighting fish will make two or three runs. Some bigger walleyes or predator fish may go for a few more runs. Be patient. Most fish are lost at the hole. When it's time, gently pull to turn the hooked fish's nose up the hole without catching exposed treble hooks on the bottom edge of the ice. This is a common way for fish to get away. To prevent hooking the ice hole, I crimp on a single Gamakatsu Siwash hook. This is another reason for a single hook on a spoon.

The best part of early ice is that the fish are still actively feeding. It is a *continuation of the fall bite*. The fish need to feed up heavily to survive the long winter, which means anglers will get a lot of action.

Dressed for success

I rarely use a fish house or pop-up shelter on early ice. I like to move around from hole to hole. A lid or cushion on a bucket is great if I stop to fish a pod. An AFTCO Reaper Hoodie and a pair of waterproof bibs are all I need for outerwear on most days. For my hands, I want light, thin, warm Fish Monkey Stealth Dry-Tec gloves and mittens.

We are lucky to live in an area where lakes freeze! This natural phenomenon doesn't exist in most parts of the world! **MWO**



Early-ice, shallow water jumbos double up on a Twitchin' Puppet.

Outdoor communicator Brian "Bro" Brosdahl lives in northern Minnesota and is a walleye guide in the Cass Lake, Leech Lake and Lake Winnibigoshish areas. Bro is a four-season fisherman and is especially known for his ice fishing knowledge and skills. For guide inquiries, contact: brosguideservice.com.

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Ice Fishing, One Notch Up

by Johnny Wilkins

As waters chill, fishing ratchets up a notch. For beginners and intermediate fishers, hitting the hard water means moving your game up one notch—or even two.

The challenges include conditions like wind and safety, and then there are fish. Start with safety, because safety is always the number one consideration on ice. Conditions change, and hazards lurk hidden beneath unforgiving weakened ice.

Knowledge of your water might include a guide for newer fishers. There’s no margin for error when crossing or entering frozen lakes or ponds. Dangers are hidden overnight, and conditions can shift quickly, making the ice you already traveled now deadly. Guides know these conditions and get out more often. Seriously, hire a guide the first few times you go, preferably on your local water or targeted lake. Don’t fish new waters when you begin.

Insulated, quality boots will make your fishing far more comfortable. Getting your feet comfortable gives you added time to explore and more time to fish bite windows. Once your feet go—the trip is done.

Safety gear—part two—is essential. Ice cleats prevent slip-and-fall trips to the ER. The first purchase you make should be these unexciting additions to your boot. They strap on, are inexpensive at \$20 to \$50, and are far less expensive than missed work and surgery.

Without cleats, you will be like a newborn baby deer with vertigo walking on a cliff edge. Never go without cleats at early ice. Add ice picks to wear for safety and you are on your way.

If you plan on fishing more ice with a partner in upcoming winters, a float suit is the final part of your safety gear.

Back to the fish. Ice fishing often requires learning your water. You may need a couple of scout missions to learn the depths and where the fish are. These patterns change from early ice to late winter. Fish may be schooling early, and then later, spread out across basins.

Ice fishing can be like a battle. You need to get your gear ready, get in the right place and sit in wait to ambush the fish. Hot bite windows are scattered through your fishing day. You need to be in the spot, ready and prepared for the action.

The battle in winter is that fish are chilled and slower. They can take time to react. The water is crystal clear at times, and your presentation needs to be raised up a notch.

Check the weather forecast forecast before you go and stay safe. High winds could be a problem; winter storms might get you stuck. You might choose a sheltered bay out of the wind or avoid extreme cold when you are new to the game. Below-zero temperatures can destroy a new ice fisher’s day in many ways.



World-champion ice fisherman and teacher –USA Fishing Team member Mick Thill worked extremely hard to get this perch on a Chicago harbor. He had electronics, battled a harbor current and 23 feet of water during a cold front. His advice, fluorocarbon line in thin diameters. Not many use line this thin, but when the author fished with him, he used .075 mm line which is less than 1-pound breaking strength.

First thing: improve your line. This leads your attack into battle. Spend the most on the last 12 inches of line as it is where you will be rewarded. Crystal-clear water exposes cheap leader line and fish will swim in reverse away from your hook. P-Line Co-Polymer Fluorocarbon, with a silicon fluorocarbon coating, stays flexible and is invisible. Fish aren’t stupid, and they know their food does not have a straight line coming off the top.

Make fish focus on your hooked bait. Buy quality line, and use it in summer, too. Match the line to your fish and go lighter than you think on ice. Increased line flex means more hook-ups. Your ice weapons should include 2- and 3-pound-test and add 5- or 6-pound for bigger fish. Fish don’t fight as hard in cold water, so you can get by with lighter line than when fishing during summer.

That said, fish don’t bite as hard in the winter, either. Fish are vacuums, and in winter, that vacuum is stuffed full of garbage, jammed and barely working. Your struggle during the war in chilly water is putting a hook in that low-power vacuum. Premium line also features flex. All ice anglers reduce the weight of their jigs. This helps on the light vacuum.

I am the opposite of many on ice. I go light on my jig and choose Mr. Waxy jigs from Gapen fishing. These are made of tin and are both move more and travel further for fish bites. Tip them with a premium plastic or live bait for a weapon to catch more fish in tough bites.

The second reason I love this jig is the UV paint. The third reason is their big profile.



Upgrade your ice jigs – Whether you tip with premium plastics or live bait, the Mr. Waxy is the perfect early- and late-season ice jig. UV colors help to draw fish in from longer distances. In overcast conditions and dark water or when fish are spread out, this is a great way to add bites. The jig is made of tin, and that light presentation adds a wobble to the drop. You can catch several bigger fish with this (even in the small sizes). Gaper makes a “Cold Killer” Ice Kit that has a lot of lip-ready ice jigs. The kit includes larger and smaller sized Mr. Waxy jigs with some small, subtle teardrop jigs for clear water and cold front fishing when the bite can get tight.

This jig is visibel from greater distance, and that calls in more fish for more bites.

Electronics should be a last priority for you. If you hire guides, they will supply this. Casual ice anglers don’t need electronics on their favorite pond. Once you know your spots and the safety required, you can predict where the fish are and the depths.

Fish with a friend and share electronics. Inexpensive electronics like the Lowrance Hook 5 All Season come with both summer and winter setups. The portable pack converts to summer fishing and also works great on ice. Expect to pay around \$549 for this setup.

story continued on next page



Use electronics for depth only – Hiring a fishing guide is the best way to see electronics in use. The HOOK 7 by Lowrance is the unit the author uses when guiding to get depths set and see what depths the fish are at. Most of the time you could fish without this, as the fish are nearly always glued to the bottom or in the bottom few feet of water. Only crappies and a few other species will suspend at mid-depths. Going with a fishing guide you will see the flasher ice mode at work. Once you see the fish on this unit, ignore it and put all your attention on the rod tip. Even the expensive ‘live’ sonars have a delay. If you stare at these you will miss hits, and your timing will be slow. Look for the All-Season Pack which features winter battery pack, ice transducer, carrying case and mount, and summer transducer. No need for a giant screen, and beginners should start at the 5-inch for around \$549.

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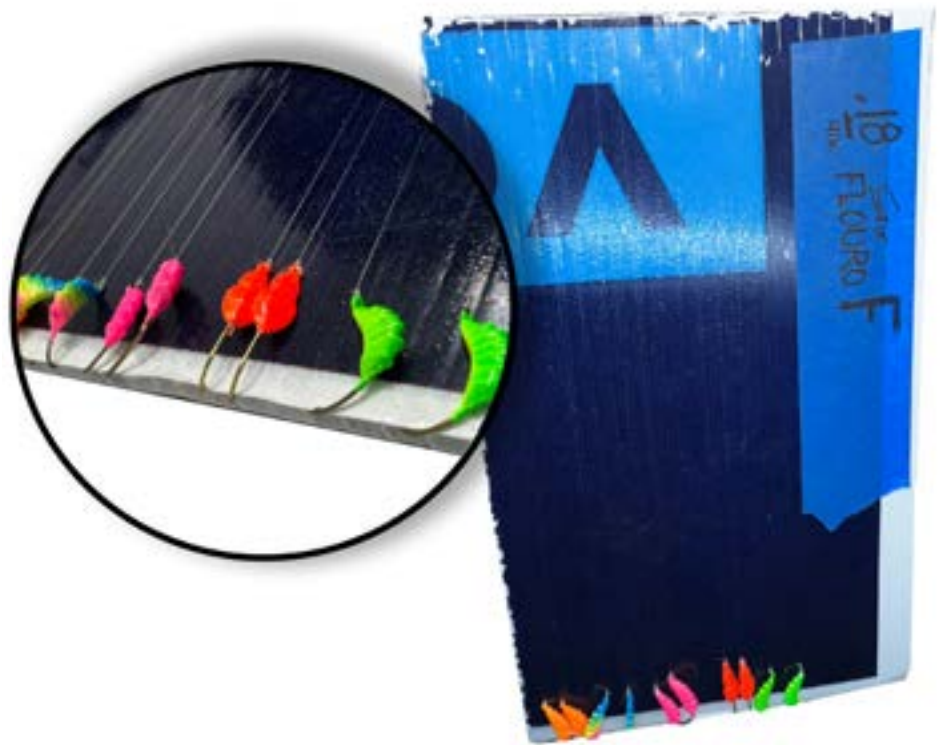
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Preparation is key – Get the work done before hitting the cold. Even in a shelter, having these lines tied ahead of time will help catch more fish. Wilkins prepares Gaper Mr. Waxy jigs with fluorocarbon line and added a loop. These are then notched in the card. Attaching a new jig or changing colors takes under a minute and can be done with cold hands. Add a piece of tape to these plastic election cards and write your line thickness. For tough conditions tie 2-pound as well as a 3-pound leader line in case bigger fish are hitting or the bite is hot. If conditions change to dark, go with brighter jigs—these have UV glow, so they are brighter in dark water and dark conditions.

The Jigging Spoon: a Wintertime Favorite



Ponds tend to freeze up earlier than rivers and lakes. The jigging spoon is a favorite of ice anglers fishing lakes, impoundments and ponds.

by Don Gasaway

Early ice is often an unsure situation. One day it is thick enough, and the next it is not. Some areas have open water for boats, and others do not. Yet in both situations, an ice fishing jig is a go-to lure.

Although a variety of baits and lures work, the jigging spoon is a wintertime favorite. Jig the little spoons vertically over weed beds and off points located near deep water.

During cold fronts, deep-water fish may be more active than those in shallow water.

Weather and barometric changes do not affect deep-water fish as much.

A variety of manufacturers produce jigging spoons. Made of lead, tungsten, other metals or a combination, jigging spoons offer flash and a darting motion that makes them very productive. Most spoons are long and narrow, resulting in a straight, fast drop and a tight wobble. This allows them to drop in specific structure more accurately.

Spoon bodies with concave, convex or bent shapes offer the most action and flash. The variety of body styles increases the level

of effectiveness to winter fishing approaches. They introduce an entirely new level of pleasure to ice fishing.

In cold water, a slow lift-drop fluttering pattern with long pauses is often best. Fish will strike a slow-moving shad-like lure fluttering in front of them. This kind of fishing requires working by feel. Always maintain contact with the lure, because most strikes occur when the lure is on the fall. If you have a slack line, you could miss the strike.

Rod action imparts action to the lure as you pull upward several inches and then let it fall freely. It flutters just like a wounded shad. Predator fish see it as an easy meal.

In cases of slow action on the part of the fish, tip the hooks of a jigging spoon with minnows, grubs, or worms to make it more attractive. The flash of the spoon attracts the attention of fish and the scent of the bait is just too much to resist.

For larger fish, a 1/4- to 1-ounce spoon is best. Crappies and bluegills will take spoons weighing 1/8-ounce or less. Most of the time, anglers prefer the silver-colored lures.

It is advisable to not tie the fishing line directly to a jigging spoon. Add a barrel swivel between the line and lure to reduce line twist. Heavy line also affects the action of a spoon. It tends to inhibit the fluttering action of the lure as it falls. Line of 10- to 14-pound test is good for gamefish like pike and walleyes.

When fished straight up and down, jigging spoons allow you to work structure and schooling fish with pinpoint accuracy.

Anglers fishing with a jigging spoon need to know the structural layout they are working. Use a fish locator to spot the fish and the structure. A good quality unit

displays structure, signs of fish and baitfish, as well as fish activity nearby.

In cold weather, reservoir fish tend to hold in and around creek channels. Some good locations include shoals on the inside of the creek channel curve; the end of bluffs associated with the channel; and points dropping into the channel.

Fishing with jigging spoons may have its up and downs. But they are excellent, off-season lures for colder months. Fish love them, and so do anglers. **MWO**

Don Gasaway is a freelance outdoor writer from Marion, Ill. who has written more than 1,000 magazine articles. Find him on Facebook at: facebook.com/donsjournal. Comments and reviews are welcome.



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Ice Fishing, One Notch Up

...continued from previous page

The initial expense of ice fishing is most expensive in the early ice season. Instead of purchasing all the items at once, pick up pieces and assemble your total ice package starting at the *end* of the season. All ice gear goes on sale as the ice melts.

Do *not* stare at electronics. Use them as a guide, get your depth right and pay attention to the rod tip! Electronics are slow; the bite is quick, and if you are not on it, you will miss it. The typical bite is so light in winter. Fish are cold-blooded, so their bodies are the temperature of the water. You will need to learn that bite.

When I say rods, I am referring to short rods. In top competitions, we don't use reels. The rods are about 1 foot long and the tip shows a "tick." There really is no bite in winter; it is a "tap." If you spend the money, forget the reel and focus on the rod. You may want a spring bobber at the end of the rod to help see the "tick." A fish taking the bait in winter can be so light that it appears as the rod losing tension or the tip lifting. That is it.

Remember, all you need with a guide are boots and a jacket. While getting started in ice fishing can be intimidating, guides like me are available to take you out for two or

four hours to show you tips and tricks along with gear. A guide will save you hundreds of dollars in wasted purchases, some of which you will greatly regret. Buying the wrong gear, tackle, electronics or rods is pretty common. Reach out and work with local fishing clubs or guides to get on the ice safely and in a much smarter way. Heading to the store and buying is a mistake if you don't know where and how to fish your area. **MWO**

Johnny Wilkins is a float fishing expert, boat and bank fishing competitor, and teacher who fished in three world championships with Team USA. A Chicago area native, Wilkins placed second behind his teacher Mick Thill in his best U.S. Open Championships. He is the founder of the Chicago Fishing School and has his own line of floats.

For more information...
Look to ChicagoFishingSchool.com for ice fishing updates, equipment reviews and to book a guided ice fishing session. Stop by one of Wilkins' seminars at the Chicago's Tinley Park Fishing, Travel & Outdoors Expo, February 13-15.

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Ice Rescues Aren’t Just for Other Anglers

by Dave Csanda
MidWest Outdoors Editor

Back in the early 1900s, my dad and I helped rescue a golden retriever that broke through the ice.

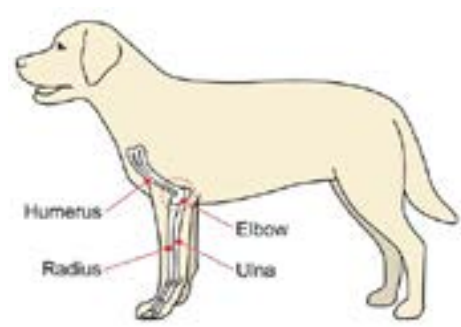
Watching through the windows of my grandparent’s lake house, we had seen two anglers gingerly walk out across the ice, tapping a spud bar atop it to make sure the ice was safe. But when they reached the *visible* rim of new ice that had formed the night before, the bar poked through, as expected. They immediately backed off and began retreating to shore... but the exuberant dog accompanying them kept on frolicking forward, until *crunch*, it punched through.

We immediately called the fire department, which informed us that they were not allowed to send the rescue squad out on a non-human emergency. But if someone else fell through, *call back*.

A whirlwind of frenzied activity ensued. We grabbed jackets and headed down toward the lake. Along the way, my dad said that we should grab an old ladder plopped up against the house. And a spud bar from beneath the porch.

Simultaneously, one of the ice anglers ran 200 yards back toward shore, toward a 12-foot aluminum boat turned upside down for the winter. As he did, the boat owner, who had also seen the calamity unfold, emerged from the house. The two turned the boat right-side up and started hauling it out across about 6 inches of “safe” ice. Meanwhile, the lone angler stood at the rim of the safe ice, verbally encouraging the dog to somehow climb out across perhaps 25 feet of inch-thick, very breakable ice.

As we all converged on the scene with our various rescue gear, the two anglers hopped into the boat with the rope, plus our spud bar and ladder, and the rest of us pushed the boat out onto the thin ice until it punched through. Immediately, they began crunching their spud bar through the ice at the bow of the boat, trying to open a lane and reach



So... what the heck does a dog’s elbow have to do with ice fishing safety? Art: Walkin’ Pets

the struggling dog. It was tough sledding, attempting to pull against the adjacent thin ice with the spud bar to move the boat forward.

After a couple minutes, they were able to proceed about halfway to the dog before they began running out of steam. Meanwhile, the golden was unsuccessfully trying to get and keep one paw up on top of the ice. Running out of strength, it finally just rested its chin atop the rim, out of options.

Out of desperation, ingenuity is born. My dad suggested sliding the 8-foot ladder from the boat, across the ice, out to the dog. As they did, it slid out far enough for the last one foot to extend into the hole.

The exhausted dog responded, slowly getting its chin atop the end rung. Then one paw. Next, the other. Then it reached forward with one leg and hooked its *elbow* (aka *cubitus*; I looked it up.) over the last rung. After a brief rest, it tried with the other leg, and got the other elbow hooked over the rung. It hung there, out of strength and moves.

Problem was, no one had thought to tie a rope to the other end of the ladder! There was still about 5 feet of thin ice between the bow of the boat and the near end of the ladder. And the boat wasn’t moving to close the gap.

Inspiration struck! *Fortunately*, our spud bar, homemade by a friend of my grandfather, had a short “T” section extending about 1 1/2-inch to either side of the end of the handle. Reaching the spud bar out over the bow, the angler up front was barely able



Illustration: Montana DPHHS

to slip the “T” over the nearest rung of the ladder, hooking it. He then began to slowly, hand-over-hand the ladder in toward the boat.

As he did, the dog managed to remain in place, still lodged atop the last rung by its elbows. (In the days before smart phones, no one thought or had time to find a camera to record this.) Little by little, the ladder pulled the dog up out of the hole, onto the thin ice. Further hauling brought it up alongside the boat. Very carefully, the two anglers managed to shift their weight and lift the dog up into the boat without capsizing.

The rescuers literally weren’t out of the water yet, however. They tossed one end of a rope—I can’t remember who brought it or where it came from—back to the three of us atop the safe ice, and we managed to pull the rescue craft up to the safe edge. Working together, we managed to get everyone back onto firm ice, including the nearly unconscious dog.

Despite pleas to let someone younger (me) carry the 80-pound dog back to shore,

Dad immediately lifted it across his chest, began trudging to shore, and made it all the way up the hill, into the house, to warm up the dog. I was picturing my mom never forgiving me if he had a heart attack, but he never wavered, and made it OK.

Meanwhile, a couple of the remaining guys hauled the boat back to shore where it had been, carried the miscellaneous rescue gear back up to our house, and they all enjoyed a shot of brandy—including the dog—to help warm up. Within a few minutes, the dog began recuperating. And we were able to call the rescue a success.

Thinking back on this experience, we were all fortunate—and a bit crazy—to pull this off. If we hadn’t had all the people and miscellaneous rescue devices available—and the dog hadn’t instinctively reacted as it did—things could have gone much worse. And we might have been panic-calling the rescue squad again.

To say that this activity left me with a

story continued on next page

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Not the dog described in the story, but as you can see, it was not a unique occurrence.

Tips from our Readers

Dear Tips Editor:

When ice fishing for gamefish, start on the breakline of the lake, where the water is 10 to 12 feet deep. Set some tip-ups there, and then at 20, 25, and 30 feet deep, if the lake you’re fishing goes that deep. Rig your tip-ups with small, medium or large minnows or other types of bait. Try to set

Ice Rescues...

...continued from previous page

healthy respect for ice safety is no joke. A lot of folks obliviously wander out onto thin ice with no clue as to potential calamities, unprepared with the proper equipment and the wherewithal to react positively should disaster strike. It’s always best to know, and prepare, before you go.

Chances are that you won’t be carrying a ladder on your next early-ice fishing trip. But a rope, ice picks to help you crawl out of a hole, a spud bar to test the ice ahead of you, life jackets or flotation suits should all else fail, and other safety gear aren’t just advised, but mandatory.

Keep abreast of forming ice conditions. Scan ahead of your approach and evaluate visible signs of potential danger, like pressure cracks. Never travel under bridges or through other constrictions where moving water thins ice. Rivers and river mouths are never completely safe. Stay away from springs or marked areas where ice conditions are unsafe or suspect. Don’t drive machines or vehicles across the ice until it’s more than safe. Plan ahead, act safely, and keep your wits about you.

Spend enough time on the water (and ice) over many years, and you’re bound to encounter situations that unexpectedly go south, even when your head is in the game and the horizon appears safe and secure. I know experienced folks who have gone through the ice, some of whom didn’t make it back out alive. Look in the haunted eyes of survivors who were unable to help their friends in time, and you’ll understand that you never want to be in their boots.

As winter deepens, ice conditions typically become much safer. But then again, when spring thaw draws nearer and ice begins pulling away from shore, take things seriously. You don’t want to sink your vehicle through thinning ice just a few feet offshore, even though the ice looks—and remains—thick just a short distance farther out. Nor errantly step across an open-water gap, out to the ice edge, and then suddenly slip down between the ice sheet and shore. The only reason one friend survived this situation is that he reached his rod, which he was still clutching in one hand, up through the surface, and his buddy pulled him back up by the rod tip!

Also remember that, along the warmer southern fringe of the Ice Belt, ice fishing is a shorter-term, “sometimes thing” to be enjoyed—cautiously. The ice here never really gets safe enough to be what you’d term fully safe, even in a cold winter.

Debbie downer? Not really. Just a realistic perspective based on experience. Ice fishing can be fun, productive and exciting if approached properly. But never take ice safety for granted. **MWOy**

Dave Csanda has enjoyed nearly 50 years in the fishing communications industry at In-Fisherman, Angling Edge and now, as editor of MidWest Outdoors. He is an inductee of both the Minnesota and National Fresh Water Fishing Halls of Fame.

them anywhere from 6 inches to 2 feet off the bottom.

After you have all your lines in, set up your jig-poles and try for some panfish. I start off in the 4- to 8-foot area off a point or weed line. Use small baits, such as waxworms and spikes, with small ice fishing jigs and lures in a variety of painted colors. Don’t be afraid to experiment with colors. Keep in mind, most days, the smaller the presentation, the better.

LeRoy Hengen
Montello, Wis.

Dear Tips Editor:

Use a good slip bobber for ice fishing. Thill makes a terrific series of slip bobbers that limit line freezing, let the line run smoothly through the housing and allow you to see the lightest bites without spooking the fish due to tension. Having a good jigging

rod paired with a quality deadstick setup is a deadly combination for the best ice fishing presentation and overall turnout. While ice fishing, you want to cover as much water as you can, and a good deadstick setup helps.

Eric Cederholm
Wauconda, Ill.

Dear Tips Editor:

If possible, never go ice fishing without a buddy. If you must go alone, fish in areas where other people can see and hear you. Rescue situations on the ice sometimes require another person’s help.

Tyler Smith
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Tips Editor,

When hunting or fishing in cold weather, wear a turtleneck sweater under your normal outdoor clothes. The turtleneck keeps body heat from escaping from around your neck and you’ll be amazed how much warmer you will be in even the coldest weather. It makes winter outings a lot more fun.

Merle E. Smith
Rock Island, Ill.

Dear Tips Editor,

Have a good supply of snelled hooks for

when your hands are too cold to tie knots. Also wear wool gloves when ice fishing because they retain heat even when wet.

John Kramer
Sullivan, Ind.

Dear Tips Editor,

It’s time to organize your tackle box. If something hasn’t been used in years, take it out. Chances are that you can use the space more efficiently. And, with sport show season coming up, you’ll probably be picking up some new items to take up the space.

Gather the items that you removed. If you know a young person just getting started fishing, you may want to pass some things along to them.

Steve Turnis
Dubuque, Iowa
MWO

Readers are invited to submit tips for this column. Length of tip should be less than 150 words. Tips should be helpful ideas to help people enjoy fishing, hunting and camping.

The readers whose tips are selected will receive a fishing product. Send your tips to: Tips Editor, MidWest Outdoors, 111 Shore Drive, Burr Ridge, IL 60527. Our email address is info@midwestoutdoors.com.



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Next on Devils Lake: Ice Fishing Season

"Quality time on ice," sounds like a tourism campaign slogan. But, according to long-time Devils Lake all-seasons fishing guide Cody Roswick, it's what all guides provide daily.

He approaches each trip with the attitude that most everybody on this spread-out lake enjoys. That is, catching a mix of perch, walleyes and northern pike. Typical days start out with walleyes. "Get on the lake at first light to take advantage of a one-to-two-hour bite window," he said. He likes cloudy, overcast days because it extends the hours that walleyes feed actively.

By mid-to-late morning, the chase is

on for perch or pike. But, for those early hours, Cody's walleye tricks have been the simplest—and most effective. With every client staring at their personal electronics ("fish finders" to the older crowd), he equips



John Bouvette with a very plump walleye!



Devils Lake is well-known for providing anglers with lots of northern pike in addition to walleyes, jumbo perch, and white bass. Photos: John Bouvette

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each angler with a spinning rod and ties on a 1/8- or 1/4-ounce rattle spoon tipped with a minnow head.

This could be anywhere from 5 to 35 feet deep. Interestingly, he ties his 6-pound Fireline directly to the spoon. "Walleyes here are not fussy," he claimed. The same setup works for perch, but he also rigs up with a tungsten jig tipped with maggots. A real treat is when his hole-punching lands clients on a school of the lake's famous giant white bass. They bite the same perch and walleye gear but refuse to come off the bottom. This bite really picks up later in the ice season.

Another popular option, and a favorite when kids are around, is chasing flags. That means tip-ups baited with smelt or minnows. Each angler is allowed four rods for pike. "Most are typical 22- to 26-inchers, but pike to 10 pounds are common," he said. Cody rigs spinning rods with a wire leader and spoon when jigging for pike while keeping a keen eye out for flags.



Happy guide customers with a typical Devils Lake catch.

His guide days are versatile; he also take clients to other area lakes and sloughs for perch. He has a few bluegill and crappie lakes hidden in his stash of secret spots, so remind him about those. He wanted folks to know that, from all his days on the water this season, the walleye population is in great shape.

Guide John Bouvette and his crew run SnoBear "houses on tracks" that can go anywhere in any weather. "This is the Cadillac of ice machines," he emphasized. "It's always 72 degrees and sunny inside." Clients move from their heated trucks to the heated SnoBears. When holes are drilled, they drop their lines from inside the comfortable setting. "On Devils Lake, you gotta be mobile," John noted from his decade-long guiding career.

Like Cody, John begins each morning targeting walleyes. He likes basic walleye tools. First, a rattle spoon or flutter spoon with a darting action, tipped with minnow heads or tails. Second, "I always have one rod tied up with a mid-size Rapala Rip 'N Rap. It's loud and draws walleyes in," he said. No matter what, his go-to colors are firetiger and gold for perch and green, pink or firetiger for walleyes.

His multi-species days start with walleyes. "We run and gun to find 'em," he said. After the morning walleye flurry, it's on to the perch search. This could be shallow in December and early January, but by mid-winter, 30 to 45 feet deep is customary.

story continued on next page

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Chasing Down Spooky Panfish

by Jerry Carlson

As my fishing partner and I strapped on our cleats in preparation for a trek across the smooth ice, we discussed the possibility of dealing with spooky fish. We had fished this lake together several times before in the early-ice scenario, and knew we could be in for a challenge.

With no snow on the ice and an ice thickness of about 6 inches, the noise we would make would be substantial. Because water molecules are close together compared to air, sound is greatly magnified in water.

A small noise on the surface becomes considerably louder under the ice.

With the help of GPS, we were soon in the general vicinity of where early-ice crappies typically hang out. With the aid of forward-facing sonar, we were quickly able to locate a small school of fish. I watched on the screen as my partner walked toward the school. As he got close to the fish, they moved off 50 feet to the side.

This cat-and-mouse game continued for a while until we gave up on these fish and searched for a new school to work. We did not catch a single fish out of this cluster of crappies.

After several years of ice fishing with forward-facing sonar, I have learned that winter fish are a lot spookier than I ever realized. The noise of walking and drilling holes makes fish nervous. During the early season when there is less ice and snow, the issue of spooky fish greatly increases.

There are some things that you can go do to combat the issue of spooky fish. One of the strategies we use is to look for fish that are less spooky. I don't know why some crappies react to surface noise more than others, but they do.

Fish in shallow water are generally spookier than fish in water over 20 feet. Picking a lake that has deeper fish can help. However, even deep fish will get nervous with excessive noise on the ice.



Early-season panfish are easily spooked by noises on the ice.

Next on Devils Lake: Ice Fishing Season

...continued from previous page

Throughout the season, running and gunning may be necessary.

"Of course, some of the most fun days are when the clients want to stay with walleyes. We move and move to locate the biters," John said. Most of his walleye water is 5 to 14 feet deep near structure like weeds or rocks. "Each day is different. Sometimes we land on them and stay; others, we drill 100 holes," he recalls.

Most of his clients are repeat customers and some elect to spend mid-days looking for pike. Jigging with rattle spoons or flutter spoons brings pike topside. "We fish for anything that bites and are always ready to switch it up to catch fish," he concluded.

The Devils Lake community may be the most fish-friendly town in North America. Resorts and motels have their own private cleaning facilities (and freezers). Additionally, dozens of full-service guide services, a casino, restaurants, hardware and more are open

with friendly smiles. Fishermen are welcome 12 months of the year. There's even a public fish cleaning station in town. The fishing season never closes; limits are generous.

Tune into these details and much more at their website. It's never too early to make ice-fishing plans and book the dates desired.

MWO

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For more information...

Devils Lake Tourism, devilslakend.com
Fin-Hunters Guide Service, Cody Roswick, owner, 701-840-5407, finhunters.com
Lake Country Guide Service, John Bouvette, guide, 701-230-2280, LCGSJB@hotmail.com

Generally, I like to drill a series of holes all at once to get the noise over with. However, there are times that I will drill as few holes as possible and be ready to drop a jig down before the fish decide to move away. When they do slide off to the side, you may be able to follow them and continue to pluck a fish or two from each hole.

Typically, I am not one to wait for fish to come to me. Instead, I try to chase them down. However, there have been times when we have drilled holes in a large area and waited for fish to move back in once they were chased out.

Snow on the ice is helpful and makes travel quieter. Cleats are necessary on smooth ice, but they do make more noise.

Fishing later in the day can also help.

Once the sun dips towards the horizon, panfish tend to become less spooky. The magic low-light period can be productive.

Understanding the fact that winter panfish are often nervous creatures is an important first step in successfully catching them. Being as quiet as possible on the ice certainly helps, but after that, you may need to experiment with different options to outsmart the spooky fish.

MWO

Jerry Carlson began his writing career in 1987 and covers both hunting and fishing topics. He currently writes for numerous media outlets and does radio work with WJON AM in St. Cloud, Minn. He has authored a book called Details for Locating and Catching Fish.



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Slamming Shallow-Water Crappies and Pike Through the Ice

by Walt Matan

The last couple of years have provided some great ice fishing for me, especially in shallow water less than 10 feet deep. It is here that bluegills, perch, crappies and pike roam freely and are readily caught, especially at first ice.

Old-school flutter spoons still produce. Standbys like Demons, 2-Spots, Rockers, Demon Jigging Spoons, Lil' Cecils and Slender Spoons are killer producers in shallow, weedy areas. Tungsten is most effective in clear water where you can present a tiny offering with enough weight to get quickly down into the strike zone.

Most of the time, though, I'm fishing in areas that have about a foot of visibility, so I'm usually fishing with a little lead or brass spoon that has a slower fall and a nice flutter. It's way easier for a fish to suck in a lightweight jig or spoon with little or no hesitation.



Nothing beats shallow crappies at first ice.



The author caught a nice crappie out of one hole, and then a pike swooped in and immediately grabbed a Slender Spoon out of the second hole.

When fishing first-ice, shallow water situations, I had always (in the past) focused on smaller presentations because I believed that these fish were skittish, which they often are. Last year, as I was fishing one of my favorite, early-season backwaters, which had become a high-traffic community spot, I watched anglers pulling in some nice pike on tip-ups.

This is nothing new in Wisconsin, as most anglers will set out a tip-up or two and then jig for bluegills. I never really cared much for tip-up fishing, but in this case, most of these fish were nice size, and I knew they would put up a great fight on a little rod. So, I decided to focus my efforts on pike.

At this point, let it be known that I like to view my Livescope while ice fishing. Many anglers will use Livescope for searching only, and then switch to a Vexilar while fishing. They believe Livescope deters fish away from their hole because of the higher frequency. Although this is true a lot of the time, I just love to watch how fish react to my lure in real time and can learn so much more with a Livescope than staring at the lines on a Vexilar.

One of the things you notice while panfishing is that you can be slamming fish... and then the bite shuts off. Fish are moving around your hole, three or four at a time, and fishing is good. When the fish are gone, enterprising anglers then search for fish with their Livescope and quickly change holes. But now that I've gotten older and slower, I wait it out and prepare for the next run.

Catching multiple panfish creates a frenzy as more fish come in to investigate; and then predators move in and spook those fish down into the weeds. After a little time passes, those bluegills and crappies move right back in.

So, I started experimenting with larger lures; instead of using a 1/16-ounce Slender Spoon, I use a 1/8-ounce and even a 1/4-ounce. Instead of a size 10 Demon, I put on a size 4. I know what you're saying, "Those



Aggressive crappies want a big spoon.

are some awfully big profiles to be using in shallow water at early ice."

You're right!

I have several rods rigged with different sizes of lures. I'm fishing out of two holes with the Livesope in the middle, watching all the action. Another thing: I'll fish those larger lures up higher in the water column, usually in the top third of the water. I've been getting some extra-large crappies, largemouth bass and pike! I even switched to a larger rod with heavier line that I usually use for walleyes, and remarkably have not spooked the crappies. They seem to get focused on the fluttering action of the Slender Spoon and Demon.

Sometimes it takes five minutes or more to tempt a fish to strike. I'm not just talking about teasing a 10-inch bluegill. I'm talking about jigging a 1/4-ounce Slender Spoon while watching a 36-inch pike with its nose mere inches away. I've had them flash in from a distance, grab the spoon and run! I've had them ease up from another angle and I think it's a crappie, then spin around and see that it's another quality pike.

When using two rods, I'll have a larger Slender Spoon with a minnow head (preferably a Rosy Red) and a Demon size 4 with a whole Rosy hooked through the dorsal on the other. I'll change things up with a smaller Demon or Demon Jigging Spoon on different rods, but I'll always keep that Slender Spoon on. Firetiger, orange glows, and chartreuse combos seem to work best for colors.

Just writing this article has got me so fired up about early ice (even though it's 85 degrees outside and the middle of September), that I've got to organize my ice tackle box, fiddle with my ice rods and reorganize my already organized gear one more time! **MWO**

Walt Matan has been a writer and television host for MidWest Outdoors for 30 years. An avid ice and open-water fisherman, he currently lives in the Quad Cities on the shores of the Mississippi River. He is the chief lure designer for Custom Jigs & Spins and B Fish N Tackle. Follow Walt on Facebook by searching Walleye College.



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Work the Early Shift for More Winter Walleyes



The great outdoors trumps indoor stuff.

by Steve Mattson

No one wants to be the first angler on the ice from a safety perspective. But everyone wants to get in on a good walleye bite. Sometimes, there is a fine line when it comes to walleye fishing during first ice. But one thing I do know is, you don't want to miss out on it.

The best chance to catch walleyes is shortly after the ice locks up. Most anglers wait until there is enough ice to drive a vehicle on it and miss out on weeks of the

best walleye fishing that the ice has to offer. During first ice, fish are hungry, active, and there are good numbers on most walleye structures.

During early ice, you don't have to lug around heavy ice augers, fish houses and gear; you can really keep it simple. A spud bar, electronics and a good fishing rod is really all you need to walk out to a fishy spot. Even the electronics are a breeze to carry with all kinds of good, lightweight lithium battery options on the market.

With safety in mind, smart anglers



Early-ice walleyes are typically willing to bite.

will travel with rope and companions. Of course, cold-weather gear that floats will give you piece of mind. Many ice suit manufacturers such as StrikeMaster offer models that provide flotation up to two hours, which is well worth the extra cost for warmth and safety.

Venture out to high-percentage spots such as main lake points or sunken humps proven to have a good population of fish during early ice. Sure, lots of places will hold walleyes, such as long breaklines or any place where wind or current pushed bait, but those are hard to find after the ice sets up. The obvious spots are typically good; you just need to get to them before the masses do. The adage, “*The early bird gets the worm*” rings true.

Even semi-modern electronics or your cell phone can provide accurate mapping of many lakes. Remote or smaller lakes may not have 1-foot contour maps but will still get you close to major lake structure. Utilize this to save time from having to chip or drill holes to check depths. Use the mapping to get you close, then just make small adjustments from there.

Depths from 15 to 25 feet are good choices for clear water while fishing shallower is possible in stained or dirtier water. This is just a starting point, and each lake may have minor exceptions that deviate from this. The best information is the fresh info that you can learn only on the water or ice. As winter continues, it usually helps to move slightly deeper on clear-water lakes, but start shallower during first ice.

Smaller lakes typically ice-up before larger lakes. Really deep lakes can be exceptions. Lakes with islands or bays can get a jump-start on ice due to protection from the wind. Consider this when researching good options. Smaller lakes make it easier to get out to good structure being they're smaller in size. Sometimes, it takes good ice to get to the good structure on bigger lakes because walking far out is not really an option, since ATV or snowmobiles may be needed.

Primetime, otherwise known as dusk or dawn, is nearly always the best window to catch fish. Walleyes are less spooky. But be



Spoons are always a good choice for walleyes.

mindful of your noise and movement during first ice, especially if there is no snow cover. The shallower you are, the more it matters, but it still is important to consider if you are fishing relatively deep.

During early ice, you don't have to be too fussy on what to use because the fish are generally willing to bite. So, use what you have the most confidence in: Deadsticked minnows, tip-ups, or spoons tipped with minnow heads. Spoons catch fish and get back down as soon as possible. Spoons such as the VMC Hatchet that are from 1.5 to 2 inches in length are solid choices early on. As winter goes on, switch to smaller-profile spoons such as a Bull spoon. Don't over work your spoon; just keep it about a foot off bottom and wait for the *thump!*

Make this the year to be part of the good, early-season walleye bite. Choose a smaller lake that will ice-up early and allow you to walk out to good structure. If you're used to watching fish look at your bait on your electronics without hitting, you'll be pleasantly surprised at the eagerness of bites during first ice. Before you know it, you'll have a few fish flopping on the ice next to you. **MWO**

Steve Mattson has been writing articles for MidWest Outdoors since 2001. He is a driven angler, guide and sponsored tournament pro who has won both bass and panfish tournaments and placed in walleye and pike events. He resides in northern Minnesota and enjoys helping others catch more fish. For more info: mattsonangling.com and @mattsonangling.

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A Guide to Ice Fishing Lake of the Woods

by Joe Henry

When the long, northern winter sets in and the lake begins to freeze, a transformation takes place on Minnesota's Lake of the Woods. This sprawling body of water, often referred to as The Walleye Capital of the World, becomes one of the most celebrated ice fishing destinations in North America. Each year, thousands of anglers travel here to experience the unique combination of excellent fishing, infrastructure of ice fishing resorts and outfitters, and myriad ice fishing options.

Whether you're an experienced angler or planning your very first ice fishing adventure, Lake of the Woods offers something for everyone. With two main regions where the action takes place—the expansive south end of the lake called Big Traverse Bay, and the picturesque Northwest Angle on the northern end of Minnesota—you'll find a variety of ways to enjoy the hard-water season.

Two primary locations

Big Traverse Bay is the big basin of Lake of the Woods and is accessed from the south shore of the lake. This area, located in Minnesota, stretches about 30 x 25 miles. This is *big ice*! The deepest spot in this basin is only 38 feet deep, making the entire basin full of life with the potential to hold fish.

Resorts and outfitters on the south shore and Rainy River ice fish this section of the lake. This section of the lake is famous for producing large numbers of walleyes, saugers, jumbo perch, eelpout and big northern pike.



The outlook for ice fishing on Lake of the Woods this winter season is very optimistic. The past two winters have produced excellent ice fishing and the open-water season this year didn't show any signs of slowing down.

The Northwest Angle is the northernmost tip of Minnesota; in fact, it is the northernmost point of the contiguous United States. This area of the lake is where the 14,552 islands of the lake begin and is

dotted with islands, reefs, mud basins, and other good, fish-supporting structure. The variety of structure in this part of the lake creates an ideal environment for walleyes, saugers, jumbo perch, crappies, and pike.

At the Northwest Angle, the logistics are a bit different. To drive to the Angle, anglers pass through about 40 miles of Canada before re-entering into Minnesota up at the Northwest Angle. Naturally, a passport, passport card, enhanced driver's license or a combo of an original birth certificate combined with a government issued ID (like a driver's license) is required to enter Canada.

The other option is to access the Angle by staying in Minnesota and going across the lake. Many take snowmobile trails or use the Lake of the Woods Passenger Service which transports guests from the south end to an Angle resort via Bombardier.

the consistent ice the lake forms being so far north, along with the flexibility in how you can ice fish. Visitors choose the level of service and independence that suits their style best.

Full-service resorts

For many, the most relaxing and hassle-free way to experience the lake is through a full-service resort. These operations provide everything: Heated transportation or access via a plowed ice road, a preheated fish house set up directly over productive fishing grounds, drilled holes, and the snow banked around the fish house to block the wind. Guests simply bring their fishing gear (or rent it) and enjoy a full day of angling.

Guides often check in with guests in their fish houses throughout the day to ensure success and just to make sure things are going well. It is a nice opportunity to check in on the bite, what colors have been best and where in the water column the fish are being caught.

Full service or on your own?

One of the reasons Lake of the Woods draws anglers from across the country is

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One of the fish species with a higher-than-normal population this winter is jumbo perch. Imagine setting the hook on what you think is a good walleye only to pull up a 14-inch jumbo. A nice bonus for ice anglers for sure.

There are both day houses and sleeper houses. Day houses are fish houses in which you fish in during the day and head off the ice in the evening to stay at the resort or various lodging options on shore. There are a number of great bars and restaurants to choose from; or some may choose to head back to their cabin and spend time with loved ones, cooking their own meals.

Many resorts also offer sleeper houses, allowing you to spend the night on the lake for the ultimate adventure. Some call this ice camping. As a rule, most sleepers provide a well-insulated and warm fish house with bunk beds, cooking facilities and restrooms in an area of the lake where the walleyes and saugers are located. The is a great way to unplug and spend a few nights on the ice.

It is sure cozy when you hear the cold wind whipping outside and you are nice and comfy in your fish house. Some groups bring special meals, cook fish, or even bake up warm cinnamon rolls in the morning while you are enjoying some good coffee and jigging for walleyes.

Fish on your own

For anglers who prefer to fish independently, Lake of the Woods provides plenty of options. Resorts maintain ice roads that you can pay a small fee to access, allowing you to drive your own vehicle, truck, or ATV out to your chosen fishing spot. Anglers with portable houses, wheelhouses, or skid houses can set up for the day or even stay overnight.

Snowmobiles, side-by-sides, and ATVs are also popular ways to travel across the ice. With more than 300,000 acres of fishable ice, the opportunities are nearly endless. Staked and groomed snowmobile trails extend from different areas of the south shore all the way up to the Northwest Angle, offering access to many parts of the lake. By law, these snowmobile trails are for snowmobiles or other ice transportation having tracks and skis. Other forms of transportation without skis utilize ice roads, and if snow conditions are conducive, can travel on their own.

For those venturing out on their own, safety is always a top priority. Resorts monitor ice conditions for their staked roads and trails closely, but once you go off the marked trails, safety precautions must be utilized.

The fishing: walleyes, saugers, jumbo perch and more

Walleyes are the main target during winter, and Lake of the Woods doesn't disappoint. Anglers can expect to catch both "eaters" under 19.5 inches, larger slot fish (19.5 to 28.0 inches) that must be released, and on occasion, one of the many trophy walleyes over 28 inches that make Lake of the Woods famous.

Saugers, a close cousin to the walleye, are abundant and keep rods bending throughout the day. Typically, smaller than a walleye, saugers are delicious and offer consistent action throughout the day.

In recent years, jumbo perch populations have surged, and anglers are enjoying a higher-than-normal catch rate of these tasty panfish. Many perch exceed 12 inches, with some stretching even larger, making them an exciting bonus to an already full bucket of walleyes and saugers.

Techniques and tactics

Most anglers use the one-two punch of jigging in one hole and deadsticking the second hole with a live minnow, often set six inches to a foot off the bottom. The jigging line attracts fish to the area and catches the more active fish. The deadstick catches fish in more of a neutral mood. Some days, the jigging line is hot; other days, it is the deadstick. Both can be productive.

On the jigging line, anglers typically use a jig or jigging spoon tipped with a minnow head, or a lipless crankbait like a Rippin Rap to really get fish fired up.

On the deadstick, a live minnow on a plain hook or ice jig suspended a just off the bottom, while actively jigging with the other rod, works well.



Ice anglers have many options this upcoming season. Fish on your own or let a resort or outfitter do the work. The opportunity to either be transported via heated transportation or drive your own vehicle to a heated fish house, with the house banked and holes drilled, is a nice way to go!

With the stained water of the lake, gold, pink, glow white, glow red, orange and chartreuse are good colors. Anglers experiment throughout the day, switching lures until they find the right combination for the conditions.

Healthy fishery with strong numbers

The past two winters have been some of the best ice fishing seasons in recent memory. Anglers reported not only high numbers of walleyes and saugers but also an unusually strong population of jumbo perch. That trend is expected to continue, thanks in part to a strong year-class of fish coming up in the system and the healthy forage base.

This year's open-water season was excellent, another encouraging sign that ice anglers can look forward to steady action once the houses are set on the ice. With the lake's natural productivity and careful fisheries management, Lake of the Woods remains a consistent, high-quality destination year after year.

Planning your trip

Whether you choose to ice fish Big Traverse Bay from the south shore or the

adventure of the Northwest Angle, planning a trip to Lake of the Woods is easier than ever. With dozens of resorts and outfitters, you'll find packages to fit any group, families, corporate groups, or hardcore anglers looking for their next big adventure.

From beginner-friendly setups where everything is done for you, to the independence of towing your own wheelhouse, the options are endless. Whichever way you choose, you'll be fishing one of North America's premier ice fishing destinations.

If you're looking for an unforgettable winter adventure filled with walleyes, saugers, jumbo perch, pike, and lasting memories, Lake of the Woods should be at the top of your list. For more information on ice fishing packages, lodging, and travel details, visit LakeoftheWoodsMN.com. **MWO**

Tournament angler and licensed charter captain Joe Henry fishes and hunts the Midwest. Henry is a media member of AGLOW and writes for numerous publications, creates videos, appears on a variety of outdoor TV and radio shows and is a frequent seminar speaker. Henry is the Executive Director of Lake of the Woods Tourism.

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Early-Ice Walleyes: Jigging the Right Bait

by Josh Hagemeister

Back in the day, the go-to ice jigging bait for walleyes was a silver Swedish Pimple. The other option was a Kastmaster. Today, the shelves at the local bait shop are decorated with hundreds of icy, fish-enticing, vertical jigging options geared toward helping you catch the big one.

For many ice anglers, the choice of what to drop down the hole can be quite overwhelming. Actually, it's quite simple if you understand just a few key points in regard to the jigging lure itself and how to match the lure to the walleyes' aggressiveness.

Let's keep this simple and break down the multitude of ice jigging lures into three basic groups. These groups are based on the action/characteristics of the lures themselves, and the general activity level of the fish.

Drum roll please... The three basic jigging lure groups are: swimming/gliding lures, up-down lures, and basic jig heads (like your favorite lead head jig you use all summer long). Let's examine each category and the basic application.



Some of the jigging spoons mentioned in this article.



The author releasing a walleye caught on a JB Lures Varmint spoon.

Swimming or gliding lures

Swimming or gliding lures make up the most aggressive lures of the three groups. After the initial upward pull (usually 1 to 2 feet), these lures swim or glide up, then out to the side as they begin an unpredictable, darting quarter-to-full-circle pattern downward as it settles back to its original starting point. Let it sit still for 10 to 15 seconds, then “twitch” it about 5 seconds, let it sit still again for another 10 to 15 seconds, and repeat! That’s a lot of action fishing through a hole in the ice!

Common examples of these lures are the Jigging Rapala, Northland Puppet Minnow, Salmo Hornet, and Moonshine Shiver Minnow. I use these lures 90 percent of the time to catch aggressively feeding fish of all species—like a hot crappie bite, “golden hour” walleyes, or pike in general.

The other 10 percent of the time, I use swimming/ gliding lures to trigger fish that are not aggressive at all. Can you say deadly

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The author with a nice walleye caught on an 1/8-ounce green jig tipped with a fathead minnow.

on finicky walleyes? In other words, this group of lures can be quite versatile.

Keep the colors basic. Bright, “fire tiger” type colors in stained water, golds/oranges/glow in tannic-stained water (i.e., Lake of The Woods/Rainy), and classic silver/black, gold/black, white, perch, silver/blue in clear-water situations. Fish the baits “naked” or tipped with a small minnow head for scent (a big minnow head can ruin the action). Experiment with different upward pull lengths and pause time in between your customized jigging sequence.

I hang ‘em on a lighter monofilament line like Berkley Trilene 8- to 10-poun- test tied directly to the lure, or with a small Cross lock snap to make switching lures faster. Once I settle on a particular lure, I generally remove the snap and tie direct.

Up-down lures

Yes, these lures are just that. When pulled upward at a fast rate, they basically travel straight up, then flutter or dart just about straight down. These lures are typical “flashy,” chrome-colored lures; there are silver and gold on almost all of them. I think that classic Christmas song, “Silver and Gold” by Burl Ives was actually about these lures! Classic examples of these lures are the Swedish Pimple or the Kastmaster. The JB Varmit and JB Weasel are other super examples.

Just about any jigging spoon falls into this group. This group of lures is, in my opinion, the most versatile for catching active or inactive fish. I probably catch 75 percent of my walleyes throughout the winter using this lure group. I also tend to use smaller sizes (1.5-inch, 1/8-ounce type of stuff) to help catch numbers of walleyes and bonus big perch.

I use the same line as I do with the swimming/gliding baits, but a small Cross Lock snap is always used in this case. I also recommend tipping the bait each time with a fresh minnow head. Minnow tails work, too, but the heads are better most of the time.

I start with a more aggressive jigging approach using 1- to 3-foot upward pulls, let it settle and sit for 5 to 10 seconds, twitch for

3 seconds, let it sit for 5 to 10 seconds, then another upward pull. That’s where I start, and I tweak from there, depending on the bites. Gold or silver with a little blue, glow, green, orange or white will do the trick in the color department.

Basic jig head

Yes, you should go get the jigs you in your left in your boat, now in storage. My summer tackle is in my ice box, and my ice tackle is in my boat. There’s a hint. I use jig heads through the ice the least amount amongst the three groups. However, they are very important in catching non-aggressive fish. Slowly tap the bottom with a 1/16- to 1/4-ounce jig (1/8-ounce seems to be most

consistent) tipped with a whole minnow (lip hooked or threaded onto the hook). The entire lead head jig approach is less invasive. Slow short lifts, resting on the bottom, hovering and twitching a few inches off the bottom.

I use 6-pound-test Berkley monofilament with these jigs. I like the stretch in the line which offers less resistance to help a non-aggressive walleye “inhale” the bait easier. This, combined with a lighter-action rod and a slow rod tip will help put more fish on the ice. A jig set up in this fashioned can easily be used as a deadstick. Pull the fish to you with an up-down lure and watch them smack the deadstick.

Pretty basic, but deadly. By adding jigging lures to your “bag o walleye tricks” this ice fishing season—use them in summer, too—I’m confident that you will wonder why you didn’t do it sooner! **MWO**

Captain Josh Hagemeister owns and operates Minnesota Fishing Guide Service. He has been in the fishing industry as a professional fishing guide going on 32 years, starting back in the days when he worked for In-Fisherman’s Camp Fish. He contributes to several outdoor publications, fishing reports and social media sites. Minnesota Fishing Guide Service, 320-291-0708; email josh@minnesotaguideservice.com; www.minnesotaguideservice.com, www.minnesotaicefishhouserental.com.

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As Usual, 2026 Erie Ice Fishing Will Be Good if Winter Arrives



Ice village between South Bass (Put-in-Bay) and Rattlesnake Island. Photos: John Hageman



A mixed catch at Put-in-Bay.

by John Hageman

Unlike some places where readers of this publication live or fish, ice formation on Lake Erie is a nail-biting experience. It is not a matter of when, but if, ice will form. Then, if it looks like ice, will it get thick enough to use—and for longer than a few days?

On Lake Erie, when we have no winter, nobody gets on the hard water. When we get sort of a winter, the islands are the only game in town. And when we get a true winter, everybody wins.

Last winter, Lake Erie was sort of a winter “Tale of Two Cites,” so to speak—the haves and have-nots. The haves were the islands, specifically from Green Island to Middle Bass. And the have-nots were Catawba and the rest of Ohio’s mainland shoreline.

At the time of this writing just past mid-September, the official winter forecasts have not yet been provided. Even if they were, they do not come with a written guarantee, so we will just have to wait and see if Lake Erie will provide ice fishing or not this winter.

In the meantime, here is a recap of how things went last year and what usually transpires.

Going from temperatures that were over 50F after Christmas which allowed Miller Boat Line to continue ferry service to South Bass (Put-in-Bay) until January 2, to frozen water as far as the eye could see only one week later, was a weather surprise that few saw coming.

The Siberian Express may not have been popular with everyone, but it was welcomed with open arms by winter outdoor enthusiasts who were anxious to play with their winter toys.

Bluegill fishing often starts the hard-water season

Near Port Clinton, ice fishing got underway during the first full week of January and an ice fishing village formed near East Harbor State Park’s kayak ramp.

Many of these seasonal inhabitants depart for the lake if it freezes well enough to divert their attention there in search of bigger game, namely walleyes.

While it was underway, Bays Edge Bait & Tackle reported brisk sales of their popular Widowmaker and Larsen tungsten jigs, with buckets of bluegills brought in daily to their fish cleaning facility for processing.

Islands Ice is the most reliable, but lately, not certain to even form

Last year was better than in 2024, when islanders only had a few days of ice fishing in mid-January before warm rains and mild temperatures the rest of the winter prevented any fishable ice from reforming.

The 2025 season first lured anxious local resident Bass Islands anglers onto an ice platform that drew the first of Put-in-Bay’s “Viking” explorers to stand on 2 inches of ice, 100 yards off South Bass Island’s “New Ramp” by January 9.

A few shanties dragged out on foot in the coming days emerged between South Bass, Middle Bass, and Rattlesnake Islands. On January 14, residents of Middle Bass Island marked their annual trail to South Bass, where the ice was reported to consistently be between 6 and 8 inches thick.

Islander Susan Byrnes caught a trophy walleye in just five minutes on January 16, her first day out, that tugged the spring scale to a little past 10 pounds.

In what appeared to be a good omen ended with that one fish, as neither she nor her husband Mike got another bite the rest of the afternoon.

Good catches of walleyes on thickening ice led to island-based anglers widening their reach by setting shanties from South Bass to Rattlesnake; Middle Bass to Ballast; and South Bass to Green Islands.

Since walleyes are easy to catch year-round, I focused my fishing on typical perch spots but had less luck with them than usual. I heard of very few being caught elsewhere all winter, even though a better-than-average perch hatch was documented by the Ohio Division of Wildlife in 2021, which resulted in many 9- to 11-inch fish landed by boat fishermen months earlier.

The location that I stubbornly remained at provided me with limits of perch 11 days in a row during our last long winter in 2018. I settled for catching walleyes that interrupted my mission to procure some Erie gold.

Thankfully, white perch were not as thick as usual, because with emerald shiners in short supply, they were especially unwelcome.

Due to the inability of anyone to find and catch their own, the islanders resorted to having a minnow wholesaler bring a truckload to the island on the last day that the ferry ran. They sold 200 gallons of emerald shiners in about an hour to residents to store in their minnow “cars.”

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Yellow perch, the author's favorite winter fish to target.



A bald eagle photo bombing a Green Island sunset.

However, on the afternoon of Tuesday January 28, a man called the U.S. Coast Guard for assistance after the floe he and three other anglers were on about a mile off Catawba began drifting, preventing them from returning to shore.

As daylight unfolded on January 29, from the South Bass Island Lighthouse, open water was present to Green Island; all the way across to Mouse Island/Catawba; and as far as could be seen toward Marblehead/Sandusky, marking the end of the mainland ice season.

If we get ice, the fish are in the lake!

Due to recent strong hatches of both walleyes and perch, fishing is good 12 months of the year with the same daily limits regardless of the season for these species.

The population of “catchable” walleyes going into the 2025 season was estimated to be 77.4 million, so after accounting for several million being removed by recreational anglers and commercial fishermen in Ontario, there are still plenty remaining.

Yellow perch fishing in the Western Basin was slow much of the fall of 2025, where the strongest population remains, so if anglers get on top of them this winter, there should be plenty left.

Call ahead

Do not assume that just because the calendar says it is winter that it has been cold enough to make ice.

Wind, rain, deep snow and above-freezing temperatures can cause ice conditions to deteriorate or impact travel on the ice.

It is best to call local bait shops for updates before making the trip to the lake,

especially if it is a far drive. They might tell you to bring your boat instead of a snowmobile or ATV.

In the Port Clinton area, Bays Edge Bait and Tackle (419/635-6326), Hi-Way Bait & Tackle (419/734-3601), Herb's Bait and Tackle (419/797-2455) and A-N-J Bait (419/635-4436) are open during winter and can provide bait, equipment, and updates for mainland ice conditions.

The Port Clinton airport can provide updates on island ice conditions and activity. The pilots at Griffing Flying Service (419/734-5400) or Island Air Taxi (419/573-2960) will relay what they are seeing as they provide transportation of passengers, mail, groceries, and other freight to all the islands.

Unfortunately, the Ohio Division of Wildlife no longer provides a list of licensed

ice guides; instead, call a charter captain who lists ice fishing services on their web site if in need of one. **MWO**

John Hageman authors about 120 articles per year. He was Manager of The Ohio State University's Stone Laboratory Biological Field Station at Put-in-Bay for 25 years, began working on Lake Erie research projects in 1977, ran ice fishing charters for 15 years and enjoys fishing for multiple species.



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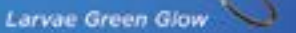
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