

The Hottest Thing on Ice

**Who cares if
the water's
frozen?**



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It's not "hot," exactly, but ice fishing is growing in popularity! Even if you haven't tried ice fishing, you've probably seen local news coverage of the famous Great Rotary Ice Fishing Derby in Meredith, or the movie *Grumpy Old Men*, whose title characters pursue the chilly sport.

What is so fascinating about fishing on a frozen pond or lake? I can't put my finger on the allure of ice fishing...but I CAN say that I have been very fortunate to share the pastime with hundreds of young children and adults over the years, and many of them have gotten "hooked" too!

The past two winters I have taught ice fishing to third- and fourth-grade students from Alton Central School through Fish and Game's "Let's

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Go Ice Fishing!" program. The students learn about winter pond ecology, fish identification, safety, angling ethics and how to use specialized ice-fishing equipment.

A field trip to the frozen waters gave the two busloads of students — that's about 75 restless, giggling eight- and nine-year olds — the opportunity to try out their new skills. I was amazed at these students and the careful preparations they made for the day; they were all dressed for the event, right down to extra hats and gloves. We were lucky to have outstanding support from parents, thirty of whom took the time to be with their children during this field trip. I think, secretly, they were not so interested in chaperoning as in trying a fun new activity.

Fast forward... the baits are all in the water and my young charges are settled into ice-fishing mode: socializing with each other and the adults,

**Fishing with
the family is a
blast — even
in deepest
winter.**

By MARK BEAUCHESNE

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Baiting the hook and setting the tip-up are fun — but the cry of “FLAG!” and the catch are where it’s at!

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digging into their backpacks full of snacks and drinks.

Then it began: Flags started going up. (What’s a flag? Read on...) The calm we enjoyed was interrupted with the cry of FLAG! — followed by a mad dash for the hole by a herd of eager children, nearly the entire group of 75! The bundled-up students, cheeks pink with cold and success, pulled a small yellow perch from the hole in the ice. The thrill of the first fish of the day cannot be beat! The excitement of flags going off continued throughout the three-hour field trip, and at the end of the day the students and the parents had the same look of disappointment. “Is it really over?” “Do we have to stop fishing?” Talk about heart-breaking! The trip was a huge success for parents, teachers and students alike.

I gathered the group for a final announcement. I thanked the parents for their time and then asked, “Who wants to go fishing this weekend?” The crowd erupted into a unified “I do, I do!” — Exactly the response I hoped for!

No Grumpy Little People on the Ice

Would you like to get your family excited about going ice fishing? To avoid the dreaded “grumpy little people” response, *plan ahead*. Here are some basics to help you prepare for your first ice-angling adventure.

TIMING: Ice fishing can be good

any time of day, so plan your trip around the warmest part of the day. Your first trip out should be fairly short; limit your fishing time to about an hour and a half of actual fishing, the total time after setting up and picking up would be about two and a half hours. By keeping the first few trips short you can be sure the interest and enthusiasm will grow.

ACTIVITIES: Having activities you can do together while ice fishing will keep the family interested. Ice fishing is the main focus of the trip, but there is some waiting involved; having activities to keep busy and warm will only add to the fun. A frisbee is a blast in the snow, as is the process of designing and building a snow fort. Winter is the best time to go wildlife tracking — animal tracks in the snow tell a story. To help find out what made the tracks, bring along a track guide. Ice-skating is another fun way to pass the time, and is a great way to get to your ice-fishing spot if the snow is not too deep.

FOOD: At the top of your ice-fishing equipment list — yes, before tip-ups, hooks or augers — is food! When out on the ice for extended periods of time, snacks are very important. The cold makes you burn calories at an increased rate; this is your body’s furnace keeping you warm. Fill a thermos with beef stew or macaroni and cheese. I have a small grill, which I bring for cooking hot dogs and fish when we catch them. A can of Sterno could heat up a can of soup — or, in a pinch, numb little fingers. Hot cocoa is an all-time favorite ice-fishing beverage. Include all family members in planning your ice-fishing eats, to avert picky-eater incidents far from home.

CLOTHING: When outfitting your family for ice fishing, do it together. Start with boot shopping. A good pair of insulated boots is a must. Making holes in the ice creates slush and standing water, so you need to be sure that the boots you select are waterproof. I like those ugly knee-high rubber boots — they come well-insulated now and are completely waterproof.

Socks are next. Wool is the best. For people who are bothered by wool, a thin synthetic liner sock and wool outer sock combination is the way to stay toasty. Avoid cotton socks — they absorb moisture and sap all the warmth from your toes. Insulated underwear is another must. Advances in clothing have made kids’ and adults thermal shirts and trousers much more comfortable and a lot warmer.

The next layer should be an additional insulating layer; fleece is a good choice. I like to wear a turtleneck shirt, which helps keep wind and wayward snowballs off my neck. Many people still



dress in the traditional wool pants and shirt. Your outer layer needs to be windproof and waterproof. A good pair of snow pants combined with a good winter coat will do the trick. Layering will give you and your children better protection and comfort in the cold.

The final must-have item: a good, warm hat. Let your child pick out the hat he or she likes — they know what’s cool! This is the best insurance that they will wear the hat often. Whether you choose gloves or mittens, everyone should have extras on hand, because eventually they **will** get wet. Mittens are warmer, but you will need to take them off even for simple tasks. Gloves offer more mobility, but are not as warm. Now you can have the best of both worlds, a glove-and-mitten combination sometimes called a glomitt. The mitten-tops flip back to reveal fingerless gloves. Children love them and they will wear them for the “cool” factor alone.

Other clothing recommendations include a scarf — the one winter item I always wear. By covering your face with the scarf the air you breathe is warmed. In addition to looking good, a scarf can double for a hat if one is lost or forgotten.

Gear to Go

Ice-fishing equipment is specialized but very simple. First, a sled is necessary for moving equipment onto the ice. Plastic boat sleds can be found at most department stores — be sure to get one that is big enough to haul your gear or a tired child. A homemade sled is fun and easy to make; a simple wooden box attached to a pair of old downhill skis works great.

You will need to make holes in the ice; a “spud” or ice chisel is an effective tool. A spud can be used to test the thickness of the ice, to make holes in the ice or to re-open holes made by someone else. An auger is a more sophisticated hole-maker — nothing more than a giant drill. Hand augers and power augers both make quick work out of the chore of making holes in the ice. Hand augers are affordable and recommended; however, if you need to make a large number of holes, power augers are very efficient.

No matter what tool you use to make the hole, there is always some slush or ice chips remaining in the hole. Use a “skimmer” — basically a long handled slotted serving spoon — to remove the slush and ice. Keeping the hole free of ice will help ensure that your ice-fishing device will work properly.

Ice-fishing devices come in many styles and types. The most popular device is the tip-up,



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which is very simple to use. The reel or spool is submerged in the water, and the rest of the device is suspended on the ice by the arms, usually a crossed pair of dowels. A simple triggering mechanism makes this device exciting: a spring-loaded flag trips or pops up when a fish takes the bait. The flag indicates that a fish has taken your bait — but to actually catch the fish, you have to remove the device from the hole and pull the fish in by hand. The submerged reel is spooled with several hundred feet of braided line, which allows the fish to run. You can’t beat fighting a fish with just a thin line and your bare hands.

Another popular ice-fishing device, a tip-up predecessor, is called a “tilt.” A tilt has a pivoting arm with a flag that, again, responds to the fish taking the bait. Tilts also have spools, but their spools are not submerged. Use the same technique for catching fish on tilts as you would for tip-ups.

For a more active ice-fishing experience, try a jigging rod or jig rod — it’s just like a regular spinning kit, but the rod is less than 3 feet long. Jig rods come in different levels of “action” to match the fish you are after, ultra-light action for panfish and heavy action for lake trout. Jig rods are named for the motion the angler gives the bait or lure — generally a slight up-and-down “jig” movement. The advantage of fishing with a jig rod is that it allows you to fish throughout the water column. A jig stick is even more basic — it’s simply a stick, about twelve inches long, notched on

Children are great at using the skimmer to keep the hole free of ice and slush. Below, if you don’t want to chip your hole out of the ice with a spud, a hand-auger is a great labor-saving device.



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Live shiners are the bait of choice.

One great place to catch ice-fishing fever — and perhaps a few fish — is this year's Meredith Rotary Fishing Derby, February 8th and 9th. The frozen surface of Lake Winnepesaukee is transformed into a veritable village of cozy bobhouses and friendly ice-anglers. See www.weirsonline.com/fishingderby.htm for location and entry information.



Let's Go Fishing! programs, funded by Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration funds, are offered statewide during ice-fishing season. Visit www.wildlife.state.nh.us for more information about ice fishing and a Let's Go Fishing class schedule.

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both ends to hold the braided fishing line. The size of the stick allows you to keep track of how deep you are fishing by counting how many lengths of line you've wound from the stick.

In most ice-fishing situations, your bait will be near the bottom, so you want to know how far down the bottom is.

Enter the "sounder," a device used to find the depth of the water. A sounder is a heavy metal weight — often just an old spark plug — with a clip that attaches to your hook or line. Lower the sounder into the hole, and take the guesswork out of how deep to fish. Most people mark their line with a button or a very small sinker, so that they won't have to re-sound after catching a fish or changing bait.

A small tackle box is excellent for carrying other items you shouldn't be without. In my tackle box I have hooks, spare sounders, non-lead sinkers, lures, jigs, a first-aid kit, pliers, trash bags and a compass.

Shiners are the bait of choice, and are sold in many locations during the ice-fishing season. You will need a bait bucket for them, and a bait dipper, which is a small net to retrieve the little rascals from the cold water. Here's a hint: Keep your bait dipper in the bait bucket so it will always be handy and the small net will not freeze.

Fishing live bait will bring you the most success. One way of baiting the hook with a shiner is to run the hook through the bottom jaw, then up and out between the nostrils. Another method is to hook them just beneath the dorsal fin. Mealworms and maggots are effective baits for sunfish and crappies; pet stores are the best resource for these wiggly things. Tip a small jig with two or three maggots. Fish the jig on the lightest jig rod you can find, and get ready for some fast action.

Keeping it Safe

Is the ice safe? Well, the honest answer is that no ice is ever safe, but here are a few guidelines: Solid, clear ice of 5 to 6 inches is adequate for small groups; ice thickness of 8 inches and up is good for large groups. Be aware that ice can be weakened by objects frozen into the ice, because they hold the heat from the sun; avoid docks, large rocks and trees fallen onto the ice. Always check the ice before you go out. Use the spud to thump the ice as hard as you can; if the spud does not break through, continue onto the ice. Make a test hole to check the thickness where the spud hit, and check the ice at intervals on your way out to your



What can a kid catch through the ice? Pickerel, perch, bass and the ever-popular crappie.

fishing spot.

Talk with your young companions about the cold, and watch them closely. Sometimes, when children are having fun, they may not notice they are getting dangerously cold.

Some important safety items to bring along are: rope (15 feet), extra clothing (left in vehicle), a compass, fire starter and matches. Ice can be very difficult to walk on, so you might consider getting ice crampons or "creepers." The steel spikes or chains of creepers grip the ice surface, giving you much-needed traction.

Those handy little instant-heat packets have become a vital part of my ice fishing gear. They are small enough to place inside gloves or wherever you have a chill.

Additional items to help ensure everyone's comfort are: a folding lawn chair or pack chair; a heavy blanket, which can be used to warm up or to block the wind; a boat cushion to use as a comfy seat or an emergency floatation device. The need for a sled should be apparent by now!

For me, part of the adventure of ice fishing is going way far out onto the ice. However, you don't have to go far to have a good time, and ice fishing doesn't have to be difficult or intimidating. The important thing is that you do it as a family and have fun. Let's face it — winters can be long around here! Having an activity to look forward to makes the long winter much more bearable. The gear you choose can be as simple or as high-tech as you like. Share this article with your family, and go explore the wonderful world of ice fishing this winter! Let us know how it goes! 

For more information about ice safety, call 603-271-3212 for a copy of the "Safety on Ice" brochure, or download it from Fish and Game's website.



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