

# Togque Time!

*Tips and tactics for catching  
lakers through the ice*

*by Tim Moore*



**T**he crisp air, the frozen surface of a lake, the silence broken only by the sound of ice augers and snowmobiles, and the challenge of pursuing New Hampshire's largest wild trout species. These are some of the things that inspire ice anglers to get out onto New Hampshire's frozen lakes each winter to catch lake trout through the ice.

Togue, laker, namaycush – whatever you call them, lake trout provide great fishing action through the ice during the long winter months in New Hampshire.

As soon as the season opens and the ice is safe enough to fish, anglers from around New England flock to lakes such as Winnepesaukee, Winnisquam, Squam, and the Connecticut Lakes for their chance at one of New Hampshire's many lake trout.

### Jigging and Tip-ups

The two most common ways to ice fish for lake trout are jigging and tip-up fishing. The debate over which method is better has gone on for many generations and will likely continue for many more. Both techniques are extremely effective. Which one works better usually depends on angler preference and the mood of the fish, which can change throughout the day. Some days, lake trout want to chase their prey, which makes jigging an effective method. Other days, the fish will only eat live smelt, and tip-ups will out-fish the jig rods. I typically have both jig rods and tip-ups (with live smelt) with me whenever I am on the ice.



PHOTO COURTESY TIM MOORE

tip-ups with live smelt. Before I could get the second tip-up in the water, the flag went up on the first! I spent the next few hours cycling between the two tip-ups. The action was non-stop. Later that afternoon, everything changed, and we were back to jigging. It was a good reminder to be ready for both types of fishing.

Generally speaking, jigging is more active and allows anglers to move around more. Spoons and bucktail jigs are common lures among lake trout anglers. Spoons attract lake trout through sight and vibration, triggering their predatory instinct. Bucktail jigs work great when paired with a ½-inch by 2-inch strip of belly meat from a white sucker. White suckers can be purchased at bait shops near most lake trout lakes. An effective jigging method is to drop your lure to the bottom, pound it a few times to stir up some silt, and reel up a couple feet before jigging.

Rods for lake trout vary by length and power, depending on the size of the lures an angler is fishing and the size of the lake trout they are targeting. Rod selection is also subjective, based on the preference of each angler. Some like very heavy rods, or even wooden jig sticks, and others prefer stout rods with some bend to cushion big lake trout head shakes. Most anglers fish heavy 36- to 40-inch rods. The roof of a lake trout's mouth consists of hard bone, which requires a hard hook-set.



Tim Moore displays a lake trout and a “go-to” gadget, the thermal tip-up. Designed to cover the entire hole and prevent freeze-up, thermal tip-ups also keep out blowing snow and slush and block out sunlight for shallow-water fishing.



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## HOOKS AND LINES

The ice fishing season in New Hampshire on lakes managed for lake trout runs from January 1 through March 31. On these lakes, anglers are allowed two lines per person through the ice, regardless of their fishing method, and are limited to a single hook with a single hook point when using bait. Treble hooks are legal, but you cannot place bait (any ingestible substance) on them. Additionally, New Hampshire has a lead ban which prohibits the use of lead sinkers and jigs weighing 1 ounce or less, regardless of size. Spoons and spinnerbaits are exempt from the lead ban. With a few exceptions, the minimum length to keep lakers is 18 inches, and the limit is two fish per day.

Tips and tactics: See a video of Tim Moore ice fishing for lake trout at [www.fishnh.com/fishing/ice-fishing.html](http://www.fishnh.com/fishing/ice-fishing.html).

## Chumming Around

Mobile anglers will often use a “run-and-gun” technique to hunt lake trout, while others will sit in one area and chum. Run-and-gun fishing allows an angler to cover more water and put their lure in front of a greater number of fish. It is most effective on days when lake trout are less active because of bright sun and high barometric pressure. The general rule is that lake trout will be more active on cloudy, low-pressure days, and less active when the sun is bright or the wind is blowing hard.

When lake trout are active, there is no need to go on the hunt. It’s usually best to sit and let the fish come to you. Chumming is an effective tactic to attract lake trout and keep them around. Most anglers will stop at their local bait shop and pick up a sucker on their way to the lake. The white-skinned belly meat of a sucker makes great bait on a jig, and the softer back meat makes great chum. Cut the back meat into ½-inch by 1½-inch strips and drop two or three pieces down the hole. As the meat falls, it not only releases a scent that attracts lake trout, but the slow sinking action will attract fish that

can’t smell it, but can see it. Be careful not to over-chum, or you will fill the fish up and leave them with no reason to bite your lure.

When tip-up fishing, you are relying on the movements of the lake trout and the liveliness of your bait to attract lake trout. Tip-ups allow anglers to spread their lines out over a greater area and wait for a flag to pop up, indicating a strike. Many anglers prefer this method because the in-between time allows them to be more social, and many love racing each other to the next flag. Tip-ups are often rigged with some sort of braided nylon line. Attached to that is a swivel and 6 to 8 feet of fluorocarbon line with a hook. A small non-lead spit shot is used to keep the bait at the desired depth.

Lake trout can be found in 30 to 40 feet of water during the winter months, often seeking “humps” next to even deeper water. While most avid lake trout ice anglers target those same depths all winter, some believe bigger fish will be caught in deeper water. Inside turns, humps, and steep drop-offs are key areas, as they are all prime feeding spots for lake trout.



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Seek out the humps within areas of deeper water to find laker hang-outs.



For through-the-ice laker action, your best bet is to employ a bucktail jig and ½-ounce to ¾-ounce jigging spoons.

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## Gear Up with Electronics

The use of electronics for ice fishing has increased dramatically over the past several years. More and more anglers are discovering the effectiveness of sonar flashers and underwater cameras. Sonar flashers give anglers a real-time look at what is going on under them using colored lines on a circular display to identify targets, such as their lure or fish. Flashers allow you to see where your lure is in the water column, where a fish is in relation to your lure, how a fish is reacting to your lure, and when there are no fish under you. The first time I saw a flasher in action through the ice, I was sold. I watched another angler beside me outfish me three to one using the same lure I was, all because he had information I didn't. It would be the last day I ever set foot on the ice without a flasher. Some call flashers cheating, but if the idea is to have fun, then I disagree.

Underwater cameras are a staple for many lake trout anglers who prefer to sit and chum. The underwater camera allows you to observe exactly how a lake trout is behaving, and some cameras can even record the footage. Cameras are more time consuming to set up than flashers or other fish finders, which is why many anglers who use them are more stationary. Once you lower the camera into the water, you must then find your lure, so you can observe how the fish are reacting to it. Then you can get an accurate picture of exactly what is going on beneath the ice. You can tell if the lake trout are eating only the chum you drop to them, if there is more than one fish, if they show any interest in your lure, and much more.

## Conserve the Resource

Many studies have been conducted about growth rates and the health of New England's lake trout populations. Some studies suggest that lake trout grow 2 to 4 inches per year for the first 4 years of their life. Then annual growth slows to an inch or less. On average, a 34-inch lake trout can be over 40 years old. Some studies also suggest that putting small fish back and keeping the biggest fish will alter the genetics of a lake trout population and stunt their growth. Besides, if the only lake trout that are put



PHOTO COURTESY TIM MOORE

back are smaller, eventually that's all that will be left. I strongly encourage practicing catch-and-release, and taking a quick photograph of larger fish so anglers can have a replica mount made, to avoid killing bigger, trophy-sized fish.

Thanks to the management efforts of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, lake trout numbers are strong enough that they do not require any stocking efforts. They are abundant in most of the lakes they inhabit. Average size varies from one waterbody to the next. Most days, anglers can easily catch several fish. Some prefer to put all the catch back, while others enjoy the flavor of lake trout fried or smoked. Regardless, it's usually the fun and camaraderie that keeps most people coming back day after day, winter after winter.



*Tim Moore is a full-time licensed New Hampshire fishing guide and the owner of Tim Moore Outdoors, LLC. He guides hundreds of ice anglers from around the world on Lake Winnepesaukee. He is also a member of the New England Outdoor Writers Association.*

An angler keeps an eye on a sonar flasher, which gives a real-time view of the water column. The flasher shows the bottom, your lure, swimming fish, and how the fish react to your presentation. Most important, you know when the fish are gone.




PHOTO COURTESY TIM MOORE

**Want to learn more?** Tim Moore (above) will give a free outdoor adventure talk on ice fishing for lake trout and white perch at the Fish and Game Department in Concord on January 10 at 7 p.m.

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