Dreaming Spring with Trout on Ice
es, I was getting the trout fishing bug real bad. But, it was a couple of moons too early. Then it occurred to me, perhaps a few decades late, that I should ice fish for trout. It would be great to simply see a trout at this point in the month of February.

In years past, this was the time to boil sap, drink some beer, boil sap, and drink some beer, a pattern which, with some imagination, bears a likeness to the repeating melodies of Stravinsky, gentle within the changing whole. Or, in other words, a time for patience and reflection. In due time, spring would arrive.

My past ice fishing, when I have had time and weather permitted, was for chain pickerel. Why I hadn’t given the trout a try over all these years is a good question. It is refreshing to have a new sporting venture come along, perhaps even more keenly felt when one is in one’s sixties. The promise of something new wakes up parts of the brain that shouldn’t be left to fall asleep. So I was revisiting some of youth’s anticipation and was happy with it all.

In New Hampshire, the “designated trout ponds” are closed to winter fishing, but there are many bodies of water, not “official,” which hold trout. I’m not prejudiced; I’ll gladly catch trout that are not official. I can’t tell the difference.

So, with growing excitement, I gathered my ice fishing gear and set about modifying my equipment for trout. I took three of my tip-ups, the ones I’ve used since 1962, and removed the big hooks and various ugly leaders meant for pickerel and replaced them with fine monofilament and much smaller hooks. Just looking at the rig used for pickerel says volumes about the nature of the quarry. But my new rigs for trout, although delicate, were still simple. I felt ready, ready to paint the town red, just with a smaller brush.

BOBHOUSE VILLAGE

I pulled the truck to a stop at the pond. It was called a lake, but here in New Hampshire we have a well-honed eccentricity about naming bodies of water. This would be called a pond almost anywhere else. It’s odd, and I do tire of trying to explain this to out-of-staters. But, why should everything make sense?

The expected scene came into view. A small hamlet this was, seven or eight bobhouses, parked vehicles and fishermen scattered about, tending their tip-ups and jigging rods. The shanties ranged from pure Americana to objects that looked like they were constructed from a piece of airplane fuselage. A crooked signpost with three arms pointed the way to the North Pole, California and Miami. I don’t know if the distances given were in miles or kilometers. That it was utilitarian was arguable, but it did reflect the general ambiance. I could feel the anticipation of catching trout as I observed the movements of the fishermen.

This was what I consider a major crowd and is very likely the main reason I never did ice fish here before. I’d heard the stories, though. Some big trout are taken through the ice, brood trout stocked in late fall.

It was late February and I was “dreaming trout.” The sight of liquid water flowing down a south-facing slope was all it took. It was one of those sunny, above-freezing days, only a tease of spring, but it had me lost on trout.
Being “hooked” on brook trout in the backcountry, this was not my ideal fishing destination. It was a put-and-take fishery with road access, where ice fishing for trout was allowed. It would suffice. The bobhouses, all-terrain vehicles, trucks, power augers and electronic gadgets came with admission. It was what it was.

I had chosen to come, so I couldn’t complain too much. After all, it was the end of February. There was a quiet enthusiasm here on the ice, which I quickly felt and liked.

It was obvious that most folks had set up over shallow water. I’ve always been a cautious ice fisherman. Not being over deep water suits me just fine, especially when those loud cracks roar across the lake and travel right between my feet. How those moving cracks navigate right to me is another mystery on life’s long list. I cringe when watching the vehicles some folks drive onto the lake, or while seeing them drill their holes within a hundred feet of open water. I learned as a teenager that you can chisel through 20 inches of ice in one spot, and then, somewhere near shore, fall through thin ice where an unnoticed stream or spring runs below.

I went to work with the chisel and found the ice to be a foot thick. I looked around for any evidence of variability, and felt somewhat reassured when the guy with the double cab pickup truck drove by. The song “skating away on the thin ice of a new day” came to mind, as I watched the truck speed away toward the far shore.

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FISH TALK

Although I am addicted to solitary fishing, there is no doubt that a good time can be had just “talking fishing” with other anglers. When the fish aren’t biting, ice fishing can test one’s patience, and a good conversation can save the day. Also, the “glad to be alive” smiles can be as bright as the sun on snow.

Of course, people are people, and some are in their own special world. This sometimes leads to conversations that dance around the edges of reality. The fishing can almost become an afterthought. In hindsight, foresight could have avoided some encounters, but I’m rich in the former and poor in the latter.

On a mid-week visit, I thought I had the lake to myself. Then, one lost-looking old soul wandered back and forth across the ice, from far across the lake, no one else in sight, in a path which led, by and by, right to me. He eyed an open hole three feet from my boots and I thought, hell no. I said, after a little while, “Don’t use that hole.”

He grinned oddly and eyed the hole a bit longer, shifting his weight, seemingly waiting for me to change my mind. After what should have been more than enough time for the situation to sink in, he gazed off toward the end of the lake. I could tell he knew I wasn’t going to budge. No doubt he has had to deal with people like me all his life. It was of no further concern to him. We both smiled in our own way, and he wandered on.
SLOGGING THROUGH THE SLUSH

I became a semi-regular through the month of March, right up to the first of April. The ultimate changes came, with warm sunny days leading to surface slush and water that would freeze up smooth and hard at night. These days were repeated until the cycle changed and the end of solid ice was near. My last outing, slogging through the slush at quitting time, I passed a couple of fishermen standing beside their tilted bobhouse. One called out, “See you next week.”

I replied, “Only if I’m in a canoe.”

They acted like I was kidding. I wasn’t. The ice was basically history a few days later. The season’s end has an insidious, sleepy kind of rush to it.

All in all, my new winter angling adventure, taking brook trout through the ice, was good medicine for the mid-winter blues. I didn’t even use a jigging rod, often just a hand line with parts of dead shiners. It was about as primitive as possible. I was the wild predator I once had been at the age of 12, and thoroughly enjoyed those old feelings.

So the ice fishing season was done. The fishing had often been slow, but on the better days, a pair of brookies shining in the sun on that ice and snow brought some warmth to the soul. I dare say I’ll do it again next winter.

Fred Prince grew up in northeastern Pennsylvania dairy country, went to graduate school in Ohio and has taught Human Anatomy & Physiology and Cell Biology at Plymouth State since 1985. He is partial to wild brook trout.

Early Season Open-Water Options

If the ice goes early, abundant open-water fishing can still be had before the traditional April 1st opening of lake trout and salmon waters:

- Stream fishing for trout begins on January 1, and New Hampshire has hundreds of miles of flowing water, ranging from major rivers to small mountain brooks.
- “Non-official” trout ponds are open year round, and thus available to fish as open water in years when ice fishing is not possible.

Last winter, a classic “off year,” I was able to cast from shore on Christmas Eve. I was not alone trying my luck that afternoon and, although a few other fishermen present were admittedly dedicated to ice fishing, they were obviously enjoying the open-water fishing as a back-up plan. As the old saying about New England weather reminds us, we need be resourceful. - FP
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