an epic

FISHING QUEST

By Clay Groves and Dave Kellam
Ardent anglers pursue fishing greatness on New Hampshire’s frozen landscape

We are Dave Kellam and Clay Groves, and we have OPD—Obsessive Piscatorial Disorder. Psychologists poorly understand our preoccupation with fish, but our families are well aware of the symptoms: distractibility around water, inability to tell time while fishing, and severe anxiety during warm days while mowing the lawn.

Our OPD served us well when we taught people about fish at the Amoskeag Fishways Learning and Visitors Center in Manchester, N.H. We have since changed jobs and moved to different towns, but we still have the affliction.

So much so, that last winter, while reminiscing about the good ol’ Fishways days, Dave said, “We ought to try to catch every kind of fish in New Hampshire.” And Clay, not to be outdone, replied, “We should eat ‘em, too!”

We laughed, and then realized we had uttered a challenge to ourselves to do something no one else had done before. We had a chance at infamy through angling. We began to make plans right away.

We decided to take one year and target freshwater fish, excluding the endangered species, of course. We could fish together or alone, but we would eat the fish together. We agreed to keep the first legal specimen of each species and not use nets or traps.

Our challenge evolved into an epic quest as we became angling knights in pursuit of the holy grail of fishing. We started a Facebook page and blog that attracted hundreds of fans. We soon found ourselves writing newspaper articles and making television appearances. We were even recognized at the town dump!

We could spill the beans right now and reveal how many fish we caught, but that misses the point. Because the true trophies of the quest are the lessons we learned along the way. We want to share some of those lessons, starting with one learned while fishing for New Hampshire’s freshwater cod.

**KEEP IT SIMPLE, STUPID**

Since we began our quest in February, our first fish was one we could only catch through the ice. We set our sights on the burbot or *Lota lota* by its scientific name—a fish so nice, a biologist named it twice. New Hampshire anglers call it a cusk, and it looks like the love child of an eel and a catfish.

Cusk only enter shallow water in the winter to spawn, so ice fishing was our only option. Based on advice from many fishing magazines, we decided to try Alton Bay at night. When we arrived, the bobhouse village on the ice suggested a hotspot; however, the air temperature was in single digits and the place was dead, except for the howling wind.

Dragging our gear-laden sleds onto the ice, we couldn’t help but swagger. It might have been the chafing long underwear, but we think it was our hunter-gatherer machismo bursting forth.

We brought tons of gear, including chairs, augers, cameras, tackle boxes, jigging rods, flashlights, a propane heater, extra propane tanks, a coffee can of suckers and a camp stove. Our plan was to drill a bunch of holes, set up a portable shanty and bounce large glowing sucker-tipped jigs off the bottom throughout the night. We also planned to clean, cook and eat the cusk.

After walking about a quarter-mile, our backs ached and our faces were numb. Exhausted, we stopped and set up camp. A strong frigid gust blew us back on our heels, as if to say, “Good evening boys, you’re in for it now.”

With hypothermia setting in, we pulled out the tent-like shelter and it instantly became an elaborate box kite that threatened to drag us to our doom. We wrestled it to the ice and chucked it in all our gear.

Once inside, we unpacked our secret weapon: a new fish finder that revealed life 20 feet beneath us. Hope warmed our veins as we scrambled for bait and line. We lowered our lures to the precise depth, but instead of a strike we were snubbed. For a maddening three hours, fish after fish insulted us.

With no promise of fish and temperatures falling, we decided to cut and run. Once outside, a minus-9° F wind chill took our breath away. We hurled all the gear back into our sleds, lashed the crumpled shanty on top, and hoofed it to the cars.

As we sat in a McDonald’s booth in Alton, embracing our hot coffees like they were lost children, we shared our thoughts. Dave pointed out that fishing magazine editors are sadistic. Clay added that they were in cahoots with tackle manufacturers. We both were disappointed, but wanted to carry on, so we decided to try a traditional Granite State cusk fishing method.
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Cousin Ron lands the first black crappie.

On his way home, Clay stopped in Center Harbor and set up six cusk lines, which are heavy lines anchored to the bottom, baited with suckers, and tied to a stick overnight. Cusk are the only fish in New Hampshire that can be legally caught this way.

The next day on his way to work, Clay walked onto the ice in dress pants and a tie. He turned a few heads as he chipped out the lines and pulled up four nice cusk.

Lesson learned: simple is better. Where hundreds of dollars of gear failed, six paint stirrers and some string succeeded. This lesson served us well throughout the quest, and allowed us to focus on the fish instead of our equipment.

IT AIN'T OVER 'TIL THE LIFE INSURANCE SALESMAN SINGS

Many fishermen are curmudgeons. They yell at kids for making noise and grumble at friends who are late. These guys usually end up fishing alone, and that’s too bad, because during our quest we learned that fishing with others adds a whole ‘nother dimension to the experience, especially if that person is Clay’s cousin Ron.

“There goes a dogfish, chased by a catfish.” The B-52’s “Rock Lobster” lyrics heralded the arrival of cousin Ron, a life insurance salesman from Lowell and a self-proclaimed Karaoke star. As he danced our way, we could tell he was enthusiastic about helping us catch our target fish: the black crappie.

After quick hellos, we offered him fishing tips, like using waxworms instead of mealworms with small, colorful ice jigs, and to avoid setting the hook hard in the paper-thin mouth of a crappie. Ron nodded and grabbed a rod.

The taste of victory is sweet. Well - it’s crunchy, anyway.
Ron belted out an Anthrax tune as he wiggled the \( \frac{1}{8} \) ounce yellow jig at the end of the ultralight line. This triggered a strike, and Ron landed the first crappie of the day, an 8-incher. It was fish number 5 in our quest!

Our little crappie was much smaller than the 2.8-pound record pulled from the Bellamy in 2000. But it was legal, and thus qualified for our quest.

“It was California Dreamin’, So we started screamin’, On such a winter’s day.” Ron sang the Dead Milkmen’s “Punk Rock Girl” lyric as he caught a second crappie. Now that was two fish to our zero. It seemed the secret was singing, so as an experiment we joined the chorus of “Don’t Stop Believin’” and Clay was rewarded with a nice 10-inch crappie. We then caught and released many more crappie that day to an off-key soundtrack.

As Ron drove away, we realized that catching fish is good, but the people you fish with really make the adventure.

**SMALL IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER**

Some guys snort at any fish under five pounds. They’re missing out, because appreciating the little things in life just means more enjoyment overall. We learned this lesson while fishing for white perch in Effingham, N.H.

It was a crisp mid-February morning and we were hunting white perch on Leavitt Bay, an appendage of Lake Ossipee. According to the bait shop owner in Union, this bay had a healthy population of the silvery schooling fish hungry for smelt.

As we pulled our sleds toward the bay, we were happy we packed light. Clay actually packed a little too light. He left his snowshoes at home. So, as Dave skittered across the four-foot snowbanks like a web-footed ballerina, Clay slogged along with the grace of a dying moose.

On the ice, we drilled a line of holes parallel to shore in about 20 feet of water. The LCD screen of our fish finder did not show fish, but we dropped large glowing jigs down anyway, tipped with lively smelt, in hopes of attracting some patrolling white perch.

In a short while, our sonar revealed a visitor. A fish was swimming around our smelt but not taking it. We quickly lowered a smaller jig tipped with a waxworm that was instantly hit. With hoots and hollers, we reeled in the fish. However, instead of a fat white perch, a diminutive five-inch-long yellow perch appeared in the hole.

With a bit of hesitation, we reeled it in – we knew that we would have to eat it since it was our first yellow perch of the quest. We never saw another fish that day.

At first we were dismissive, but on closer inspection we saw that the yellow perch was a remarkably pretty fish. It had a vibrant yellow-green hue that was disrupted by dramatic dark vertical bands. Its pectoral and anal fins glowed bright red. The exquisite structure of the mouth and gills were fascinating as we manually worked the dead fish’s mouth. All in all, we were becoming very proud of our catch.

We gutted, scaled, breaded and fried the fish whole in our camp stove skillet and flaked the meat off onto a ham sandwich we brought for lunch. Like a crunchy condiment, it added a pleasant moisture and flavor to this poor man’s “surf and turf.”

That was the first of many small fish that we would catch during our quest. In fact, we actually found a “microfishing group” – small-fish enthusiasts who also appreciate the little things in life – and spent some time last spring catching teeny-tiny fish with hooks barely the size of this J.

We went after big fish, too – we got skunked in our attempt to bag a carp with bow and arrow. Over the months of the quest, we’ve hooked monster bass and wee blacknose dace, learned a ton about New Hampshire’s freshwater fish, made new friends and found some new favorite fishing spots – and tried recipes from the ridiculous (slimy sculpin scampi) to the sublime (fallfish cakes).

This ice-fishing season, we will be out trying to catch the few remaining fish on our quest and working on a book about our adventures; you can follow our progress at [www.catch-m-all.com](http://www.catch-m-all.com). Also, we encourage our fellow anglers to post the lessons they have learned while fishing on our Catch-M-All Facebook page. Until next time, remember: fish simply, fish with friends and appreciate the little ones as much as the big ones.

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**Poor Man’s Lobster**

**Simple recipe produces gourmet results.**

Boil water with salt and a little red wine vinegar; add one-inch chunks of cusk and boil for two minutes. The cusk is done when it’s tender and looks terrible. But don’t be fooled: the hot fish dipped in melted garlic butter is fabulous!

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**CATCHING FISH IS GOOD, BUT THE PEOPLE YOU FISH WITH REALLY MAKE THE ADVENTURE.**

Dave Kellam lives in Exeter with his wife and daughter. When he is not signing autographs in the local beauty parlor, he is a drummer in a Portsmouth street band. Clay Groves lives in Conway with his wife and two daughters. When he is not being recognized at the dump, he makes maple syrup, cooks whatever is in season and plays like a maniac.
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