

TFN Ice-Fishing Primer

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The TFN Ice-Fishing Primer

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In fact, ice-fishing is not only a great way to spend some time in the outdoors during the winter, it's also a very effective method of catching fish if practiced properly. **THE SEASON:**

The first and most obvious requirement for this method of fishing is ice. Those waters that freeze in the northern half of the world generally do so any time from October through December, the further north, the earlier. Once frozen, they normally stay in that condition until March through May and even into June, the further north, the later.

Once the ice is a SOLID 3-4 inches thick, it is safe to venture forth on foot. 5-6 SOLID inches will support snowmobiles and ATVs, while you'll have to wait until it is 8 inches or more before attempting to drive your car on it. We emphasize the word SOLID because ice can have air pockets, pockets of snow, and even slush that reduce its tensile strength. **THE RULES:**

Like any form of fishing, there are generally government-controlled rules and regulations regarding ice-fishing. Before you go out on the ice, make sure that you are fully aware of the species that are in season, and the equipment that is allowed to be used, including what type and how much. In some areas, we've heard of being able to use as many as 7 lines at one time. On the other hand, some lakes are shut down completely by the government where no fishing of any sort may take place over the winter. **EQUIPMENT BASICS:**

If you are going to try your luck from a commercially rented ice-hut, you probably won't need any equipment at all. These huts, which generally have room for between 4 and 6 people, are warmed up before you get there, have a big pre-cut hole in the middle, and are provided with an appropriate number of lines, minnows, and often salted minnows (used for chumming the water). The one drawback to this method of ice-fishing is that although you'll be toasty and comfortable, if the fish aren't immediately below your hut, you're S.O.L..

We'll presume that you and your buddies will be venturing forth on your own for the balance of this article. **Cutting Through the Ice**

There are 5 basic methods of breaking the icy barrier between you and the fish. Unfortunately, the efficiency of each method is directly related to the cost.

Gas Powered Ice Augers.

These drills are very efficient, if noisy, but can cut a hole through a foot of ice in seconds. If your budget is not tight, one of these tools will make your days on the ice much more enjoyable and incredibly less strenuous, allowing you to save all that energy for bringing in all those fish.

Gas Powered Chain Saws.

You'll get a square hole, but you won't be restricted to the diameter of an auger bit. Many commercial ice-hut rental establishments use these to make holes large enough for six people to fish through.

Manual Ice Augers.

These can be cranked by one or two people to get through the ice. Although they require some labour, they cost well under \$100, and are much more efficient than the last two tools discussed below.

Ice Chisels, or Spuds.

A spud is a long, steel pole with a chisel on one end and a strap or rope on the other, used for vertically chipping away ice. They are inexpensive at \$15 to \$40 dollars, but require a substantial exertion each time you want a new hole. However, they're easy to use, and if you go back to the same holes the next day, or use someone else's holes within a couple of days of them being opened, spuds are great for clearing 1-2 inches of ice.

An Axe.

Don't scoff at a 5lb axe to do the job. They're less wieldy and much cheaper than spuds, and can cut ice just as well. However, you have to be more careful to avoid taking the odd toe in your zealous attack on the water.{mospagebreak title=Keeping the Hole Clear}Keeping the Hole Clear

Depending on the outdoor temperature and wind conditions, and whether or not it's sunny, ice-fishing holes can stay open for hours or freeze up in minutes. Either way, nature has decided that sooner or later, every hole will freeze. If you have a line going from outside the hole into the water (more about this below), the line will freeze into the ice and strikes will not be able to be detected.

An age-old method of keeping the line free is by surrounding the line with some sort of oil or grease that won't freeze under normal conditions. One way of doing this without getting oil all over the place is to take a short length of PVC pipe or other plastic tube or hose, taping coat-hanger wires to it perpendicular to each other with duct tape, and placing it in the hole so that the wires support it and the tubing goes a couple of inches into the water. grease the exterior of the tube so that the ice won't freeze to it. Place your line through the tube, into the water, and then pour some vegetable oil into the tube. The oil will prevent the interior of the tube from freezing.

A more traditional method is to buy an ice skimmer. These are inexpensive ladles with holes in the cup portion to skim surface ice from your hole. They are available in both plastic and metal, but, although ice can freeze up the metal ones, they're much more sturdy and can be used to chip through a quarter or an inch of ice when the plastic models would bend or bounce off.

Another valuable tool to have available is a small pick-axe or hammer to free equipment that has been locked into the ice for a few hours.{mospagebreak title=Rods, Reels and Tip-ups}Rods, Reels & Tip-ups

There is nothing preventing you from using your summer gear on the ice, but a regular length rod is a bit cumbersome to use while fighting a fish through a hole that's 5 or 6 feet away from you, where you can't see the direction in which the fish is swimming. Ice can be quite sharp, and without controlling the line's entry into the water, you can also get broken off right at the hole.

To make things easier, you can purchase reasonably inexpensive ice-fishing rods that will accommodate your spinning or baitcasting reels. These rods are between 18" and 36" in length, and are designed to help fight the fish while enabling you to be positioned directly over the hole. There are also one-piece rod and reel combinations made out of plastic or wood specifically for ice-fishing.

Although jigging with rods is often more productive than just leaving lines in the water, the major drawback to fishing with them is that you are pretty well restricted to one or two lines, and both within a very short distance of each other.

The generally favoured method of fishing through the ice is by using some sort of contraption that dangles the line in the water at a specific depth and comes equipped with some visible or audible method of indicating that the bait has been taken.

In many places, anglers still use switches taken from the dead or dormant bushes on shore, freeze them into the small piles of ice and snow created when the holes are drilled, and hang a loop in the line from the switch with fluorescent orange ribbon tied to the loop. When a fish takes the bait, the loop with the ribbon on it falls into the water to indicate the strike. The line runs freely off the spool until you get there. Once again, the major drawback is that the line can easily freeze into the water (unless you use something similar to the Ice-free Tube above). Additionally, many of the switches get frozen in hard and cannot be transported to different locations.

Most anglers now use tip-ups to aid their ice-fishing success. Tip-ups involve a flag that pops up to indicate the strike. In the associated diagram, you will notice that examples A and B have spools at the bottom of a post. The spools are actually immersed in the water so no line-freeze occurs. If you don't clear the hole from time to time, though, the whole thing can get frozen in fairly solidly, which makes it difficult to reel in a fish when you can't reach the line. Additionally, many of the models have a hard time spanning a 10 inch hole, which is the large size available from augers. Stories abound of the tip-up slipping into the larger holes. There are wooden models that are about 16 inches across, but one wonders why don't they make the more-convenient plastic ones with extensions that can be pulled out the ends.

The example marked C sits beside the hole, so there is less chance of it falling in. You may have noticed that it also has a small metal plate on the end of the arm where the line goes through. The reason for this design is to enable the wind to impart a jiggling action to the line. Anglers who have used all three types will tell you that this model will out-catch the others on average by at least 3-1. Once again, however, the hole must be clear, and if the wind changes directions, the tip-up must be adjusted accordingly.

The general all-purpose bait for ice-fishing is the live minnow, although some of the newer scent-impregnated baits can also produce large creels. Minnows can be kept a long time on the ice if you use a styrofoam-insulated bucket, many of which including a nice padded seat for your comfort. For panfish and crappie, we suggest you use the small 1-2 inch minnows or small larvae or grub imitations, and the larger size minnows and imitations for whitefish, trout, walleye and pike. How you dress your offering can mean all the difference in the world.

There are many different types of lures that can be used in conjunction with these baits, depending on the species you're after:

- for panfish and crappie, small (1/32 to 1/8 oz) jigs, Swedish Pimples, Williams and Russian Ice Jigs or Lindy Rigs seem to work best;
- for whitefish and trout, Williams and Mr. Champ shiny spoons and Ice Rapalas are normally called for; and,
- for walleye and pike, all of the above can each have a chance on any given day.

Remember that like open water fishing, you must match your offering to the forage and that different styles and colours will work better at different times. Although colour is not as important under the ice, especially if there is a blanket of snow or a layer of slush blocking the light, it is sometimes necessary to lower an attractor as well as your baits to bring in the fish. Using shiny spoons can help, and some people put down a large minnow, not so much to catch fish, but to cause enough commotion to bring the predators into the area where they'll find the other baits.

As mentioned above, many commercial establishments will provide you with salted minnows for chumming. Blood contains salt, so it is believed that putting these salty morsels into the water will cause a salty taste to permeate the surrounding area, bringing in the fish.

There are a number of keys to remember when trying to locate fish.

First of all, most fish with the exceptions of panfish and pike will stay within a foot or two of the bottom. The water is warmest there, and activity therefore costs less energy. Pike, which have binocular vision and strike in an upward direction, requiring you to suspend your baits further off the bottom - up to 3 feet. And panfish and crappie, which are schooling fish, tend to suspend at different levels. A good sonar or flasher unit can give you clues as to what level they might be found.

Secondly, there are 2 parts to the ice-fishing season: early and late ice, and that in between. Fish will be both more active and in shallower water during the early and late ice periods.

Thirdly, different species of fish live at different depths. The warmer water species such as bass (if you're allowed to catch them), pike and walleye will not often venture deeper than 30-40 feet, whereas trout may go as deep as 50-60 feet or more. On some ocean tributaries, anglers can fish for cod and halibut that can be 100 feet deep or more.

Fourthly, look for structure. If the fish you're after relates to structure in the open water season and does not become relatively dormant over the winter, chances are that it will relate to similar type structure year 'round. A portable sonar or flasher can help you find the structure, even through the ice. Carry some sort of container that will hold water with you, and pour a small puddle of it on the ice you want to check. Place the transducer in the puddle and you should be able to read to the bottom.

And lastly, when in doubt, look for other anglers on the ice; not the stationary huts, but the anglers out in the open. Most of these folks will tend to be local die-hards who make a point of following the fish around in the winter.

When ice-fishing, you must be aware of two possible dangers not involving the ice, itself. The first one is frostbite. Frostbite can affect any area of the body, but is most commonly found in the extremities such as your ears, nose, fingers and toes. So these areas must be constantly monitored to make sure they are not getting too cold.

The other major concern is hypothermia, which occurs when the overall body temperature falls until the efficiency of the body's organs is compromised to the point that they can no longer function properly. Only a few degrees can make all the difference in the world, and remember that the longer you're on the ice, the colder you're likely to get.

The key to consistent comfort on the ice is layering. You might think that the thick, burly sweater your mother knitted you for your birthday is all you need, but what if it gets too hot? Or what happens if the wind picks up and goes right through it? We'll start with keeping the head warm and move down.

A great percentage of natural body heat can be lost through the top of one's head, so wear proper gear to retain the heat you already have. Often, people will wear a toque under the hood of their jacket, or even a thin hat under a thicker one. Either way, one or both can be removed, depending on the conditions. In extremely cold conditions, a thicker woolen balaclava under a toque can be indispensable since it not only protects the head, but also the face and neck. There are also face-masks designed for skiers that can be used in conjunction with hats to keep the face warm.

As noted, a balaclava will also protect the neck area. No matter what you wear over top, it is strongly suggested that you wear a turtleneck or dickey underneath. A scarf is handy but not as preferable as a neck-tube that can be raised to cover the lower part of the face as well as the neck. Again, if you get too hot, you can remove the neck-tube and still have your turtleneck on underneath.

From your neck to your wrists and ankles, you should always start out with a good pair of long-johns. These can be thin, made out of thermal materials, the older types made out of wool, or even out of sweat-shirt material. One-piece models are preferred because they maintain a layer from the neck to the ankles.

Some anglers wear two outer layers, and some three or four. It depends on the layers. Many wear sweat pants, a turtleneck and a sweater or vest under a snowmobile suit. Others might wear an additional jacket and pair of sweats under a shell. It depends on what you own, how cold it is going to be, and what your budget is for new outdoor clothing. But in all cases, layers should be able to be stripped off or added as needed, and the outer layer should have some degree of water repellence to it. Not only might you come across some wet snow or (gasp) freezing rain while on the ice, but if you have to kneel down for anything, the warmth from your body will melt a little bit of the ice you're kneeling on, which will then either stay wet or freeze and become part of your clothing.

Footwear should include a couple of pairs of thermal or woolen socks under warm, waterproof winter boots. You will be standing on ice for quite a period and will want as much insulation as is comfortable because the feet are one of the primary areas for heat loss. Also, the boots should not be tight. If you can move your feet around a little bit it's easier to keep them warm. Another reason for 2 pairs of socks instead of one is that feet perspire, and the moisture can be wicked, or drawn away from the feet through the first layer.

We have left gloves to the last because anglers seem to each have their own preferences. Some use woolen gloves with the fingers cut out, some use the same but with flaps to cover the fingers. Some use neoprene gloves (made of skin-diving wet-suit material), while others just use huge mittens that they take off to attend to the lines. Some use ski gloves and others use snowmobile mitts. So use whatever is comfortable for you. Just keep in mind that fingers can get frostbite quickly if left in freezing temperatures. Also make sure you carry a towel with you to dry off your hands after getting them wet or handling fish. You can also use this rag to kneel on in order to keep yourself dryer.

And finally, make sure to remember some hot tea, coffee or soup. not only will the heat warm you up. but you can lose just as much fluids in the cold as you can sweat out in the heat.

Above all, use common sense.