

Ice Fishing In The 90's

Contributed by John Sherrer
Friday, 29 June 2007

Growing up on the shores of Lake Erie, ice fishing was a great way to pass the winter months and provide for those Friday night fish fries. ... Thirty years later, as one might imagine, ice fishing has developed into as much an art, with as much specialized equipment, as fly fishing.

Growing up on the shores of Lake Erie, ice fishing was a great way to pass the winter months and provide for those Friday night fish fries. Equipment and tactics were brute and simple. Endurance was tested to the limits maintaining the vigil in the open at the jagged holes chopped by the spud.

Thirty years later, as one might imagine, ice fishing has developed into as much an art, with as much specialized equipment, as fly fishing. There are portable ice shelters, hand and power augers, magnetic tip-ups and all kinds of specialized gear. One can choose to stay as primitive and simple or as high tech as desired. The comfort, fun, and productivity can rival the best days of spring or summer. Here's a few ideas on how to get started or improve your enjoyment of the highly addictive sport of ice fishing.{mospagebreak title=Comfort}

COMFORT

It's hard to imagine sitting on a bucket out on the open ice and enjoying ice fishing except on those rare days of a thaw in January and February. I remember my dad and I first rigging up wind breaks and all kinds of devices to keep us more comfortable so we could concentrate more on fishing instead of constant movement to stay warm, de-icing our lines and keeping the holes open. Since those early days, I've built ice huts that were either too heavy and clumsy to be of any practical use, or ones the first gust of wind leveled. I've owned half a dozen different commercial solutions, and am absolutely convinced the Viking ice hut is the best model available. There's little enjoyment making ice fishing an endurance test, the low cost and ingenuity of these portable shelters goes a long way to maximizing productive and enjoyable winter fishing trips.

It folds up and fits easily into all cars or trucks. Its lightweight, sturdy, durable, and goes up in 60 seconds. The plastic floor is immune to rotting from wet and keeps your feet off the ice. It never ceases to amaze me how these huts keep you sufficiently warm without a heater and the accompanying fumes. Between solar heat and body heat, we find ourselves unzipping the door a bit for fresh air, even on the coldest days.

The Viking, or hut of your choice, will keep you comfortable so you can fish longer. Just as important, fishing in a hut keeps your line, spool, and rod guides from icing up so you can have an aggravation free time of fishing. And using a hut takes away the need for having layers of heavy clothing. I've had times on sunny days where I've stripped down to my t-shirt inside my little sauna box!{mospagebreak title=Rods and Reels}

RODS AND REELS

What an evolution from the homemade rigs to whats available on the market today! In my youth almost all ice fishing equipment was scraps of wood, nails, coathanger wire, and braided line with heavy sinkers.

Over the last 30 years, ice fishing equipment has adapted much of the open water rods and reels. Of course the rods are shortened, but everything from ultra-lite reels for panfish to baitcasting reels for toothier game fish are being used with appropriate ice rods. These innovations are great for playing the larger fish, and when panfishing in deep water. Tangles are eliminated from hauling in line hand over hand.

The commercial ice rods usually come with either plastic or metal slip rings to hold the reel in place. These have a bulky feel to them and I cut them off with tin snips. I fasten the reel handle on with simple electricians tape for a nice, comfortable grip.

LURES, BAIT AND TACKLE{mospagebreak title=Lures, Bait and Tackle}

All the variations of jigs and vertical jigs work well ice fishing. A good selection of Rapala ice jigs, Luhr Jensen's Crippled Herring, Hopkins vertical spoons, Sweedish Pimples, Mr. Twisters, and an assortment of the small stamped metal fluorescent ice jigs will complete your arsenal. Select the size that matches up with the species you're after. Experiment to see how the fish want their snacks on a given day. Try the jigs tipped with a maggot or minnow, and sometimes plain. Vary your jigging action, and depth til you're catching fish. Try different colors, although if I could only select one color the rest of my life, it would be chartreuse.

Fishing two lines can be difficult when the fish are hitting, and I can usually catch more fish concentrating on working one line with proper attention than trying to keep up with two rods. If things slow down, experiment with a different bait, or just

a minnow on a plain hook on a second line. If there's one secret or unique tactic I have, its that I don't like to set the rod down when I'm fishing. I try all kinds of jigging patterns, and try to remember which technique brought the most strikes. I also miss fewer strikes this way, instead of trying to be quick on the draw watching and grabbing for a stationary rod that is getting action.

I've found that the locations that produce in open water, are also productive through the ice. No need to re-invent the wheel here. Try to locate over drop offs or structure, and with modern hand or power augers and portable huts, moving til you find the fish is easy. Fishing new lakes isn't hard, fisherman will congregate over schools of fish, and there's always room to set up near-by.

The more time you spend ice fishing you'll develop your own preferences on equipment and tactics, and most good open water fisherman are also good ice fisherman. The principles of catching fish are the same, just the methods of ice fishing are different. And some people even find ice fishing more productive than open water. Here in Pennsylvania, the state records for walleye and northern pike were caught through the ice. Whether trying to land trophies or tablefare, ice fishing today can be the best fishing of the year, and a very healthy addiction.