

It's cold as ice, but not for these ice fishermen

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Give him a choice, and Chip Leer of Walker, Minn., says he'll take lake trout as his preferred species when ice fishing. "It hits the hardest, it's the most fun, and the fight is incredible," Leer says. Plus, he said, lakera are the species he gets to fish the least. Photo courtesy of Chip Leer/MCT

Ice fishing has come a long way. Once, the typical ice fisherman was a huddled figure sitting for hours on a windy, frozen lake, watching a hand-drilled hole freeze shut.

Now that fisherman, or angler, is more likely to be sitting in his or her shirtsleeves in a heated and well-lit fishing shelter. Today's typical angler has a fishing line over a power-drilled hole, waiting comfortably for the flasher that indicates an incoming fish. And when the flasher goes off, they're as likely as not to text a friend about it.

Is it any wonder that ice fishing is becoming more popular?

"It's because it got nice," said Russ Francisco of Marine General Supply in Duluth, Minn. "We have nice equipment now. Tents became warmer. Rods and reels are high-quality. It's fun to go now."

Gearing Up For The Ice

An activity that once was an exercise in suffering and endurance has become downright civilized.

Ice fishing's rise in popularity has paralleled the increase in new types of ice-fishing gear, say people who sell fishing gear. Lots of ice-fishing shelters are now built using sled bases. The top folds into the sled, along with bait buckets, rods, tackle and heaters.

Other shelters snap open easily and pack down small. Heaters are simpler and safer; electronics keep improving; and rods and reels are getting more sophisticated.

And even with the significant cost of getting started in ice fishing, the sport is a relative bargain, retailers say.

"It's way cheaper than summer fishing," said Mike Reedy of Northwest Outlet in Superior, Wis. "You don't have to get a boat."

And, said Ron Murphy, who is bringing the area its first ice fishing show, "You can do it as a family." He owns Shamrock Productions in Burnsville, Minn.

The Fish Are Biting Beneath

Ice fishing retailers say the winter fishing season now rivals the summer season. And that's saying something in a fish-crazy state like Minnesota.

"It is equal to the summer fishing in dollars and cents," Francisco said. "Every time I say that on the radio or somewhere, people question me, but it's true. There's a lot of people who just ice fish."

Scott VanValkenburg of Fisherman's Corner in Pike Lake, Minn., agrees. "December and January are every bit as busy as June and July," he said.

As ice now forms on the area's lakes, winter anglers are making plans to get out. One grandfather was talking to Marine General's Francisco the other day about taking his 4-year-old grandson out.

According to Francisco, taking kids out on the ice is more practical than taking them out in a boat in the summer. "They can run on the ice," he said. "Part of fishing is running around with other kids. If someone else catches a fish, they can all run over to see it."

And there's always a warm shelter waiting.

The other reason that ice fishing is popular here is that the fishing is good for lots of species.

"We're lucky here," VanValkenburg said. "We've got wonderful bluegill fishing, crappie fishing and, of course, walleye fishing."

Kamloops, Coho And Splake

Anglers have a good shot at catching big trophy walleyes in the nearby harbor, where the fish run up to 30 inches or longer. As soon as the ice forms there, anglers will be pulling their shelters out to fish for those walleyes.

"When the harbor freezes, to us, that's just like summer, like the opener," Francisco said. "Big walleyes is what they're looking for."

Beyond that, when the ice is right along the shore, anglers can also catch Kamloops rainbow trout and coho salmon.

And if the ice gets really good offshore, anglers can catch big lake trout in Lake Superior.

"People come from all over just to say they've stood on Lake Superior and fished," Francisco said. "They come from Iowa, Indiana, the Dakotas and mostly from the Twin Cities."

Farther north in Minnesota, many inland lakes are stocked with brook trout, rainbows and splake. Native lake trout are found in other inland lakes.

On Lake of the Woods, which is partly in Minnesota and partly in Canada, there are hotel resorts for ice anglers. If there were any question about the growth of ice fishing, look at the amount of money those resorts are spending in Lake of the Woods, Francisco said. "It's as important as summer fishing."

In fact, the amount of time spent winter fishing now far exceeds summer fishing on the Minnesota side of the lake, according to the state.

Quiz

- 1 In "Gearing Up For The Ice," the article argues that ice fishing is now civilized by:
- (A) providing a personal ice fishing story
 - (B) providing details of ice fishing innovations
 - (C) comparing the cost of summer fishing to ice fishing
 - (D) explaining the benefits of ice fishing to summer fishing
- 2 All the following are the effects of ice fishing's rise in popularity EXCEPT:
- (A) an abundance of new types of fishing gear
 - (B) an increase in sales for fishing retailers
 - (C) a decrease in profits for boat retailers
 - (D) an increase in the number of out of state travelers
- 3 Select the paragraph from introduction [paragraphs 1-4] that explains why ice fishing has become more popular.
- 4 What is the general tone of this article?
- (A) amusing
 - (B) hopeful
 - (C) light
 - (D) serious