

# **A Complete Guide to Ice Fishing**

## **Tips for beginners and seasoned anglers**



**Ice fishing tackle, gear, artificial lures, live baits, techniques, tip ups and tip downs, and tactics are covered in individual chapters**

**The top 12 ice fishing species are covered in great detail**

**Written by,  
Capt Jim Klopfer**

# **A Complete Guide to Ice Fishing**

## **Introduction**

This book was written to help those interested in ice fishing get started as well as giving seasoned anglers some additional information. Tackle, equipment, tactics, techniques, migrations, and species are all covered in detail. I wanted each chapter to be a “stand alone” piece of information, so there is a bit of redundancy in regard to tackle and lures. I decided that this was the best way to do it.

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# Forward

## Safety First!

This book is to be used as an informational ice fishing guide for beginners. With that said, the number one top priority is ice fishing safety. There are a variety of safety items that you can purchase to be the most prepared in the case you fall through the ice. Items that many ice fishing anglers keep on them during early and late ice, are:

- Wearable Ice Picks
- Spud Bars
- Rope
- Floatable Ice Fishing Bibs/Jacket
- Another Angler

Typically, spud bars are used in both early and late in the ice season. The purpose of the spud bar, or chisel, is to tap the bar in front of you on the ice twice to determine how thick the ice is. If the bar goes through the ice, then you know the ice is not safe.

Early ice can be just as questionable as late ice. Due to the inconsistent freezing and warming temperatures in early and late winter, the ice is either building or deteriorating making it always a good idea to be extra cautious.

If you happen to fall through the ice, wearing floatable fishing bibs and jackets will help, but you still may need help getting out of the water. Many ice fishing anglers wear ice picks around their neck in the case they fall in they can just grab them and try to pull themselves out. Once you get out of the ice it is recommended that you do not stand up and that you roll away from the area of breakage.

Of course, it is always a good idea to never go alone during early or late ice. Bring a buddy that can help you in the case you are unable to get out by yourself. If you brought a rope with you, your fishing buddy can throw you the rope from a safe distance ensuring they will also not go through the ice.

**Tara Lauren, owner of Tara Lauren Outdoors**



# Ice Fishing Tackle and Gear

In this chapter we will thoroughly cover ice fishing tackle and gear. Just as in open water fishing, and really any other hobby or sport, some specialized equipment is required. Rods, reels, hooks, and lures are just the beginning. Ice fishing anglers will also need augers, proper clothing, and other equipment. They might even spring for extravagant items such as portable shelters and fish finders.



Safety is the number one consideration when it comes to ice fishing! It should always be the first factor when planning a trip. While many anglers do consider ice thickness, exposure to the cold is also a serious issue to take into account. There are a few basic things that every angler should do before an ice fishing trip. Most serious ice fishing anglers are advised to invest in a floatable suit for safety.

## **Ice thickness and ice fishing safety**

Ice thickness is of prime consideration. This is particularly true early and late in the season. Regions that experience extreme winters will usually have plenty of ice in mid winter. Anglers can access ice fishing reports both online and from local shops to get an idea of current conditions.

Fortunately, anglers can easily check the ice thickness once they have arrived at their favorite lake. The easiest thing to do is to simply drill a hole. The angler can then measure the thickness of the ice to determine if it is safe enough to fish. A good rule of thumb is that the ice should be a minimum of 4” to walk on and at least 12” inches to drive on.

## **Protection from the elements**

One thing that has certainly changed over the years is the quality and affordability of outdoor apparel. Thermal undergarments, boots, socks, hats, gloves, and coats are easily obtained at reasonable prices. For the most part, this gear is lighter and less cumbersome than it used to be. Properly outfitted, an angler can fish in comfort for many hours, despite the conditions.



Portable, pop up ice houses are a game changer! These reasonably affordable devices really increase the comfort level for anglers when ice fishing. This may encourage children and less enthusiastic anglers to give ice fishing a try as they will be able to fish in comfort. A secondary benefit of these portable ice houses is that they block out glare from the sun. This allows anglers to see very well down into the water.

## **Drilling ice fishing holes**

One aspect of ice fishing that is probably the most obvious difference from open water fishing is that anglers need to drill a hole in order to wet a line. Once again, modern technology has changed this drastically from bygone years. Most anglers ice fishing learn early on that a gas or battery-powered ice auger is the way to go. These modern devices make drilling multiple holes a quick and easy job. Manual augers are still available for anglers that desire them.

## **Ice fishing rods and reels**

Most anglers ice fishing do use rods and reels. However, for the most part, the main difference is the length of the rod. Shorter rods are almost always used. It is just easier to fish the closer to the hole an angler can stand. Since casting is not required, the length advantage is negated.

The vast majority of anglers ice fishing use light spinning tackle. Some still do use spin cast reels. Very light line is required as the cold water is quite clear and fish will not bite if the presentation does not look natural. Fortunately, anglers do not need to spend a lot of money on these rod and reel outfits. Quality combinations can be purchased for \$50 or less.

## **Ice fishing line**

Line is not the place to try and save a little money! The cold water is almost always extremely clear. Light, thin lines that are nearly invisible will draw more strikes. Most anglers fish with 2 lb line for panfish and 4-6 lb line for larger species. Anglers will notice a reduction in strikes when going up any higher than that for anything other than larger pike, musky, lake trout, etc.

Line manufacturers market lines that are specifically designed for ice fishing. Both monofilament and fluorocarbon lines are popular. Suffix has a nice selection of ice fishing lines, as does many other manufacturers. These lines are designed to produce fish and work well in the clear, cold water. They are worth the little extra cost.

Some anglers prefer to use braided line. The primary advantage of braided line is that it has zero stretch and therefore more sensitivity. However, it is easier for fish to see. Anglers using braided line generally use a swivel or snap swivel on the end of the braid, and then a fluorocarbon leader around 3 feet long.

## **Ice fishing lures**

The most popular ice fishing lure by far is the jig. Since casting and retrieving is not an option, the only presentation anglers can make is a vertical one. Jigs are perfect for this application! A jig can be lowered down to any desired depth and worked in an enticing manner. Live bait can also be used in conjunction with jigs, which will be discussed in a bit.

Jigs come in many different sizes, shapes, and colors. Basically, they all work the same. A jig is a hook with a weight molded on the shank near the eye. The weight not only allows the jig to sink, it also gives it that erratic action for which it is named. Modern ice fishing jigs are made of tungsten.

## **Ice fishing jigs**

Jigs can come with some type of natural or synthetic dressing such as buck tail. Probably more popular is the jig and grub combination. With this rig, jig heads are used in conjunction with soft plastic grub bodies. This allows anglers to quickly and easily change the size and color of the tail.

Ice fishing anglers have a wide variety of choices when it comes to choosing jigs. The selection is endless! However, most are very similar. In general, brightly colored jig heads are preferred. Hooks are usually small and delicate. Anglers can use jigs as light as 1/64 ounce for panfish, crappie, and small trout. Larger jigs are used for larger game fish. Local tackle shops are a great resource for anglers as they will have a good selection of the most productive jigs for the area.

Grub bodies also come in a myriad of sizes, shapes, and colors. Most do the same job and it just becomes a matter of angler preference. Again, bright colors are quite productive. Tails can mimic minnows while many really don't look like anything in the water. As long as they undulate seductively in the water, they will catch fish!



## Other ice fishing lures

While jigs are the most commonly used artificial lure for ice fishing, there are others that are productive and should be in the tackle box of every angler ice fishing. These mostly include hard body plugs and spoons. These lures are obviously still worked using a vertical presentation. They are extremely productive on a variety of game fish, particularly larger species. Spoons can be tipped with a live grub or worm as well.

## **Ice fishing plugs**

The venerable Rapala Jigging Rap is an ice fishing plug that has been around many decades. It is revered by some old-school ice fishing anglers and still produces fish to this day. The best situation to use this lure is when anglers are looking for trout, pike, and walleye. The lure is obviously fished vertically and has a unique circular swimming motion. The Chubby Darter is another very popular ice fishing plug.

Lipless crankbaits are also used by anglers ice fishing. While not designed for ice fishing, the mid plug tie results in a lure that can be used in a vertical presentation. Rapala Ripping Rap, Bill Norman Rattletrap, and Live Target Golden Shiner are examples of these baits.

## **Ice fishing spoons**

Spoons are another productive ice fishing lure. They are a natural for ice fishing as they are often used in a vertical presentation. Spoons are available in many sizes and finishes. The spoon is basically lowered down and worked with short jerks. Most strikes occur as the spoon flutters down. They really mimic a wounded bait fish. Spoons will catch just about every freshwater species and they are easy to use!

There are many different ice fishing spoons available to anglers. These include the Leech Flutter spoon, Acme Kastmaster spoon, VMC Rattle spoon, and Swedish Pimple. There are many more spoons and when fished correctly, all will catch fish.

## **Ice fishing with live bait**

Many anglers ice fishing choose to use live bait. It is an extremely effective technique that certainly produces a lot of fish through the ice. Top live baits include wax worms, mealworms, nightcrawlers, minnows, and leeches.

Tackle requirement for anglers ice fishing with live bait are pretty basic. Most anglers who fish in freshwater already have most of what is required. Hooks in sizes 14 to 4 in the bait holder style will cover most angling situations. Split shot in several sizes will be needed as well. Many anglers bypass this and simply use a jig head, the weight and hook are combined in one tidy unit. Floats can be used to suspend the bait at a desired level.



## Fish finders for ice fishing

Portable fish finders that are specifically designed for ice fishing are another piece of gear that will produce more fish. There can be a little learning curve, but once the skill of reading the unit is mastered, angling success will skyrocket! Anglers have a wide selection of fish finders to choose from. Many prefer the old school “flasher” units. Other like the more modern “graph” style. Regardless of the choice, these units will definitely help anglers put more fish on the ice!



## **Ice fishing with tip downs and tip ups**

Tip downs are often used by anglers when ice fishing. These are devices that allow a rod or line to be fished unattended. When a fish bites, the weight of a fish pulling causes the device to pivot. Often times the rod moves downward, where the tip is in the hole, signaling a bite. This allows anglers to fish quite a few holes at one time. It is great fun when several go off at once and everyone scurries around to get the fish!

Tip ups are similar to tip downs. They are devices that allow anglers to fish a hole unattended. However, they do not require a rod and reel, those are built into the unit. When a fish bites, a flag pops up and anglers scramble to get to it and bring the fish in.



## **Miscellaneous ice fishing gear**

A few final pieces of gear are required for anglers fishing through the ice. A skimmer looks a bit like a spoon on the edge of a stick. It is used to clear ice chips out of the hole. Otherwise, the normal fishing supplies such as tackle boxes and pliers will also be needed. One last thing, do not forget the thermos with coffee or soup!

# **Ice Fishing Basics, how to get started**

This chapter on ice fishing basics will cover everything the angler needs to know to take his or her new equipment out on the ice and catch fish! Ice fishing is really not all that different from open water fishing. The main consideration is that anglers only have the opportunity to use a vertical presentation.

## **Understanding fish migrations when ice fishing**

Anglers ice fishing must first decide where they are going to fish. Those that have a “home lake” that they fish exclusively have that decision already made for them. Other anglers have a wide choice of bodies of water from which to choose. Fishing reports from local bait shops and online forums are good resources to use for novice anglers getting started. Bait and tackle bought at local shops is money well spent as the advice you will get from these businesses is invaluable!

While ice certainly hinders anglers from using boats, it does not at all change the migration patterns of fish below. The winter patterns are very similar to summer, except in reverse. Early in the ice fishing season, which is fall, fish are likely to be found quite shallow. As midwinter approaches, and the water gets even colder, fish will migrate to deeper holes, points, and main lake channels. The pattern will reverse itself as spring approaches.

## **Drilling ice fishing holes**

One good strategy for novice ice anglers is to drill a dozen or so holes 10 feet apart. Ideally, these holes will be in multiple depths over quality fish holding structure. Points are excellent spots to take this approach. This is especially true if they drop off into the main river channel. Drilling multiple holes like this allows anglers to cover a lot of water. They can also set up tip downs in the holes that they are not actively fishing.

Holes will need to be cleaned out occasionally. This is where the skimmer comes into play. This will make fishing easier. One tip veteran ice anglers use is to keep some slush in the hole when fishing shallow. This can make a big difference when the fish are wary.



## **Ice fishing strategies**

Early in the ice fishing season, weed beds and other structure in 10 to 15 feet of water are a good place to start. Anglers should drill the first couple holes there, then work out deeper. This is especially effective on a sloping flat or point. Holes should not be drilled at the same depth. Determining the depth at which fish are feeding at is a crucial aspect of ice fishing!



Successful ice fishing anglers do a lot of the work before the lake freezes. The same spots that produce in late spring and summer will produce in the winter as well. Anglers can use a hand held GPS unit to mark underwater structure such as drop-offs, bends in the channel, rock piles, weed beds, and more. The combination of cover and structure usually results in a productive fishing spot.

GPS units are not only for finding fish. They are important safety equipment as well. This is not really an issue on smaller lakes. However, on large bodies of water it is easy for anglers to get turned around in bad weather. Also, if a medical issue arises, help will know where to go.

“Structures” are physical changes in the lake or river bottom. These include river channel edges and bends, points, flats, and drop-offs. These are things that pretty much do not change. Fish use structure as underwater roads on which they migrate. Cover consists of things such as fallen timber, rock piles, reefs, and weed beds. Fish use structure to migrate but cover to hide in and ambush prey.

## **Effects of weather when ice fishing**

It surprises many anglers new to ice fishing that fish under the ice respond very similar to fish in open water. Early and late in the day are the best times to fish. Fish have fixed pupils. That means they can't adjust to changing light conditions. They see best in low light conditions. That is why, generally speaking, fish bite better early, late, and on cloudy days.

Pressure systems greatly affect fish activity as well, just as in open water fishing. Fish will bite best as a cold front approaches. As the pressure starts to drop, fish will feed actively and aggressively. As it drops further, they will slow down. As the front moves through and the pressure rises up high, fish will often shut down. Those “post cold front” trips can be tough!

Wind and weather changes will also affect the current under the ice. This can drastically affect the bite! Only experience will help anglers understand how the wind direction and speed will affect fish habits in each body of water.

## **Ice fishing techniques**

Now that the body of water has been chosen and the holes have been drilled, it is time to go fishing! One nice thing about ice fishing is that the actual fishing gear is really fairly simple. Anglers can choose to fish with live bait, artificial lures, or a combination of the two. This latter choice is often times the best as it combines the best of both worlds; the flash and movement of an artificial lure with the feel and taste of live bait.



## **Ice fishing with jigs**

For most anglers ice fishing, a jig is the best choice when getting started. Quality jig heads are very light, brightly colored, with a very sharp hook. One of the best jigs to use are VMC Neon Moon Eye jig heads. They are manufactured with a very thin shank. They also have a bait holder. These two factors combine to help both live and artificial baits stay on the hook. Live bait will also remain lively for a longer period of time.



The VMC Neon Moon Eye jig has a couple other advantages as well. It's slender design cuts through the water, making it a great choice when fishing in current. Finally, the glowing head helps game fish find the bait. This is especially helpful in low light conditions when fish bite best!

It is important to match the jig to the species being sought after. Tiny jigs are best used for panfish. Conversely, larger baits will produce walleye and pike. Jigs are very effective and many anglers prefer them over live bait for both the convenience and productivity. The latest jigs are extremely realistic with their 3-D technology.

## **Fishing the jig**

The technique used for fishing a jig under the ice is fairly simple. The angler opens the bail and the jig is allowed to fall through the water column to the bottom or the desired depth. Subtle movements are used to hop the jig very gently. In this frigid water, the fishes metabolism has slowed.

A fast-moving, erratic action will not produce in most cases. The old saying “if you think you’re moving it slow enough, cut your speed in half, and you’re probably just about right” is a good philosophy. Often times, no movement at all will draw a strike.

After the jig has been worked right on the bottom for a fair amount of time, it can be slowly worked up through the water column. Tapping the jig gently on the bottom will help game fish find the lure. This is especially true for anglers seeking walleye. The bait will disturb the bottom and dislodge insects and larvae. This creates a small “chum line” that will attract fish to the lure or baited jig.

Many fish will be found suspended in the water column, not just right on the bottom. This is a situation where a fish finder can be invaluable. Anglers can actually see the jig working and then see fish rise up to take. It is kind of like a fishing video game!

## **Ice fishing with spoons and plugs**

The same approach can be used for anglers using other artificial lures as well. Small specially designed hard baits such as the Rapala Jigging Rap will produce fish. These lures will also attract larger game fish. Spoons can also be fished in a similar manner. They come in a wide variety of sizes from tiny baits which are designed for panfish to larger spoons which will fool a big walleye or northern pike.



## **Ice fishing with live bait**

Live bait is certainly quite productive when chasing fish under the ice. The most commonly used live baits are waxies, maggots, grubs, nightcrawlers, and minnows. In areas where ice fishing is popular, these are readily available at local shops. With the exception of minnows, most live bait is easy to store and keep alive.

Anglers ice fishing with live bait can fish them on a bare hook or a jig head. As mentioned above, the jig head is a very convenient device for presenting live bait as it has the weight and the hook all in one unit. Anglers can use a hook and a tiny split shot as well. At times a float is used to suspend the live bait at a determined depth.

## **Commercial baits produce as well**

There are also many prepared baits that are available. The main advantage to these baits is the convenience. In some respects, this goes for fishing with artificial lures as well. The GULP line of baits kind of bridges the two. They are artificial lures but are heavily scented as well.

Often times, once a depth that the fish are feeding at is found, that pattern will produce fish in other spots as well. Most fish species tend to school up fairly tightly in the winter. This means that anglers will have to move around quite a bit in search of fish at times. However, once a school of fish is located, the action can be fantastic.

## **Fish finders are useful ice fishing tools**



Fish finders are another excellent tool that anglers can use to increase their success. Patient anglers can use the fish finder to determine how a fish wants the lure or bait. By noticing how fish react, anglers can adjust the presentation to draw a strike. This can take a while, so persistence is required.

Panfish are usually easy to locate on the fish finder. They will normally be suspended, often times relating to some type of structure, cover, or break line. Larger predators such as pike will show up as larger marks. Walleye can be tricky as they often hug the bottom.

## **Ice fishing with tip downs**

Tip downs are another piece of equipment that anglers can use when ice fishing. These devices allow a rod and reel or line to be fished unattended. Live bait is normally used. When a fish strikes, the device pivots due to the weight of the fish pulling down. The rod tip will usually dip down into the hole that is being fished. Tip downs allow anglers to fish more holes at one time. This can certainly aid in locating fish.



While it may sound boring, fishing with tip downs is actually a lot a fun! It is a great way to introduce youngsters to the sport of ice fishing. They can play in the snow or chase the dog around while waiting for a fish to strike. When the bite is on and multiple tip downs are going off at once, it can be great fun as everyone scurries around trying to be the first one to get to the bent rod!

## Ice fishing with tip ups

Tip ups are similar to tip downs in that they can be left alone to “fish” themselves. Tip ups come in many different styles. However, there are two main types: round tip ups and wooden tip ups. Round tip ups cover the hole so it does not freeze up. This works great for anglers that want to do less “supervising” of their hole. For the most part, these anglers are seeking larger fish.

Wooden tip ups require tending to much more than the round tip ups do. The hole will freeze up. These rigs have larger spools which are best for deeper water. Live bait is used since the rig fishes unattended. The best approach is to hook the bait behind the dorsal fin. It will be more lively and appear to the game fish to be fleeing. This will trigger more strikes.





# Ice Fishing With Live Bait

In this chapter we will cover ice fishing with live bait. In cold water, the metabolism of fish slows down dramatically. They do not need to feed as often and do not feed as aggressively. While artificial lures will catch plenty of fish under the ice, many anglers have more confidence ice fishing with live bait.





There are obvious reasons why live bait produces for anglers ice fishing. Why try to duplicate the real thing when you can use the real thing? One of the great advantages of artificial lures is that anglers can cover more water. This really is not an issue when ice fishing. Anglers cannot cast in order to cover water, since they are fishing through a hole in the ice.

However, one common and very productive technique is to combine both live bait and artificial lures when ice fishing. The most popular ice fishing lure is the jig. Anglers can use a bare jig head to use with live bait. They can also “tip” a jig, spoon, or plug with live bait to increase its effectiveness.

## **Tackle and rigging for ice fishing with live bait**

The same basic rods and reels that anglers have been using when ice fishing for decades work fine when ice fishing with live bait. Anglers will do best by using the lightest line possible given the situation they are fishing and the size of the fish being pursued. Many anglers go as light as two pound test line when chasing bluegill and other pan fish under the ice.



Probably the most popular method of live bait fishing under the ice is combining a jig head with live bait. Jig heads combine the hook and weight in one tidy little unit. Most ice fishing jig heads are quite bright, which serves to help attract the fish as well. Anglers can also attach a soft plastic grub body to the jig head and then tip the lure. The same approach will apply to other artificial lures as well.

There are times when anglers will do best fishing a standard live bait hook. This is generally done when fish are finicky. Sometimes the bait fluttering down into the water column in a natural manner is the presentation required to draw strike. A small selection of hooks, split shot, and bobbers should be in every ice fishing tackle box.

## **Best live baits for ice fishing**

Anglers have quite a few choices when it comes to ice fishing with live bait. The top ice fishing baits include wax worms, minnows, nightcrawlers, mealworms, and leeches. While there are some other exotic live baits, these are the most popular ones that are the easiest to obtain and have proven to be productive.

### **Wax worms**

Wax worms are perhaps the most popular live bait for anglers ice fishing. This is particularly true for those pursuing bluegill and other pan fish. However, wax worms will catch just about every species. These are very popular baits and most tackle shops that cater to anglers ice fishing will keep a good supply on hand. “Waxies” are also available at pet shops and can be purchased online.

Wax worms are the larval form of a bee moth. They average three quarters of an inch to 1 inch long. They are usually white. Wax worms hold up quite well in cold weather. When not fishing, anglers should store them at room temperature. They can be kept alive for a month or two if handled in this manner. However, they can die if exposed to freezing temperatures for long.

Wax worms are not a natural forage for fish. However, for whatever reason, fish cannot resist them! While panfish are usually the main quarry of ice anglers, other species will hit them as well. Larger species such as walleye and trout in particular will fall prey to a well presented wax worm.

Wax worms are most often presented on a tiny jig head. This just seems to be the combination that fish like best. Tiny jigs as light as 1/64 of an ounce with small hooks will fool yellow perch, bluegill, and other pan fish. They can be used to tip a jig and grub combo as well as spoons and other lures. Wax worms can be fished on a bare hook, though this is not done very often.

## **Nightcrawlers**

Nightcrawlers are a terrific and productive freshwater fishing bait for just about every species that swims. They are just as productive for anglers ice fishing as they are when used during the open water. Walleye, trout, bass, pan fish and more will delightfully take a nice lively nightcrawler!

Nightcrawlers are easily obtained at most bait shops. They can be purchased online as well. In the warmer months, anglers can catch their own.

Nightcrawlers will stay alive a long time at room temperature or a little below. They will die if exposed to temperatures that are too cold or too hot. Nightcrawlers are usually kept in a bed of top soil or dirt.

Nightcrawlers can be fished on a live bait hook as well as on a jig. Often times, allowing the nightcrawler to slowly descend through the water column on a hook with no weight or a tiny split shot is the best presentation. Those pursuing walleye will do well to fish them on a jig head right on the bottom, which is where they feed. Anglers chasing tasty pan fish will do best pinching off a small piece of nightcrawler. Anglers do not need to use a very large piece of bait in this situation. Finally, a small piece of nightcrawler can be used to tip artificial lures.

## **Minnows**

Big fish eat little fish; it is a basic fishing fact. This is true for anglers ice fishing with live bait as well. A helpless minnow that is struggling on the hook will attract a variety of game fish. Minnows are the favored bait of crappie anglers. Northern pike, walleye, and bass will also take a well presented live minnow.

Live minnows are available at most tackle shops that cater to anglers that are ice fishing. Shiners, suckers, and fathead minnows are the most popular. Minnows are a bit more difficult to keep alive than some of the other live baits. A bait bucket with an aerator will keep them frisky all day. Dead minnows will produce, at times even better than live bait. However, generally speaking, healthy and active live baits are the best choice.

Small minnows are best for anglers chasing crappie. The minnow should be between one and two inches long. Anglers chasing larger game fish can step up the size of the bait. A northern pike will take a minnow as long as 6 inches! It is important to match the hook to the size of the bait as well. A light wire #6 hook is a good choice for anglers crappie fishing.

Some anglers will use a bobber to suspend the live minnow at the desired depth. The resistance of the bobber can also cause the minnow to swim frantically. This will often times trigger a strike. Anglers can go up in hook size from there with the size of the bait being used.



## **Hooking the minnow properly is crucial to success**

Many anglers ice fishing with minnows hook them incorrectly. Hooking minnows through the lips works well in open water fishing. However, it will quickly kill the bait when ice fishing. Also, since it is a vertical presentation, the minnow will appear unnatural. The best choice is to hook the minnow in the back halfway between the tail and the dorsal fin. This will keep the bait frisky and alive. It will also cause the bait to swim away, putting out distress signals. This will often trigger a bite.

Minnows can also be used in conjunction with an artificial lure. When using a jig, the minnow can be hooked through the lips and lowered to the bottom. This can be a productive method to take walleye. Minnows can also be used to tip a spoon as well. Most bait shops have a selection of minnows. Anglers should choose the minnow that matches the area being fished as well as the species being sought. Fat head minnows are best for river mouths. Emerald and golden shiners are usually best for deeper waters in lakes.

Minnows are often the the bait of choice for anglers using tip ups and tip downs. Since this method of fishing does not require the angler to attend to the hole, the bait needs to supply the action. Minnows do that quite well. Also, most anglers using tip ups and tip downs are in pursuit of larger game fish such as pike, walleye, lake trout, and more. A large, live minnow is often the best bait in this application.

## **Mealworms**

Mealworms are another excellent live bait used by anglers ice fishing. They are the larval stage of a darkling beetle. They are generally short and fat, rarely exceeding 1 inch in length. Mealworms are favored especially by pan fish anglers. However, trout will greedily devour them as well. Due to their size, mealworms are perfect for tipping a jig or other artificial lure.

Mealworms are bit more difficult to keep alive in the cold. For that reason, they tend to be more popular towards the end of the ice fishing season. They are available at local tackle shops and can also be purchased online. Some pet shops also keep them in stock. They should be kept at room temperature and will die if exposed to freezing temperatures.

## **Leeches**

Leeches are not used very often by anglers ice fishing with live bait. The primary reason for this is that they tend to curl up in a ball in cold water. However, anglers have learned a little trick. By keeping the leeches in a refrigerator for a period of time, they can acclimate to the cold and then be used as live bait under the ice. This does take a little more time and effort, but the results can be worth it.

## **Other ice fishing baits**

There are a few other choices for anglers ice fishing with live bait. These include salmon eggs, cut bait, and commercially prepared baits such as Berkeley Power Bait. Salmon eggs are particularly effective on trout and whitefish. Anglers can fish them on a weighted hook or an artificial lure. Sometimes color does make a difference, anglers should keep experimenting until a productive pattern emerges.

Cut bait is often overlooked by anglers ice fishing. There are times when lethargic fish would rather not chase a live bait. In these instances, a freshly dead minnow or fresh piece of cut bait can be much more productive. The best approach is to fish the piece of bait right on the bottom with no action. Artificial lures can be tipped with a piece of cut bait as well.

There are numerous commercially available prepared baits as well. The main advantage of these baits is the convenience. While not technically live bait, they are fished the same way and can be as productive at times. These include the Berkeley Power Bait, Ice Nuggets, and more. They can be stored in the tackle box for a very long time.

## **Ice fishing techniques when using live bait**

Ice fishing with live bait is fairly basic. However, as with any other type of fishing, there are nuances that will spell the difference between success and failure. If there is one mistake anglers make when ice fishing with live bait, it is giving the bait too much action. As mentioned above, the metabolism of fish in cold water is very slow. They will not be in a mood to chase down a bait. Also, it is just not natural looking in that cold water.



Anglers fishing live bait on a jig head will do well to let the bait slowly float to the bottom with the bail open. If at any point the line stops moving, speeds up or even twitches, the angler should close the bail and quickly reel until tight. If no strike occurs on the fall, the bait should be left to sit on the bottom. Gently tapping the jig head up and down on the bottom will often times draw a walleye or other fish to the bait. Patience can be required as it can take 10 minutes or more for the fish to commit to the bait.



Artificial lures such as spoons and jigs can also be tipped with live bait. The same basic approach applies. Anglers should let the spoon or plug flutter down to the bottom naturally. Suspended fish will often hit the bait on the way down. If anglers are marking fish on a fish finder, it is best to work the lure slightly above the fish. Most fish feed up as opposed to down. A subtle jigging motion will generally be more productive than an aggressive one.

# Ice Fishing with lures

The subject of this chapter is ice fishing with lures. While many anglers ice fishing use live bait, more and more are using lures to catch fish. Artificial lures do have a couple of advantages over live bait. Also, many anglers combine both live bait and lures. This is really the best of both worlds!



The main advantage that anglers ice fishing with lures have over those fishing with live bait is convenience. Bait needs to be purchased and kept alive. Artificial lures sit in the tackle box, ready to fish at any time. While some live baits are pretty easy to keep alive, minnows and other baits require more time and effort.

Lures can also trigger strikes when fish are not feeding. The flash and vibration of a lure may excite a fish that is otherwise reluctant to take a live bait. Anglers need to be subtle with the action they impart to a lure, as fish do slow down in the cold water. Jigs are the top ice fishing lure, with spoons and plugs being second and third.

## **Ice fishing tackle when using lures**

The same rods and reels that anglers use when ice fishing with live bait work fine when presenting lures. Anglers chasing panfish will do best keeping the line as light as possible. 2 lb test is often used. As the quarry increases in size, so should the line size. However, the water is very clear and anglers should go with the lightest line possible.

## **Lure selection**

Ice fishing lures come in several types along with many colors and sizes. Lures designed to catch panfish are tiny! Larger lures are aimed at walleye, pike, and other larger game fish. Jigs are by far the most popular lure used by anglers ice fishing. Jig heads are often used plain to present live baits. Spoons are another very popular lure. Plugs are the final lure type used by anglers ice fishing with lures.

## **Ice fishing jigs**





Quality jig heads are very light, brightly colored, with a very sharp hook. Jigs come in a myriad of sizes, shapes, and colors. However, they all basically work the same. The jig head consists of a hook with a heavier head molded in near the eye. Tungsten is often used as it is very dense. The head is often brightly colored. The weight and shape of the head determines how fast it will sink and move in the water. It also gives the lure the action for which it gets its name. A grub body is added to the jig to complete the lure.

Many anglers use a bare jig head in conjunction with live bait. This can be done when seeking bluegill using wax worms on a light jig head. Small pieces of nightcrawler can be used as well. A minnow can be used for crappie and other game fish.

Most anglers ice fishing with lures buy the jig heads and grub bodies separately. Every angler has his or her favorite bait. Some have body shapes that do not resemble anything found in the wild. Yet, they undulate seductively and catch fish! Color combinations are endless, as are jig head and body choices. There are many quality jig manufacturers. Some of the best are small companies found in local shops. Several popular options are listed below.

### **VMC Neon Moon Eye jigs**

VMC Neon Moon Eye jig heads are excellent ice fishing lures. They are manufactured with a very thin shank. Moon Eye jigs also have a bait holder tab. These two factors combine to help both live and artificial baits stay on the hook. Live bait will also remain lively for a longer period of time.



The VMC Neon Moon Eye jig has a couple other advantages over some other jigs as well. It has a slender design which cuts through the water. This makes it a great choice when fishing in current. The glowing head helps game fish find the bait, this is especially helpful in low light conditions when fish bite best!

## **Clam jigs**

Clam manufactures several very productive ice fishing jigs. Their lures are made of Tungsten, which is very dense. They sink quickly despite having a small profile. The Clam XL and XXL are good examples of this. These Clam jigs hang at a 45 degree angle with larger than average hooks. The larger hooks result in better hook up ratios when using larger soft plastics or live baits. They are available in a wide range of sizes and colors.

The Clam Drop Kick was designed by Dave Genz. It has a unique and tantalizing action that panfish in particular cannot resist. It also has a flat top, making it easier to see on a fish finder. The Drop Kick has a large hook with a 90 degree eye. This results in most fish being hooked and landed.

## **Marmooska jigs**

The Marmoosks jig is a great all round jig, especially for panfish. It has an offset designed head that gives anglers excellent control while also producing a great fish-catching action. The Marmooska jig pivots, which increases hook-ups and landed fish. The hook is very light wire. It is available in multiple sizes and colors.

## **Bro Bug jigs**

The Bro Bug jig is another extremely effective panfish and bluegill jig. It has a long shank and a barbless wire bait collar. This makes it an excellent choice when presenting live bait like wax worms. It is available in tiny sizes, starting at 1/72 of an ounce! They can make a difference when the bite is tough. The Bro Bug was designed to mimic larvae that hatches on the bottom, something bluegill and other species feed on under the ice.

## **Ice fishing spoons**

Ice fishing spoons have been around for a long time. They continue to be effective to this day. Spoons come in a variety of sizes. While tiny spoons do catch panfish, most anglers use spoons when chasing larger game fish species. Spoons flutter as they slowly sink, producing flash and vibration.



Spoons will catch fish throughout the water column. Most bites occur as the bait falls, seemingly helpless. Fish will take the bait right on the bottom as well, particularly walleye. Spoons are easy to see on a fish finder. Anglers should work the bait just above any fish marked on the machine. Silver and gold are the most popular finishes, though painted spoons are popular as well.

Spoons can be used with live bait, too. In most cases, anglers ice fishing with lures will use a small piece of nightcrawler, wax worm, or meal worm to sweeten up the hook a bit. One underutilized technique is to use a small strip of cut bait on a spoon. This can be extremely effective for pike and other large game fish. Dead minnows can be used as well.

### **Swedish Pimple spoon**

The Swedish Pimple is a classic ice fishing spoon. It is particularly known to be effective on walleye and trout. For many anglers ice fishing with lures, the conversation starts, and ends, with this spoon. The design is time-proven and has not changed much. However, it is now offered in many different sizes and finishes. They are even available with rattles.

### **Kastmaster spoon**

The Kastmaster by Acme is another old school ice fishing spoon that has fooled countless fish over the years. Silver, gold, and prism tape spoons are the most productive, though many other colors are available as well. 1/12 ounce to 3/8 ounce Kastmaster spoons will catch just about every species available to anglers ice fishing with lures.

### **Clam Leech Flutter Spoon**

The Clam Leech Flutter Spoon is a heavy, fast sinking bait with a lot of action. It gets its name as it resembles a leech. It is an excellent spoon when fish are aggressive and works well both plain and tipped. Walleye and yellow perch in particular fall prey to this lure. It is available in a dozen different finishes.



## **Ice fishing plugs**

Anglers also use plugs when ice fishing. While plugs in open water are generally not used in a vertical presentation, specially designed ice fishing plugs will produce fish. These lures have the line tie in the center and when jigged up fall in a circular, swimming manner. They do imitate a wounded bait fish.

Ice fishing plugs come in a wide range of sizes. The smallest versions will catch panfish. However, most anglers use plugs when trying to catch larger game fish species. Some of the best ice fishing plugs are listed below.

## **Rapala Jigging Rap**

The conversation about ice fishing plugs starts with the Rapala Jigging Rap. It is a long time favorite that has been producing fish for many decades. The center tie and rear lip result in an erratic, circular swimming action when jigged. Smaller #2 and #3 sized Jigging Raps will fool perch. Anglers seeking larger game will do better using the #7 size Rapala Jigging Rap.

## **Chubby Darter**

The Chubby Darter is another ice-fishing legend. Anglers will find it to be an effective vertical ice fishing lure. The Darter has a slow sink rate in the water. The unique shape of the lure results in a tantalizing swimming action that draws strikes. The Chubby Darter is a favorite among ice anglers, being effective for catching walleye, perch, bass, crappie, and pike. The Chubby Darter is available in 1 3/8- and 1 3/4-inch models and 6 patterns.

## **Rattletrap**

The Bill Lewis Rattletrap is an often overlooked ice fishing lure. Well known to open water anglers, the smaller versions such as the Tiny Trap can be very effective under the ice. They are an aggressive lure and work best when fish are active and willing to chase a bait.

## **Tips for ice fishing with lures**

If there is one mistake anglers ice fishing with lures make it is to be too aggressive in the presentation. Fish metabolism slows greatly in the frigid water. They will be spooked off of a drastically gyrating lure! Subtle, gentle movements produce the best results. There are times that no action works best. This is referred to as “dead sticking” and is a tactic used by veteran ice anglers. It often works best with a piece of bait on the lure.

Anglers should use the lightest line possible. Many will go as low as 2 lb test when chasing panfish in gin clear water. Serious ice fishing anglers opt for flourocarbon line. It is expensive, but sinks and is virtually invisible in the water. Flourocarbon line also stretches less than monofilament, resulting in better hook ups and more fish landed.

Anglers should adjust the size of the lure to the size of the fish being sought. While larger fish can be taken on tiny lures, the larger sized lures will fool larger game fish. Conversely, bluegill and panfish anglers will do best with the tiniest of lures.



### **Using lures with live bait when ice fishing**

Many anglers combine live bait and artificial lures. This can be an extremely effective combination! It is best to go conservative when adding live bait to artificial lures. All that is really needed is just a little taste. Anglers fishing with live bait on a bare jig head can be more generous.



# Ice Fishing with Tip Ups and Tip Downs

This chapter will focus on ice fishing with tip ups and tip downs. The main advantage of these techniques is that anglers do not need to actively monitor the hole. Therefore, several holes can be fished at one time, increasing the odds of success. The rigs are set and the fish do the rest. Live bait is normally used, since the hole is not being actively fished. Cut bait can be used as well.



Tip ups and tip downs are similar, but there are differences as well. Tip downs are devices that use a regular ice fishing rod and reel. They are mostly used by anglers chasing panfish through the ice. Tip ups use heavier line and have a spool as part of the unit. They are generally used when pursuing larger species. It is important to check local fishing regulations. They will vary greatly regarding hooks, baits, hole spacing, and number of lines allowed.



While this can be an easy method of ice fishing, successful anglers usually put in more effort. Constantly checking baits and adjusting their depths will usually result in more fish. Also, this is a great way to get youngsters involved in ice fishing. They can play while waiting for a bite as opposed to intently watching a rod tip. When a rod goes off or a flag pops up, it is a mad dash to see who can get to the line first!

## Ice fishing hole placement

As mentioned previously, the primary advantage to ice fishing with tip ups and tip downs is that several different spots can be fished at one time. Therefore, hole location is critical to optimizing the pattern of rigs. The best approach is to drill holes that fish several depths and if possible, different types of cover. Anglers use GPS and sonar to pin point proven spots. Organized holes in a grid pattern will efficiently cover an area.



While covering water is the goal, anglers do not want the rigs spread too far apart. Baits will need to be monitored and changed at least every hour or so. Also, when a flag pops or a rod goes off, anglers need to be able to reach them in a reasonable amount of time. Keeping the holes to a one hundred yard radius is a good rule of thumb.

Successful anglers ice fishing with tip ups and tip downs do their homework before arriving on the ice. Studying charts and reviewing data from open water fishing will help anglers identify the top spots. Local bait shops can be great sources of information regarding best baits, depths, and bodies of water that are producing fish. Finally, online forums and groups can be a wealth of local information as well.

## **Best baits for ice fishing with tip ups and tip downs**

Anglers ice fishing with tip ups and tip downs almost always use live or cut bait. The reason is simple; since the hole is not being actively fished, the bait must attract the fish. Anglers using tip ups almost always opt for a live minnow. Most of time, tip ups are used on larger fish such as walleye, pike, and larger trout. These fish prefer a substantial meal.

Anglers using tip downs are usually after panfish and smaller species. Live minnows are still a top bait, especially for those chasing crappie and yellow perch. Tiny jigs tipped with waxworms, dead minnows, meal worms, and nightcrawlers will fool plenty of perch and panfish as well.

While live bait is most often preferred, successful ice fishing anglers should not overlook using dead or cut bait. In fact, there are some locations where live minnows are not allowed to be used as bait. Fresh minnows that die can be effective baits and anglers should not simply toss them away. They can also be frozen and used on a later date. Larger pieces of cut bait from freshly caught fish can produce some large pike and trout, where legal.

## **Ice fishing with tip downs**

Tip downs are great because they allow anglers to fish multiple holes while still catching them on a regular ice fishing rod and reel. This is kind of the best of both worlds! Anglers ice fishing with tip downs are normally pursuing pan fish, crappie, and other smaller game fish species. These fish are better suited for tip downs as they generally don't strike hard enough to pop the clip on a tip up.

Tip downs are excellent for anglers learning a new body of water. They allow multiple baits to be presented at different depths and locations. This will help anglers learn much more quickly the types of structure and depth at which fish are feeding. Tip downs are also very conducive to family fishing.

## Tip down options

Tip downs are lightweight devices that are usually made of wood or metal. They are very portable and set up quite quickly. As mentioned above, they use a conventional ice fishing rod and reel. Once set, the rod sits either horizontal or a bit above. When a fish strikes, the unit pivots and the rod tip dips down towards the hole. Thus the name “tip down”!

There are a wide variety of tip down units available to ice fishing anglers. Most opt for the type where any rod and reel can be used. This way, anglers can use the outfits that they already own. Sullivan is an industry leader and makes some excellent tip downs that use any rod and reel combination. Some tip downs come with flags as well. However, it is very easy to tell when a fish takes a bait.



## Setting up an ice fishing tip down

Once the hole is drilled, the tip down is set at that location. Anglers can use a live minnow or nightcrawler on a small hook with a split shot to get it down in the water column. This works well for crappie and yellow perch as well as a variety of other game fish species. Micro jigs with a meal worm or waxworm are best for anglers chasing bluegill and panfish.

While the bait should be placed close to the bottom, anglers should vary the depth that they are fishing with the various set ups. This way, anglers can quickly identify the depth that which fish are holding and feeding. It is important to keep an eye on your tip downs! It is not unusual for a fish to take the bait off of the hook unnoticed by the angler. Fishing a hook with no bait defeats the purpose of covering a lot of water.



There are several other nuances which will help anglers ice fishing with tip downs be more successful. It is very important to keep the hole clear of ice. Most often, very light line is used in this application. Sharp pieces of ice will quickly cut this very thin line.

Also, wind can be an issue when fishing with tip downs. The best approach is usually to point the tip of the rod right into the wind. This results in the best line management when dealing with a stiff breeze. Also, it is often a good idea to pack some snow around the base of the tip down when it is windy.

## **Ice fishing with tip ups**

Tip ups have been around a long time. Many anglers use them exclusively when ice fishing. Most often, they are used to catch larger fish such as pike, walleye, lake trout and more. Panfish bite very lightly, so tip ups do not work as well for them. The tip up allows anglers to present a live or cut bait at a desired depth, without having to sit at the hole and actively fish it.

The unit consists of a frame, usually wood, a spool of line, and a flag that signals when a fish strikes. The spool is usually filled with stout braided line, 50 lb is a good strength. A leader is then attached to the end of the braid using a snap swivel. This allows for an easy change of leaders, depending on the conditions. Some anglers add a pinch-on weight just above the snap swivel. This helps it hang straight down. In strong current or very deep water, a sliding egg sinker can be used.

Some anglers prefer round, plastic tip ups. These are very convenient as they fit right inside the hole. This eliminates the need to constantly keep the hole free from floating ice. These units are a bit more expensive, but many anglers consider them worth the cost.

## **Setting and using the ice fishing tip up**

Once the hole is drilled, the tip up rig is set up. The hook is baited and lowered down to the desired depth. Anglers should vary depth the bait is presented at each hole to determine where the fish are feeding that day. The line is then set in the clip and the angler moves on to set up the next hole.

When a flag pops up, the angler dashes over to the hole. The spool will usually be spinning as a fish runs with the bait. The tip up is removed out of the way. Once the run slows, the angler takes up the slack and then sharply sets the hook by hand. After the fish is hooked, it is patiently brought back in using a hand over hand motion. The head of the fish is raised up through the ice, then the rest of it is pulled through.



## **Tip up ice fishing rigs**

Anglers fishing with tip ups have several options when it comes to rigs for their live or cut bait. Once again, anglers need to check local fishing regulations to make sure they are fishing in compliance with game laws and restrictions.

### **Walleye rig**

The best rig for fishing for walleye with a tip down is to use a jig and live minnow. A 4 foot long fluorocarbon leader is preferred. Most anglers use 8 pound test to 10 pound test line. The jig provides both weight and a hook. Anglers can fish a similar rig using a #4 live bait hook and a small split shot or two. With either rig, the minnow should be hooked in the back between the dorsal fin in the tail. This will keep it swimming down and away which signals distress to walleye in the area.

### **Trout rig**

Lake trout and larger rainbow and brown trout are highly prized species that anglers pursue through the ice. Once again, a 4 foot long fluorocarbon leader testing 8 to 10 pounds works well. Live minnows are most often used. Where legal, a small treble results in a good hookup ratio. Anglers who like to practice catch and release fishing and in areas where treble hooks are not allowed will do fine with a light wire live bait hook.

### **Pike rig**

Pike have very sharp teeth. Many anglers who ice fish for them use steel leaders. However, fluorocarbon leaders will often draw more strikes. Anglers will just have to determine if the risk is worth it. Many anglers use a quick strike rig when pursuing northern pike through the ice. This rig consists of two hooks and a swivel. The bait is then hooked through the head and through the tail, increasing the odds of a hook up.

# Ice fishing for Walleye

Many anglers enjoy ice fishing for walleye. Walleye are one of the most popular freshwater game fish for anglers fishing northern waters. This certainly is true when lakes and rivers freeze over as well. This chapter will cover the tackle, lures and baits, locations, and techniques to help anglers be more successful catching walleye through the ice!



Special thanks to Rick DeGagné who owns The Hook 'n' Cook Inn, Victoria Beach, Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Though not a guide, Rick is an expert at ice fishing for walleye. While Lake Winnipeg will be discussed, the tips, tackle, and baits shared will work on hard water walleye anywhere!

## **Ice fishing tackle and gear**

Ice fishing requires some specialized gear and equipment. Some of this is not inexpensive. The rods, reels, lines, and terminal tackle are reasonably affordable. However, ice augers, fish finders, apparel, shelters, GPS units, and even specialized vehicles do get pricey. Most of these items have safety ramifications and anglers should not skimp in these areas. Ice fishing is great fun, but must be done with angler safety in mind.

## **Ice fishing rods and reels**

Ice anglers will do well using shorter rods ranging from 24" to 36" and sometimes 42". Although it is much easier to use a shorter rod, Rick prefers to use a med/heavy 36" rod with 6lb line when ripping lipless rattle baits like the Live Target. For other lures, especially when dead sticking, Rick suggests using shorter 28" rods. However, there is no "wrong" choice, it really is a matter of preference.

## **Ice fishing shelters**

Shelters are a must. Insulated flip-overs or pop-ups heated by propane heaters are the preferred choice. Like many other productive lakes, Lake Winnipeg is considered by many to be a featureless lake. Therefore the fish are nomadic and are always on the move chasing bait fish. It is common to have to move on the ice so being portable is the way to go.

For this reason, most hard core fishermen wear special ice fishing gear that protects them from the extreme cold and winds. Some also have floatation features. These consist of bibs and jackets. An example would be Striker Ice Climate jacket and bibs. They come with removable liners so they are very useful in different temperatures. A very good pair of boots is also very important! Cold feet will shorten your time on the ice quickly.

## **Fish finders/sonar**

Fish Finders are crucial when ice fishing for walleye. Sonar can mean the difference between catching 1 fish or catching 10. Flashers are probably more popular with anglers but graphs are starting to gain more popularity as more advanced technology keeps coming out every year. They are worth the cost.

## **Ice fishing augers**

Ice thickness can get up to 5 feet thick on far north waters, depending on the season. On average, it gets to be 3 to 4 feet thick near the end of the season. Gas powered augers are preferred on Lake Winnipeg and other lakes with very thick ice. Electric augers will work, but performance is limited in extreme cold and very thick ice. Most brands of electric augers will break down when the ice is 4 feet thick and very cold temps. Skimmers or scoops are also a necessity to clear the slush and ice chips left in the hole. Augers also vary in size, but on Lake Winnipeg 8" to 10" augers are most popular.

## **GPS units**

GPS units are essential for locating underwater structure. Most anglers do their "homework" during the open water, marking potential holding spots for winter walleye. Also, GPS units are essential safety gear as well. Weather can turn quickly, reducing visibility. Also, if an anglers gets in trouble and needs medical attention, help will know where to come.

## **Ice fishing for walleye with lures**

Artificial lures are extremely effective when ice fishing for walleye. They provide weight to sink, flash and vibration, and of course a hook. Many walleye anglers, Rick included, almost always combine live bait with an artificial lure. Ice fishing lures must be presented vertically, as opposed to open water fishing where they can be cast out and retrieved back in. Most ice fishing lures fall into three categories; jigs, spoons, and plugs.

## **Ice fishing jigs**

Jigs are very popular ice fishing lures for walleye and other species. Anglers chasing panfish use tiny versions. Most anglers ice fishing for walleye choose jigs that weigh between 1/8 and 1/2 ounce. Water depth and current strength will dictate which size is required. Most quality jigs are tungsten, which is very dense.

Jigs are usually used in conjunction with a soft plastic bait. This is a proven combination that catches fish all year long. The jig and grub can be tipped with a live or frozen minnow.

The best approach when ice fishing for walleye is to allow the jig to float down naturally through the water column. Most walleye will be found on or near the bottom. However, a roaming game fish of any species may intercept it as it flutters down through the water. Once the jig hits the bottom, it should be bounced lightly. The noise may attract a walleye. Anglers need to be patient and use their sonar units!



## **Ice fishing spoons**

Ice fishing spoons work very well for several reasons. Most are heavy and sink quickly. This results in the bait getting down to the bottom quickly when fishing deeper water. Spoons put out both flash and vibration, which will hopefully attract a hungry walleye. The hook up ratio is good with spoons as well.

Jigging spoons are also fairly easy to fish. The spoon is lowered down to the bottom, then jigged off the bottom using quick movements. As in all fishing, anglers should vary the retrieve until a productive pattern emerges. The same applies to ice fishing spoon sizes and colors; anglers should experiment with various sizes and finishes. Spoons can be tipped with salted frozen minnows.



## **Ice fishing plugs**

While many anglers picture plugs being cast out and retrieved, some are effective in a vertical presentation. These really only include specially designed ice fishing plugs as well as lipless crank baits.

The Rapala Jigging Rap is a legendary ice fishing plug. The #7 Jigging Rap is a good size for walleye. Rick likes brighter color patterns for these baits. The bait has a fin on the rear which creates a circular swimming motion as the lure falls through the water column.

Live Target Golden Shiner lipless plugs are a favorite of Rick. The lure is dropped down and ripped up. Most bites occur as the lure falls. The Bill Lewis Rattle Trap is another example of this type of lure.

## **Ice fishing for walleye with live bait**

Many anglers choose to fish for walleye through the ice using live bait. There is certainly good reason for this! The most popular bait for walleye fishing is a live minnow. These are readily available at bait shops that cater to anglers ice fishing.

Live minnows can be fished on a bare jig head as well as a hook. Jig heads are the best choice in deeper water. Anglers fishing over weeds or other structure can fish a live minnow under a float. A small split shot will get the bait down. A float can be used to suspend the minnow at a certain depth.

Nightcrawlers are another popular live bait for anglers ice fishing for walleye. Like minnows, they can be fished on both jig heads and on hooks. Nightcrawlers tend to work better early and late in the season when the walleye are in water that is not as deep.

## **Best spots to catch walleye under the ice**

The same spots and areas that produce walleye in open water fishing will produce under the ice as well. Walleye also exhibit a seasonal migration. It is a bit like summer, but in reverse. Early in the ice fishing season, fish will be found in shallower water. Weed beds, points, creek channel edges, and submerged islands in 15 to 20 feet of water are good spots to start fishing.

As the season progresses, walleye will generally move deeper. Main river channels, deeper reefs, and other spots will often be the most productive. As spring approaches, walleye will again ease in a bit shallower.

## **Effects of weather when ice fishing for walleye**

Weather has a huge effect on fish activity under the ice, just as it does in open water. Prime times to fish are early and late in the day. Also, approaching fronts will have the fish feeding. Conversely, post front conditions with a bright, high sky can make for a sluggish bite.



## **Ice fishing strategies for walleye**

Once out on the ice, it is time to go fishing! However, successful anglers have a game plan, based on local information, weather, and experience. The best approach is to drill multiple holes in a crisscross pattern. Ideally, the holes will cover several different depths over cover and some type of structure break.

Once the holes are drilled, the sonar unit can be deployed to see what life lurks below. Hopefully, bait and game fish will appear on the screen. Even if there is no action, it is still worth dropping a bait down. A jig and minnow is a good place to start. A spoons is a good second choice.

If fish are seen but they do not seem interested, it is time to try different lures, baits, and presentations. Finicky fish usually respond to slow, subtle movements and smaller baits. However, sometimes ripping a plug will result in a reflex strike.

## **2 pronged approach for walleye fishing success**

There is a technique to fishing on Lake Winnipeg that works on many other lakes as well. Anglers are allowed to use 2 rods in one hole. The longer rod is used for ripping the Live Target tipped with a minnow/shiner head hooked through the eyes on the back treble and a shorter rod for a dead stick. The dead stick will consist of either a jig head tipped with either a live minnow through the tail or a frozen salted minnow/shiner, a bobber rigged with a live minnow hooked through the tail weighted down with split shot, or a spoon like a Macho Minnow tipped with a frozen salted shiner on the treble hook. The Macho Minnow has a plastic fin that flutters with the slightest movement that seems to trigger a bite.

Lake Winnipeg, like other lakes, is murky, so there is a need to attract the fish. This is where the Live Target and other lipless baits comes in. Anglers attract the fish by ripping the lure 4 to 5 feet off the bottom. The rattle is quite loud and can easily be heard in your shelter. Anglers should keep ripping the lure for a good 5 minutes then let it sit about 2 feet off the bottom for a few more minutes before moving to the dead stick and give it very subtle movements.

## **Teasing the walleye to the lure**

The lure is worked back and forth near the bottom until a fish appears on the fish finder. They usually come up from the bottom. The goal is to try and get them to chase the lure towards the ice at the right speed. If reeled too fast or too slowly, the fish will lose interest. Yes anglers do occasionally catch some as the lure drops towards the bottom.

Bites often occur 2 or 3 feet below the ice as fish chase the lure from the bottom in 20 foot. This is why a fish finder is important. The chase can last a long time with a fish following the lure up and down several times before biting the lure or deciding that it is more interested in the dead stick.

Anglers then switch rods, start jigging the dead stick and start the chase with that lure. It is like playing a video game. Of course you can't use this approach with a float rig. The live minnow will create it's own chase with the fish.

Sometimes when the fish are lethargic, the Live Target just acts as a dinner bell and the fish are only interested in the dead stick. A less aggressive approach with the Live Target is best in this situation to not spook the fish.

Tip ups and tip downs can be good options as well. Live minnows are the best choice in this situation. However, dead minnows, nightcrawlers, and even cut bait can be effective as well. Sometimes a dead bait sitting motionless on the bottom is what is required to get a walleye to bite!

## **Walleye fishing on Lake Winnipeg**

Lake Winnipeg produces huge walleye. Many anglers from the U.S. head up there in search of trophy greenbacks. Some come up 3 or 4 times a season. It is a world renowned sport fishery. Several 30" plus walleye are caught each season. March is the preferred month as the weather gets milder. It is called "March Madness" in the ice fishing world on Lake Winnipeg. All the local hotels and lodging gets booked solid during March.

Temperatures and weather on Lake Winnipeg during ice fishing season can get very extreme. Temperatures can get as cold as -40 degrees Celsius. It also gets very windy on Lake Winnipeg with gusts at some times reaching 70 kms per hour. This is why the lake earned the nickname "Big Windy". On average one can expect temperatures around -20 Celsius during the winter with winds between 10 to 20 kms per hour.

Live minnows or frozen salted shiners/minnows is all that is used in winter months on Lake Winnipeg to try and match the forage in the winter. The South Basin of the lake has a sandy bottom with very little structure. The fish are always roaming about, looking for bait fish which are also always on the move.

Rick usually starts in the 20 feet of water range and it is best to fish in groups as it saves a lot of time locating the fish. Groups of 4 to 5 tents can cover a lot of area if each group fishes different depths and works together. The use of walkie talkies is handy in these situations. For example, 1 tent fishes 14 foot, the next 16 foot, and so on. In some locations this could easily span a kilometer or more. In other locations this could cover 100 yards. Once a school of fish is located, everyone moves into the general area.



Large ice ridges that stick out of the ice are good spots to start. These are caused by the strong winds which usually happen during the early ice freeze. These ridges create structure under the ice for bait fish to hide. Often walleye cruise the ice ridge lines feeding off these bait fish. The ice in these areas is usually quite thick. I usually add a 12" or even 18" extension to my auger to make it through the ice.

Most trophy walleye over 28" are released back into the water as there are pretty much all females full of eggs. They are the future of the fishery on the lake. Having said that, anglers are allowed to keep 1 walleye over 28" per season. Lake Winnipeg as well as all of Manitoba is barbless, so anglers must secure their bait on the hook or it will fall off.



# Ice Fishing for Bluegill and panfish

This chapter will focus on ice fishing for bluegill and panfish. These diminutive game fish are prized by anglers ice fishing just as they are for those fishing open water. Bluegill and panfish put up a great little fight on ultra light tackle. They can be aggressive in winter, making them a prime target. Finally, and perhaps most important, they are fantastic eating!



Like many other fish species, bluegill and panfish will exhibit a seasonal migration under the ice. Generally, this is a reverse pattern of summer. Early and late in the ice fishing season, bluegill and panfish will be found in fairly shallow water at times. They will generally concentrate over cover, especially weed beds. They may be found in water as shallow as 5 feet deep.

In the coldest parts of winter, bluegill and panfish will be found a bit deeper. They will stage up on drop-offs and channel edges. Water between 10 and 25 feet deep is the best place to search for them. They are often concentrated during this time, and it can be difficult locating them. However, once found, a bunch of them can be caught in short order.

## **Ice fishing tackle for bluegill and panfish**

Ice fishing rods and reels are pretty basic. For the most part, they are smaller versions of ultra light tackle that anglers use when open water fishing. The biggest difference is the length of the rod. Since anglers will be standing close to the hole, a long rod is a disadvantage. Anglers ice fishing for bluegill and panfish generally go with fishing rods between 24 inches and 36 inches long.

Reels used when ice fishing for panfish are the same as those used in other ice fishing applications. The most part, they are the lightest versions available. A quality ice fishing rod and reel can be purchased for under \$50.

Lines are very important when ice fishing. In the cold water, there is very little algae growth. Therefore, the water is crystal clear. Successful anglers seldom go above 4 pound test, with 2 pound test being preferred. Several manufacturers make line specifically designed for ice fishing. These lines stay supple even in the very cold weather. Light line will also result in much better action for anglers using artificial lures. Jigs and spoons will have a more lifelike presentation on this lighter line.

## **Ice fishing for bluegill and panfish with live bait**

Many anglers ice fishing for bluegill and panfish use live bait. The most popular live baits are wax worms, mealworms, nightcrawlers, earthworms, and small minnows. Wax worms and mealworms in particular are favored bluegill and panfish baits. They can be fished alone on a very small hook with a split shot. Most often, they are fished on a tiny jig head. In fact, anglers almost always tip their artificial lures with some type of live bait.

For the most part, these baits are easily obtained at local bait and tackle shops that cater to ice fishermen. As long as they are not exposed to the freezing cold, they should remain alive healthy for quite a while. If possible, they should be kept at room temperature. Many ice fishermen simply keep their waxies in their winter coat pocket. Minnows are bit more troublesome and must be kept alive in an aerated bucket. Live minnows will catch fewer panfish and bluegill, however they will catch some of the larger specimens.



## **Ice fishing for bluegill and panfish with lures**

Bluegill and panfish can most certainly be caught by anglers using artificial lures as well. As mentioned above, most effective technique is to combine the two. Tiny jigs are by far the most popular artificial lure for panfish and bluegill. These come in a myriad of sizes, shapes, and colors. In most instances, jig heads weighing 1/32 of an ounce that are brightly colored work best. Anglers can go up or down in size as needed given the current fishing conditions. Modern jigs are made of tungsten and they are very dense. This allows for more weight in a smaller package.

## **Bluegill and panfish jigs**

Anglers can purchase jigs either fully dressed or plain so that they can add their own grub body. While most anglers have gone to the jig and grub design, some still prefer a jig dressed with some type of material. In most cases, this is marabou. Marabou has an incredible lifelike action in the water and responds to even the slightest movement.

Just as with jig heads, the selection of grub bodies available to anglers ice fishing for bluegill and panfish is extensive. Some do not resemble anything that swims in the water. However, as long as they are brightly colored and have a natural motion in the water, they will catch fish. This set up makes it easy for anglers to quickly and easily change color combinations along with body sizes and shapes.

Scented soft plastic bodies can give anglers ice fishing for panfish a great advantage. The Gulp line of baits is a perfect example of this. The 1 inch Gulp Alive Minnow is a terrific bluegill and panfish lure. It not only has the action of a soft plastic bait but the scent of a live bait. It is an excellent and productive combination.

## **Ice fishing spoons**

Spoons are very effective ice fishing lures as well. They are available in the tiniest of sizes, which are well-suited for the small mouths of bluegill and panfish. Gold and silver are the most popular finishes. However, of late brightly colored neon finishes have become popular. As with all fishing, angler should experiment with colors and sizes until a productive pattern emerges.

Generally speaking, gold works well in low light conditions and silver works better in the bright sun. Therefore, gold is the best choice early and late in the day and on cloudy days. Conversely, silver is the best choice midday and on bright sunny days. The brighter neon colored spoons are a better choice when fishing deeper water.

## **Techniques to catch bluegill and panfish through the ice**

The primary challenge when ice fishing for bluegill and panfish is to locate them. In the wintertime, fish tend to bunch up into larger schools. It is important to take in the current conditions such as time of year, weather, and area fishing reports. Local bait shops are excellent sources of information, especially when anglers purchase bait and equipment there. Online resources such as forums or fishing reports can be helpful as well.

Anglers should drill a dozen or so holes in either a crisscross or grid pattern to get started. Ideally, these holes will cover a variety of depths as well as several types of cover. The primary cover bluegills and panfish will use in the winter is submerged weed beds and fallen timber. They will also relate to breaks such as points, drop-offs, and channel edges.

An electronic fish finder can be a huge advantage in this situation. Anglers can quickly determine if there is any activity under the the hole. Often times, the fish will be suspended. Knowing the depth that which they are holding is crucial so that anglers can present their baits at the proper depth. It is best to present the bait or lure to the fish a little above where they are holding. Fish almost always feed up, and bluegill and panfish are no exception. Aggressive fish will rise a few feet up to take the lure or bait.

## **Successful anglers vary the baits and presentation**

Often times the smaller fish are initially the most aggressive. If smaller fish become a nuisance, anglers can step up to a larger lure or bait. They can also be a little bit more aggressive or change up the jigging motion. Sometimes that is all it takes to get the larger bluegill and other panfish to bite.

Anglers fishing without an electronic fish finder will simply have to cover the entire water column. It is important to have some idea of the depth of the water being fished. An angler can do this by lowering the lure or bait all the way to the bottom. The bait is then reeled up about halfway and the jigging process begins. The lure or bait should be lowered in one foot increments and given plenty of time to work until it reaches the bottom. If no action occurs, it is time to move onto the next hole.



If no fish rise to the bait, anglers should very slowly lower the bait to the fish a few inches at a time. It is important to be careful and not give the bait too much action as this will spook wary fish. Gentle upper movements of the rod tip of 6 to 10 inches while allowing the bait to flutter down naturally is usually the best approach. If the bait gets down into the school of fish and no strike occurs, it is time to try another lure or bait.

## **Rigging up for panfish and bluegill**

The easiest way to start ice fishing for bluegill and panfish is to simply tie a tiny jig onto the end of the line. 1/32nd ounce is a good place to start in water that is around 15 feet deep. The jig can then be baited with a live waxie or mealworm or a soft plastic bait can be added. This can be tipped with a bait as well. In deeper water, a split shot can be added 18 inches or so above the jig. It is important not to place the split shot too close to the jig as it will adversely affect the action.



Another rig that works well for anglers ice fishing for bluegill and panfish is to use a small silver spoon and a dropper. This rig uses a spoon without a hook which is tied to the line. A 12 inch leader is tied to the hook end of the spoon, followed by a small live bait hook. This hook can then be baited with a waxie, mealworm, piece of nightcrawler, or live minnow.

This is similar to what salmon anglers use when trolling in the Great Lakes. The spoon provides weight as well as some flash. Once attracted to the spoon, hopefully the fish takes the baited hook below.

## **Ice fishing for bluegill and panfish with tip downs**

Tip downs are a great option for anglers ice fishing for bluegill and panfish. They allow for multiple holes to be fished at one time, as they do not need attending. A tip down is a device which holds a rod in place over the hole. When a fish bites, the rod tip jerks down, thus the name.

Since the rod is not being actively fished, this situation requires the use of live bait. Anglers bait the hook, drop it down to the desired depth, then set the rod in the tip down. He or she then moves on to the next hole and repeats the procedure. It is important to keep an eye on the rods as they sit in the tip down. Panfish are quick and can strip the bait off the hook. It does not do any good to have a bare hook with no bait on it.

Tip downs are excellent for anglers learning a new lake as it allows them to cover a fair amount of water in a short period of time. They are also fantastic when fishing families with young children. The kids do not have to hold the rod or actively fish, they can fool around and play, then when a rod goes off there is a chase to see who can be the first one to grab it!

# Ice Fishing for Northern Pike

The subject of this chapter will be ice fishing for northern pike. Northern pike are one of the most popular freshwater species for several reasons. One, they grow very large and are one of the heaviest fish that can be taken through the ice. Two, they are a true coldwater species. This means that they remain active under the ice. Finally, they are much more aggressive than many other species that anglers catch when ice fishing.



Northern pike can be taken by anglers ice fishing with both artificial lures and live and frozen bait. Since pike generally prefer a substantial meal, larger baits such as jigs, spoons, and jigging plugs are the best choice for anglers who prefer to fish with artificial lures. These are generally worked more aggressively than when fishing for other species as pike are usually active and comfortable in the cold water.

Live and frozen minnows work very well for pike. These include but are not limited to suckers, shiners, and where legal, panfish. Experienced anglers will often freeze their leftover live minnows to use as bait on the next trip. During very cold water when pike do slow down a bit, frozen baits can often be more productive as the pike does not have to chase them down.

## **Ice fishing for northern pike; tackle and equipment**

Many anglers ice fishing for northern pike do so with a rod and reel. Those that do need to beef the tackle up a bit as these fish grow quite large. Most anglers opt for 20 pound braided line when fishing in shelters. Many opt for 8 pound to 10 pound monofilament line when fishing in exposed weather as the line is just easier to manage.

A leader of some sort is usually used. It can be either steel or fluorocarbon, depending on angler preference and conditions. Most anglers have gone away from steel leaders when fishing with lures as they have found that this results in more strikes. Some lures will be lost, but the trade-off is usually worth it. Anglers fishing tip ups with live or frozen bait will often stick with a wire leader.

Many anglers ice fishing for northern pike use tip ups. In fact, more northern pike are landed by anglers using tip ups than all other species combined. Larger live and dead baits are the most productive for catching pike. This makes it a natural to use tip ups when pursuing them.

## **Locating northern pike under the ice**

Once located, northern pike are not all that difficult to get to bite in most instances. This is especially true early and late in the season when they are quite aggressive. The key to anglers ice fishing for northern pike having success is locating fish. This may sound obvious. However, understanding their migrations and movements is more important with pike than some other species.

Pike will be found very shallow early in the ice fishing season. As soon as there is enough safe ice to fish, anglers can find them in shallow water. Large weedy coves are excellent spots to try. It cannot be stressed enough however, that anglers need to put safety first and not venture out into ice that is too thin!

Forage species will still be present in shallow water early in the ice fishing season. This is the reason that northern pike will still be found there. Pike will feed on bluegill and other panfish, suckers, shiners, and other small fish. This bite will last until the water gets too cold and the bait fish move off into deeper water. Weed edges where shallow grass beds drop off into deeper water are prime spots early in the ice fishing season. The same spots that produce northern pike for anglers fishing the open water just before the freeze should produce once the ice thickens up as well.

## **Mid winter northern pike tactics**

Many anglers ice fishing for northern pike choose to stop fishing for them in mid-winter. However, persistent anglers will often find that this is when the largest fish are to be caught. It is more difficult to locate them and anglers must move around in search of fish.

Structure and depth changes are the keys to locating large northern pike in mid-winter. Main river channels and sloping points with significant drop-offs are prime spots. This is especially true if some type of cover such as boulders or fallen timber is present.

A deep hole is another prime spot for anglers ice fishing for northern pike. Deep holes will concentrate insect larvae. This will attract minnows, which of course in turn will bring in the game fish species. Deep holes that have adjacent cover such as boulders and fallen timber are most certainly prime spots to ice fish for northern pike in the middle of winter.

While pike found in shallow water will often be caught in the middle of the water column, pike in deeper water are more likely to hug the bottom. The primary reason for this is that the structure is located there. Seldom will anglers find weed beds in water this deep. Therefore, pike will be relating to structure on the bottom.

## **Strategies for drilling holes**

Successful anglers ice fishing for northern pike generally have a strategy in mind before heading out to the lake. Many do their homework on the lake before it freezes and use a quality GPS unit to mark likely ice fishing spots. Modern apps and websites can also provide anglers a wealth of knowledge and information.



The best approach is usually to drill holes in a grid or zigzag pattern, concentrating on depth changes and submerged cover such as weed beds, rock piles, and submerged timber. Once a productive depth is found, pike will normally be found in a similar depth throughout the lake. Anglers can then concentrate on that depth to maximize their results.

## **Choosing the best pike waters to fish**

Anglers ice fishing for northern pike have a choice to make when choosing a lake. Some lakes are better when it comes to numbers and action, while others are known for producing trophy northern pike. Ideally, there is a lake that offers both. However, this is usually not the case. Experience, DNR reports, and information from local bait shops and anglers are great sources of information.



Northern pike are the ultimate ambush predator. This is one reason why weed beds are so productive. The northern pike's camouflage allows them to easily blend in to submerged vegetation. However, this habit continues in deeper water as well. Seldom will northern pike be found in open water. They will almost always relate to some type of structure, be it a channel edge, drop off, deep weed bed, or submerged rock pile.

Steeply sloping points are natural spots for anglers ice fishing for northern pike. Anglers can cover several different depths and drop-offs with a minimal amount of holes. This obviously saves time and makes for more efficient fishing.

## **Ice fishing for northern pike; techniques**

The two basic techniques that anglers use when ice fishing for pike are jigging with spoons and plugs and using tip ups. Tip ups give anglers the advantage of fishing multiple holes at one time. However, most areas do have laws limiting the number of tip ups per angler. Also, there can be limitations as to how far they are spaced apart. Many anglers still prefer to catch northern pike on a conventional ice fishing rod and an artificial lure.

## **Jigging for pike**

Jigs, spoons, and plugs will all produce northern pike through the ice. As mentioned earlier, northern pike do prefer a larger meal. Therefore, baits in the 3 inch to 4 inch range usually work best. These are generally worked more aggressively as pike are quite active even in the cold water.

The best set up for using artificial lures for pike is a medium ice fishing spinning rod with 10 pound monofilament or fluorocarbon line or 20 pound braided line. In both cases, a snap swivel is tied to the end of the line, followed by a 3 feet piece of 20 pound fluorocarbon leader.

Once set up and ready to go, the angler drops the lure to the desired depth and begins jigging it sharply in one foot increments. This is done multiple times at a certain depth. Then, the lure is dropped another foot or so and the process repeated all the way to the bottom. Often times, especially in deep water, allowing the lure to sit on the bottom for a few moments before jigging again will draw strike. Pike will often watch the lure as it sits there motionless.

Many anglers also tip their artificial lures with a minnow head or tail, or with a strip of dead bait. This can work very well when fish are less active. Jigs, spoons, and plugs can all be tipped with a piece of bait.

## **Best lures when ice fishing for northern pike**

The list of top lures for anglers ice fishing for northern pike include jigs, spoons, and plugs. The Rapala Jigging Rap is the go to lure for anglers ice fishing with plugs. It has been around a long time and still catches plenty of fish. Other productive plugs include the Chubby Darter and Live Target Golden Shiner.



Spoons are very effective lures for anglers ice fishing for northern pike. They are heavy which means they will get down in deep water quickly. Spoons also put out a lot of flash and vibration. Top spoons include the Kastmaster and Swedish Pimple, though there are plenty of other productive spoons out there as well.

Many anglers ice fishing associate jigs with panfish and walleye. However, jigs will certainly produce northern pike as well. Anglers should go with larger sizes that are around 3 inches to 4 inches long. Productive jigs include Marmooska Jigs and Bro Bug Jigs.

### **Using tip ups for northern pike**

A four inch to six-inch sucker on a treble hooks fished on a tip up rig has probably produced more northern pike than all other methods combined. It is simple, yet extremely effective. Pike are active and like larger, live baits. Tip ups allow anglers to fish multiple holes at one time, increasing their chances of success.

Anglers should have their tip ups rigged with a good coated line that is freeze resistant. This is most often quite heavy line. The line then goes through a 1/2 ounce sliding egg sinker, followed by a good snap swivel. The swivel stops the sinker and allows for easy leader changes. A 3 foot long 20 pound fluorocarbon leader and a #2/0 to #5/0 hook completes the rig. Anglers can use a wire leader, however it is a bit more cumbersome.

Live bait fish are most often used under tip ups. Suckers, fathead minnows, and shiners are the most common. However, local bait shops that cater to ice fishermen will offer other baits as well. Dead and frozen baits will certainly produce northern pike, too. Dead and cut baits can be productive when fish are bit lethargic and seemingly unwilling to chase down a larger, lively bait.

### **Combine tip ups and jigging for pike fishing success**

One excellent strategy is to use both tip ups and artificial lures at once. Anglers will place a tip up rig with a lively minnow set a few feet off the bottom in a likely spot. If legal, another tip up or even several can be set. Then, anglers can proceed to use jigging rods at other holes to help locate pike.



Tip ups can be a great option for anglers with families and for novice ice fishermen. Kids can fool around and play and then when the flag goes off the race is on to see who gets to the hole first! Also, more people usually means more tip ups that anglers are allowed to fish at one time.





# Ice Fishing for Yellow Perch

This chapter will focus on ice fishing for yellow perch. Yellow perch are one of the most popular species sought by anglers fishing through the ice, and for good reason! They are a beautiful fish with vibrant colors. Yellow perch are fairly plentiful in most northern waters. Compared to some species, they are more aggressive and easier to catch. Yellow perch put up a spirited battle. Finally, and perhaps most important, they are fantastic eating!



Anglers ice fishing for yellow perch need to be ready to do two things; drill a lot of holes and move around. Perch congregate in large schools in winter. Anglers who locate them may experience fast action. However, this means that there is a lot of water where the fish are not! Dedicated anglers will put in the time and effort to locate and catch them.

Yellow perch are fairly aggressive and adapt well in the cold water. They can be caught on most of the traditional ice fishing lures as well as live baits. The large schools result in some competition between the fish. Often times, anglers can get them excited and into a bit of a feeding frenzy.

## **Tackle and equipment for yellow perch**

Anglers ice fishing for yellow perch can use their standard light spinning tackle. While many use 2 lb test for ice fishing for panfish, it is fine to bump it up a bit when chasing yellow perch. 4 lb line will be fine in most situations. Tip ups can be utilized, however most anglers prefer to catch them on a rod and reel. Several manufacturers make monofilament and fluorocarbon line specifically designed for ice fishing. Fluorocarbon lines are bit more expensive, but many anglers find them worth the cost.

Anglers can use braided line as well. Ten pound test is a good size to use for yellow perch and other panfish. However, with braided line a leader is required. Anglers will tie a swivel or snap swivel to the end of the braid. Then, they will attach a 3 foot long fluorocarbon leader that test between 4 pound and 6 pounds. The swivel can have the added benefit of reducing line twist.

A basic selection of jigs and spoons will get most anglers ice fishing for yellow perch started. The same panfish lures, perhaps one size larger, will do fine for perch. Live bait hooks in size #8 and size #6, split shot, and a few small floats will complete the perch anglers tackle box.

Other pieces of equipment obviously include augers, shelters, a sled, scoops, pliers, and a Thermos of coffee or soup. One piece of equipment that will really increase success for anglers ice fishing for yellow perch is a portable sonar unit, or fish finder. Yellow perch school up, locating them is the most important aspect. A sonar unit will save anglers countless hours of fishing unproductive waters.

## **Yellow perch migrations**

As with other species, at first ice anglers will find yellow perch fairly shallow. Submerged weed beds, mud flats that slowly taper off, weed line edges, points, and reefs are all good spots to try. These structures and cover in 10' to 15' of water will usually be productive early in the ice fishing season. **ANGLERS MUST PUT SAFETY FIRST!** It is never worth taking a risk on unsafe ice just to catch fish.

As it gets colder, smaller yellow perch will still be found in the shallower water. However, larger fish will for the most part move out deeper. Channel edges, deeper mud flats, deep points, and submerged rocks and reefs are prime spots to try. Anglers ice fishing for yellow perch in rivers will do best finding deeper tributaries with less current.

As spring approaches, the pattern reverses itself. Yellow perch spawn in spring. They will move shallow and especially seek tributary creeks. Flats, points, weed beds, and reefs in 10 feet of water just off shore of the creek mouths are prime spots for late season perch. Once again, anglers need to put safety first and not fish unsafe ice.

## **Locating yellow perch**

Once out on the lake, anglers ice fishing for yellow perch will need to decide where to drill the holes. The stage of the ice fishing season will pretty much determine where and how deep an angler starts. Experience can not be understated. Reports from local shops are invaluable. Online and social media forums can provide good information as well. When all else fails, look for a cluster of anglers! Just be courteous and do not crowd them.

Once anglers decide on an area that they want to fish, the best approach is to drill multiple holes. A dozen or so holes in a grid pattern in a 75 yard radius is a good initial plan. These holes should cover multiple depths, structure breaks, submerged cover, and open mud flats. Another benefit of this is that as perch move off anglers can simply jump ahead to the next hole and intercept them at that location.

As mentioned earlier, a portable sonar machine is invaluable in locating yellow perch. Since these fish school up in large numbers in the winter, they will basically all be in one spot. That means that there will be a lot of water with no fish. Instead of manually fishing each hole to determine if there are yellow perch there, a sonar can quickly and efficiently eliminate unproductive water.



## **Fish finders are great tools for locating yellow perch**

Just as important, the sonar machine will indicate the depth at which the fish are holding. It is almost always best to present the lure or bait a little above the holding fish. Once again, a sonar machine will save many hours of fishing time in determining the depth that fish are holding that particular day.

However, just because no fish are seen on the screen does not mean that hole is not worth a try. A good approach on a hole that is not showing fish is to drop down a spoon or other lure that will attract and draw fish in. A good strategy is to drop the lure and about halfway to the bottom and jig it aggressively. Then, angler should vary the depth and repeat the process.

Before leaving a hole, it is best to bounce a spoon up and down off the bottom a few times. This will kick up the bottom, sometimes dislodging forage that yellow perch eat. After a few bounces on the bottom, the spoon should be raised up a foot or two, just above the bottom disturbance. If no fish show up, it is time to move on. Ten minutes or so at each hole is plenty of time to determine if it will be productive.

## **Yellow perch baits**

Anglers ice fishing for yellow perch can use both live bait and artificial lures. In fact, one of the best approaches is to combine the two. Since yellow perch tend to be a bit more aggressive than some other species, artificial lures can be very productive. On days when the bite is tough, however, tipping the jig or spoon with a minnow or waxie can make the difference between a slow bite and a fast one.

The best live bait for anglers fishing for yellow perch is a small minnow. Just as in open water fishing, yellow perch love minnows. One inch to two inch minnows, about the same size as would be used for crappie, are perfect when pursuing yellow perch. They can be fished on a jig head as well as a plain hook with a split shot. A bobber can be used to suspend the minnow at the desired depth.



Yellow perch will take other baits as well. Nightcrawlers, wax worms, mealworms, and spikes will all catch fish. Wax worms and mealworms are best fished either on a plain jig head or a jig and grub combination. They can also be added to spoons. Nightcrawlers can be fished whole on a hook. Anglers can also pinch off a small piece and tip and artificial lure as well.

## **Best lures for yellow perch**

Many anglers ice fishing for yellow perch choose to do so with artificial lures. There are couple reasons for this. Lures will tend to attract and catch more active and aggressive fish. They also allow anglers to cover more water in less amount of time. Finally, lures are just a lot of fun to fish!

## **Jigs**

Jigs are undoubtedly the top ice fishing lure. They are affordable, versatile, and extremely effective. Anglers can purchase jigs that are dressed with natural hair such as marabou. Many anglers buy bare jig heads and then add on their favorite grub body. This jig and grub combination is very efficient. Anglers can easily change the action, size, and color of the lure with a simple grub body change.

Most quality ice fishing jig heads are made of tungsten these days. This material is extremely dense. That means that the jig will be heavy while having a small profile. Most ice fishing jigs are also brightly colored. The flash and color will help draw fish to the lure.

Jigs work very well when yellow perch and other game fish are showing up on the fish finder. 1/16 ounce jigs are a good place to start, though anglers can go up or down in size depending on conditions. Fussy perch may require a drop down to 1/32 or even 1/64 of an ounce. Conversely, larger jigs can be used on active fish.

Grub bodies come in a myriad of styles, shapes, and colors. It would be impossible to cover them all in this article. While every angler has his or her favorite, the reality is that location and presentation are really more important factors. Local bait shops and online fishing reports are good places to get good information on the best grub bodies to use.

The best approach is to lower the jig until it is just above the fish. Then, using subtle jigging motions, the lure is hopped up and down in small increments. It can also be slowly raised and lowered. The idea is to vary the retrieve until a productive pattern emerges. Anglers will often see fish rise up out of the school towards the jig, but not take it. At this point, changing up the jigging motion will often draw a strike.



## **Spoons**

Spoons are terrific ice fishing baits for yellow perch and other species. They are heavy, which means they sink quickly. This makes them an excellent choice when fishing deeper water. Spoons also put out flash and vibration. This will hopefully attract the aggressive yellow perch to the lure.

Spoons come in many different sizes, shapes, and finishes. Small 1” spoons in silver and gold are the most popular choices. Gold works best early and late in the day and on days with cloud cover. Conversely, silver is the best choice when the sun is out and bright.

These are excellent lures to prospect with. They allow anglers ice fishing for yellow perch to cover a fair amount of water quickly and efficiently. At times they also tend to catch larger fish. Anglers can fish them plain when fish are active. However, adding a wax worm, mealworms, minnow or piece of minnow, or a piece of nightcrawler will increase to catch on days when the fish are bit finicky.

## **Plugs**

The Rapala Jigging Rap has been around a long time. It is considered THE plug when it comes to ice fishing. Jigging Raps are available in many different sizes and finishes. The 1 1/2 inch length bait is a good all-around size for yellow perch and other smaller game fish. The eye of the lure is in the center and there is a plastic fin or tail on the rear. When jerked sharply, the bait falls in a natural circular swimming motion. It mimics a wounded bait fish falling helplessly. It is an excellent lure for yellow perch.

## **Tip ups**

Anglers can use tip ups when ice fishing for yellow perch. Since the hole is not being actively fished, the best choice in this situation is to use a small live minnow. The bait is simply lowered down into the hole, set at the desired depth, then the wait begins. Most anglers combine tip ups while actively fishing and jigging holes. Tip ups are a good alternative when fishing with kids and novice anglers as the rig pretty much does all the work.

# Ice Fishing for Rainbow Trout

The topic of this chapter is ice fishing for rainbow trout. Rainbow trout are one of the most popular and recognizable fish in the world! They are a beautiful fish that has it all. Rainbows are fantastic fish that take artificial lures, flies, and live bait. They put up a great battle on light tackle, often leaping high out of the water. Of course, they can't do this under the ice, but they still put up a terrific fight.





Ice fishing for rainbow trout is a bit different than many other species. Trout love the cold water. This means that their seasonal migrations are different than many other freshwater fish. While the majority of fish species move deeper as it gets colder, rainbow trout do the opposite. Fish can be found as shallow as three or four feet.

Another difference for anglers ice fishing for rainbow trout compared to other species is that successful anglers are more stationary. While mobility is the key when chasing down yellow perch, walleye, and other schooling fish, this tactic often proves unsuccessful when pursuing rainbow trout. They are spooky and the activity will often get them off their bite.

## **Rainbow trout habits**

The key to anglers having success ice fishing for rainbow trout is understanding their habits and their forage. Rainbow trout will be most often found in two locations when ice fishing. These are submerged weed beds, particularly the edge of the weeds and open muddy flats. These are the areas where rainbow trout will find food in the winter.

Rainbow trout mostly feed on nymphs, larvae, leeches, snails, and small bait fish. Nymphs and larvae will almost always be found on mud flats. Therefore, that is where the rainbow trout will look for them as well. Small bait fish are usually found hiding in the weeds or relating to deep structure such as a drop off.

Shallow mud flats and weed beds are best fished early and late in the day. Anglers fishing tiny jigs or live baits very close to the bottom should do well. As the day warms up, a change in tactics is required. Moving to deeper offshore ledges and fishing the mid-depths with spoons and plugs is usually more productive.



## Rainbow trout tackle

Tackle used when ice fishing for rainbow trout is pretty basic. A 30 inch to 36 inch long rod with light to medium light action (depending on the size of the fish in the lake or river) is all that is required. Most anglers spool the reels up with 4 pound test fluorocarbon line. Several manufacturers offer line specifically designed for anglers fishing under the ice. It holds up better in the cold conditions.



The same artificial lures and baits that produce for anglers when ice fishing for other species will do well for rainbow trout, too. Tiny jigs, small spoons, and very small plugs are the top artificial lures. They can be fished alone or tipped with a wax worm, piece of minnow, or small live minnow. A small selection of hooks ranging from #8 up to #4 and a few split shot will complete the tackle box.

## **Rainbow trout locations**

Generally speaking, the best spots to find rainbow trout under the ice are large shallow flats and shoals. These expansive areas with muddy bottom and weed beds will have the most forage in the winter time. Areas between 5 feet deep and 10 feet deep are generally best, but every lake is different.

Ideally, the transition from the flat to deep water will be steep. If this occurs in 10 to 20 feet of water, so much the better. Rainbow trout will cruise these edges in search of food. A submerged weed bed in 8 feet of water that drops off sharply to 15 feet of water is an example of an ideal spot to fish. Rainbow trout will cruise both the edge of the weeds and the depth change in search of food.

## **Ice fishing strategies for rainbow trout**

As mentioned earlier, ice fishing for rainbow trout is a bit different than it is for other species. The fact that they will often be found very shallow requires a change in tactics. Successful anglers pursuing rainbow trout get out on the water at first light and drill all of their holes early. This allows them to move about and fish as quietly as possible without making the noise required to drill new holes.

Anglers ice fishing for rainbow trout will start drilling very shallow then move out into deeper water. Once the outside edge of the weed bed or the steeper drop off is located, anglers do not need to go any deeper. It is not uncommon to catch rainbow trout in shallow water just a couple feet below the ice.

While fish finders are crucial in some ice fishing applications, they are less important for anglers ice fishing for rainbow trout. This is mostly due to the fact that rainbow trout do not school up and cruise much more than most other game fish in the winter. However, sonar machines can be very useful in locating submerged weed beds as well as the structure breaks.

## **Successful tactics for catching rainbows**

A good approach for anglers ice fishing for rainbow trout is to start fishing shallow water early and then work deeper as the sun gets higher in the sky. Like most game fish, rainbow trout are most active early and late in the day and even at night. Under a cloudy sky, the fish may stay shallow all day. By mid day, most fish will be cruising the deeper edges in 15 feet to 20 feet of water. As evening approaches, the pattern will reverse itself and fish will move shallow once again to feed.

While moving around a lot is often the key to success when ice fishing, this is not so much the case when pursuing rainbow trout. Since these fish don't really school up and do a fair amount of cruising, often times the best approach is to sit patiently in one spot and either lure a fish in or wait for one to cruise by. Running around from hole to hole is generally not productive.

However, this does not mean that an angler ice fishing for rainbow trout should set in one spot all day. As outlined above, starting in 3 feet of water to 5 feet of water early in the day than slowly moving deeper is a good approach. Every day fishing is different and experience is a great teacher. There is no substitute for time out on the water!

## **Fishing with live bait**

The best live baits for anglers ice fishing for rainbow trout are mealworms, wax worms, spikes, and small live minnows. These are all readily available at tackle shops that cater to ice fishermen. Live baits can be presented on a small hook. A small split shot can be used to get the bait down to the desired depth.

Live bait can also be used in conjunction with artificial lures. This two-pronged approach is often the most effective as it combines the advantages of both. Tiny jigs can be tipped with waxies or mealworms as well as the head or tail of a minnow. A small spoon tipped with a tiny minnow is an extremely effective combination as well.



## **Artificial lures are productive for rainbow trout**

The same basic lures that produce fish for anglers ice fishing for other species will catch rainbow trout as well. Tiny jigs can be very effective when worked just off the bottom or just above submerged weed beds. Most modern ice fishing jigs are made of tungsten. This material is very dense and results in a very small jig being heavy for its size. Anglers can add a small split shot 18 inches above the jig if needed.

Spoons are very effective lures when ice fishing for rainbow trout. While jigs are the most popular ice fishing lure, spoons are more effective on rainbow trout for a couple of reasons. Rainbow trout are more active than most other species and will respond to a larger bait being worked more aggressively. They also often want a larger meal, which the spoon represents.

Spoons work very well in the middle periods of the day when rainbow trout are suspended over deeper water. Anglers should start fishing the spoon about 5 feet below the ice. After jigging it aggressively and working it for several minutes, a few feet of line can be let out and the process repeated. Before an angler gives up on a spot, the spoon should be bounced off the bottom several times sharply, then raised a foot or so above. Disturbing the bottom will hopefully kick up forage and attract rainbow trout to the lure.

Plugs are also effective lures when ice fishing for rainbow trout. The standard in the industry is the Rapala Jigging Rap. It has been around a very long time and continues to be a productive lure to this day. It has an eyelet in the middle and a fin on the rear which results in an erratic circular swimming motion when jigged. Jigging Raps come in a variety of sizes and colors. Anglers should match the locally available forage for best results.

Flies can also be used effectively as long as they get down to the fish. While conventional fly fishing tackle cannot be used, weighted flies and nymphs can be used to fool rainbow trout. If the fly itself is not heavy enough to reach the bottom, anglers can simply add on a tiny split shot or two.



# Ice Fishing for Crappie

This chapter will highlight ice fishing for crappie. Crappie are a very popular freshwater fish. They are found throughout most of the United States.

Crappie are pretty and grow fairly large for pan fish. They put up a decent fight, but the primary reason for their popularity is for their value on a dinner plate. Crappie are delicious eating!



There are two types of crappie, black crappie and white crappie. There are a few differences in habits and locations between the two. However, for the purposes of this chapter, we will treat them both the same. Crappie are a schooling fish and once located a bunch can be caught quickly. However, this also means that there is a lot of water that is devoid of fish.

There are several similarities between ice fishing for crappie and fishing for them in open water. Vertical presentations are often used. Crappie will school up, generally relating to some type of cover or structure. The top baits are jigs and live minnows. They taste great, no matter when they are caught!

The number one factor to consider when ice fishing for crappie or any other species is safety. Safety always comes first! Unfortunately, anglers die every year from exposure to the cold and from accidents involving falling through the ice. There are simple safety measures that can be taken to ensure that this does not happen.

## **Best tackle for crappie**

Tackle used when ice fishing for crappie is pretty basic. The same outfits used for panfish and other smaller game fish will work fine when pursuing crappie. Fishing rods are generally light and between 30 inches and 36 inches long. Rods with soft tips are preferred as crappie have a very thin tissue in their mouth. Ultra light reels are attached and spooled up with line.

Four pound fluorocarbon line is a good all around choice. Anglers who prefer braided line can go with 10 pound test. However, they will need to attach a 3 foot long fluorocarbon leader to the braid. This is usually done using a swivel or snap swivel to reduce line twist and allow for easy changing of the leader.

Anglers will want to bring along a decent selection of hooks, split shot, and floats for fishing with live bait. Hook sizes should range from #2 for larger crappie down to #8 when fishing smaller baits. The tackle box should also have some artificial lures. Small jigs, spoons, and plugs are the most productive.

## **Crappie fishing strategies**

Now that we have all the gear, it is time to go fishing! Just as in open water fishing, determining the spot to fish is crucial to success. It can also be a bit daunting. Local bait shops where minnows and other tackle can be purchased are a great source of local information.

Message boards and other online resources such as report sites can save anglers a lot of time. Clusters of anglers already out on the ice can signify that a school of fish has been located. It is okay to fish there, just be courteous.

As stated earlier, there are actually fish migrations under the ice. Crappie will move around seeking ideal conditions as well as forage. In November and December, which is early in the season, points, weed beds, and other structure in water between 14 feet deep and 20 feet deep are good places to start.



One good strategy when ice fishing for crappie is to drill 10 holes 10 feet apart. The goal is to have these holes in several different depths and over different structure. This strategy makes it easy to cover a fair amount of water relatively easily. Drilling holes and finding the depth that the fish are feeding at is important.

Anglers can actively fish each hole or they can use a series of tip downs. Setting up tip downs will allow anglers to fish live bait in some holes while jigging vertically in others. Normally, anglers will actively jig holes that are marking fish on the sonar unit. Tip downs set with a live minnow are placed in the holes with less activity. However, just because no fish are being marked does not mean that there are none in the area. We will discuss more about tip downs later in this article.

The best times to go fishing are early and late in the day and on days with cloud cover. This is true for anglers ice fishing for crappie just as it is when open water fishing. However, they can certainly be caught in the middle of the day as well.

## **Live bait produces crappie**

Many anglers choose to use live bait when crappie fishing. There is very good reason for this! Many anglers feel that it is easier to catch fish on the real thing as opposed to trying to fool them with a piece of hardware. The top live baits for crappie fishing are minnows, wax worms, and mealworms. Often times, mealworms and waxies work best around shallow grass. Minnows generally produce better when fishing in deeper water.

The live bait can be presented in a couple different ways. The simplest rig is a hook tied right to the end of the line with a small split shot 18 inches above. This works very well with a live minnow. The minnow should be hooked in the back between the dorsal fin in the tail. Many anglers make the mistake of hooking minnows through the lips. This does not work as well when ice fishing. Floats can be used to suspend the minnow at the desired depth while also providing visual evidence of a bite.

Wax worms and mealworms are most often fished on a jig head. They can be used on a bare jig head or in conjunction with a jig and grub combination. Both can be very effective. In fact, the combination of a live bait and an artificial lure in one package can often be the key to success as it combines the taste of the bait with the flash and action of a lure.

## Best lures for crappie

Artificial lures will certainly produce for anglers ice fishing for crappie. The number one bait without a doubt is the jig and grub combo. This is true for anglers ice fishing just as it is for anglers open water fishing. The jig head provides a hook and weight to get the bait down. Modern ice fishing jig heads are usually made of tungsten. This is a very dense material and allows for anglers to use very light weight jigs. Jig heads can be as light as 1/64 of an ounce.



Jig heads come in several different designs. The key element is the placement of the line tie. This will determine the action of the jig in the water. The lure will be balanced differently and will react differently based on this factor. Jig heads come in many different colors and designs. Most anglers ice fishing prefer very brightly colored jig heads to help call the fish to the bait.



Grub bodies are threaded on to the jig head. This is an outstanding fish catching combination that will fool just about every species of fish on the planet. Grub bodies come in many different sizes, shapes, styles, and colors. It would be impossible to cover them all here. The best approach is to get some local information and find out what baits work in a particular area. However, sometimes thinking outside the box and showing the fish something they have never seen will produce even better.

## **Fishing with jigs**

Crappie will readily take a jig. However, this does not mean they are easy to catch. One of the most important strategies is to constantly vary the presentation. Anglers should try several different colors, depths, and jigging motions. Many anglers ice fishing for crappie always tip the jig. Others wait to see how aggressive the fish are, tipping the jig if the bite is a bit slow.

Crappie almost always feed facing up, so if using a sonar unit, it is best to work the jig a foot or two above the suspended fish. The bite can be very difficult to detect in this situation. Often times, the line will simply go slack as the crappie takes the bait while swimming up. When this happens, the angler should reel quickly to remove the slack in the line and gently raise the rod tip.

After initially dropping the jig down to the desired depth, the angler should try a subtle, gentle twitch of the rod tip. This will make the jig dance seductively in place. If that does not produce, then raising the rod tip a foot or so and allowing the jig to fall back down should be tried. In general, the best approach is to start with subtle movements of the jig and then become a bit more aggressive, hoping to trigger a strike.

Jigs will produce crappie in very shallow water, particularly over submerged weed beds. In this situation, the jigs should be fished just above the top of the grass. Fish will dart out of the cover to inhale the jig. Tiny jigs tipped with a mealworm or wax worm work very well.

Once the crappie is hooked, the angler must keep even, steady pressure on the fish. Crappie have a very thin membrane in the side of their mouth. This will result in the hook creating and wallowing out a hole. The slightest bit of slack can result in the jig falling out. With small hooks and a soft mouth, a delicate, light touch is required. Anglers should take their time and avoid pumping the rod tip. Again, slow steady pressure works best.

## **Spoons**

Spoons are excellent artificial lures for catching crappie. This is especially true for anglers who are after larger fish. Spoons provide weight to get down into the water column as well as flash and vibration. They are outstanding lures to use when crappie are suspended in deeper water. They can be tipped with a piece of minnow or even a live minnow.

Ice fishing spoons come in a myriad of sizes, shapes, and finishes. Generally speaking, gold works best in low light conditions such as early, late, and on cloudy days. Silver spoons are a better choice on bright, sunny days. Spoons will also draw active fish from further away than will jigs. When crappie are feeding on small bait fish, spoons are incredibly effective.

Spoons are best worked in deeper water. They can be fished at any point in the water column. Anglers ice fishing for crappie are often surprised at how close to the ice these fish can be caught. However, that does not mean that anglers should ignore the bottom or lower portions of the area that is being fished.

## **Plugs**

The standard when it comes to ice fishing plugs is the Rapala Jigging Rap. It has been around a very long time and still catches a lot of fish to this day. This lure has the line tie in the center of the bait and a then on the tail. This results in the lure having an erratic action. It falls in a circular motion, mimicking a wounded bait fish.

The Chubby Darter is another effective ice fishing plug. It has a bit larger profile than the Jigging Rap does. Both of these plugs or any others should be worked fairly aggressively. These lures are best used when fish are aggressive and anglers are looking for quality fish over numbers.

## **Tip downs for crappie**

Tip downs are clever devices that hold a fishing rod stationary over a hole. They are bit similar to tip ups except that with a tip up the fish is hand lined in. With the tip down, the angler has a couple of advantages. The hole can be fished without an angler actively supervising. Also, once the fish is hooked, the fight can be enjoyed on a standard rod and reel.



These devices are readily available and quite affordable. Sullivan is widely recognized as one of the best brands available. They average around \$25 apiece. While anglers can fish artificial lures, since the bait is not being actively fished, live bait works best. In most instances, anglers lower down a live minnow on a hook with a split shot.

Tip downs are great for family fishing! Kids don't always have the longest attention spans. With tip downs, there is almost always something going on, between fish being caught and hooks being attended to. There's nothing wrong with the kids playing on the ice or snow and scrambling for the rod when the tip buries in the hole.

### **Shallow lake fishing**

Crappie respond a bit differently, depending on the body of water being fished. Anglers ice fishing for crappie in shallow lakes will usually find them over submerged weed beds. In that environment, weeds are generally where the forage will be found. Because the weeds are on the bottom and the food is on the bottom, that is most often where the crappie will be found.

Crappie can be found in the deepest holes available in these shallow lakes. However, once the vegetation dies off the food source will be depleted and fish will generally move shallow again. Healthy aquatic vegetation in shallow water will put off oxygen which will attract bait fish.

### **Deep crappie lakes**

Crappie in larger, deeper waters will react a bit differently. Schools of fish will generally be found further offshore, often times suspended. While in open water, they will generally relate to some type of structure such as a creek or river channel edge, submerged island, fallen timber, or rock pile. Having this much water can certainly make the fish more difficult to locate. A portable sonar unit is invaluable in helping to locate structure and fish.

Early in the ice fishing season, there will be plenty of oxygen in the water near the bottom. Therefore, crappie can be caught there. However, as winter lingers on and oxygen levels become lower, fish will relocate, particularly if there is a lot of snow on the ice which will block sunlight.

These fish will generally move shallower, though that doesn't necessarily mean they'll move in closer to the bank. Instead, they will slide up the water column. Anglers ice fishing for crappie will often find them 10 or 15 feet below the surface, even in water that is very deep. This is due to oxygen deprivation levels and forage location.



Larger lakes will generally have more defined structure than will shallow, weedy lakes. This type of structure includes sloping points, main river channel edges, creek tributary channels, underwater islands and reefs, rock piles, and even bridges.

In river systems and in lakes that have current and fish like rivers, anglers ice fishing for crappie will find them in areas of lower current flow. These would include coves and backwater areas away from the main current flow. Coves and tributary creeks can also be great places to fish.



# Ice Fishing for Lake Trout



Many winter anglers enjoy ice fishing for lake trout. And for good reason! Lake trout are one of the largest species available to freshwater anglers. They are apex predators that grow very large. Like most trout, lakers thrive in the cold water. In fact, some anglers believe they actually feed more voraciously in the winter than they do at other times of the year.

Lake trout roam about in small packs, not exactly schools. They are found throughout the water column, from a few feet under the ice all the way to the bottom. Basically, they go where the forage goes. The fish that they feed on are usually found near the surface when there is a plankton bloom or down at the bottom where they feed on larvae. The primary forage for lake trout are ciscoes, whitefish, smelt, herring, and perch.

While lake trout can be caught on live and cut bait, their aggressive nature results in artificial lures being quite effective. Lake trout, especially large ones, are looking for a substantial meal as well. Therefore, the best artificial lures are usually spoons and plugs. Anglers fishing with bait almost always use a live, frozen, or fresh dead bait fish.

## **Tackle for ice fishing for lake trout**

Ice fishing for lake trout does take tackle that is different than that used in other types of ice fishing. The ultralight spinning outfits with 4 pound line will not cut it when chasing these large, powerful fish. Anglers can use spinning tackle for lake trout. However, rods need to be 42 inches to 48 inches long and on the heavy side. Many anglers have gone to bait casting outfits. These are particularly desired when fishing water over 50 feet deep.

Most anglers ice fishing for lake trout prefer to use braided line. Braided line has no stretch while offering incredible sensitivity. The fact that this line does not stretch is very important when setting the hook on lake trout. This is particularly true in deeper water. Monofilament and fluorocarbon line both stretch, braided line does not. Anglers can get away with 8 pound monofilament or fluorocarbon line when fishing in fairly shallow water for lake trout.

A swivel is tied to the end of the braided line. This eliminates line twist while making a convenient connection for the angler to attach a leader. Most opt for a 3 foot long section of 10 pound fluorocarbon leader. However, when the water is very clear, some anglers extend this to 5 feet or 6 feet long and even drop as light as 6 lb test.

## **Lake trout locations**

Lake trout are seemingly always on the move. This is both a good thing and a bad thing. Unlike fishing for panfish, lake trout will not be found in big schools hovering in one spot. Instead, they cruise in packs of a couple fish to a dozen in search of prey.

Fortunately, lake trout do relate to structure. This means that the locations in which they can be found are predictable. Top spots include points, submerged islands, flats, and channel edges that drop off into deeper water. Structure that has cover on it such as boulders and submerged timber only increase the chances of it being a lake trout hot-spot. They use this structure and cover to locate and ambush their prey.

Lake trout will certainly move up shallow to feed as well. While the shallow flats are usually too warm in the summer months, this is not true in the winter. Lakers will move up onto flats to feed on yellow perch and other species. The edges of flats that are 8 to 12 feet deep and drop off quickly into deeper water are prime spots. The secondary drop off, where the bottom drops from 18 feet to 35 or 40 feet can be a very good spot as well.

## **Lake trout tactics**

Locating lake trout is certainly the most difficult part. Generally speaking, anglers ice fishing for lake trout do not have trouble getting them to bite, once they locate them. After all, these fish are cruising and feeding.

Wintertime water temperatures are ideal for their comfort level. They are almost always on the move in search of their next meal. These large, cold, deep lakes require the lake trout to search constantly for the areas where forage is present.

Working the right depth is very important when ice fishing for lake trout. Normally, lake trout are found anywhere from 10 feet below the ice and as deep as 80 feet. They will at times be found suspending over very deep water. Once again, it is all about the forage and availability of food.

Fish locations and behavior change a bit in mid-winter. Thickening ice and snow on the surface blocks sunlight penetration into the water. This results in plankton being found higher in the water column as the sunlight diminishes. Bait fish feed on this plankton and will be found there as well. This mini food chain of course culminates in predators such as lake trout.

It is important to work the entire water column, no matter what lure or bait is being used. Most often, lake trout will not be marked on the sonar unit. Instead, as mentioned above, they will be swimming about in search of food. The bait could be in the mud on the bottom feeding or up near the surface seeking plankton.

## Lake trout lures

The two most productive lures for anglers ice fishing for lake trout are spoons and tube jigs. These two lures account for the vast majority of lake trout caught by anglers. Both are similar in that they mimic the ciscoes, smelt, herring, and other forage species that support lake trout populations. Vertically presented plugs can be effective as well.

Lake trout are usually quite aggressive. Anglers should take advantage of this trait by giving their lures a very erratic action. Lake trout are attracted to the flash and vibration of a lure; it imitates a wounded bait fish and simulates an easy meal for a hungry lake trout. There are times when the lure can't be moved fast enough!



It is important though, to develop a bit of a rhythm. In the crystal clear water, lake trout will see the lure from a long way off. When ready, the fish will strike. By keeping the jigging pattern the same, anglers stand a better chance of the fish finding the bait. If a strong knock or thump is felt, that could be the fish missing the lure. Anglers should continue to work it, the lake trout will usually turn around and finish it off.

## **Jigs produce lake trout**

Jig heads with either a tube or soft plastic grub body are extremely effective lures for catching lake trout. White is the most popular color as it matches the silvery type bait fish that lakers feed on. As with jigs everywhere, the vast majority of bites occur as the lure falls. After being jerked up sharply, the seductive fall, seemingly helpless, will trigger the strike. Anglers can add scent or even a strip of cut bait as well.

While erratic aggressive retrieves are generally the most productive, successful anglers vary the retrieve until a productive pattern emerges. There are certainly days when the lake trout want the bait a little less active. The same applies when it comes to color, anglers should mix it up. This is especially true in shallower water where lake trout feed on yellow perch and other species. Rattles inside the soft plastic bait or tube can also make a difference. Again, some days the fish want them and some days they don't.

## **Fishing for lakers with spoons**

Spoons are incredibly effective artificial lures for anglers ice fishing for lake trout. They very closely resemble the ciscoes, herring, and other bait fish that they feed on. Spoons are heavy and sink to the bottom quickly; efficiently covering the water column. They also put out a lot of flash and vibration.

The best spoons are those that match the size of the locally available forage. The Mepp's Cyclops and Williams Whitefish are two very popular spoons for catching lake trout. 1/2 ounce to 3/4 ounce are generally the best sizes. Silver is an excellent all round finish. Copper works very well on cloudy days and when lake trout are shallow feeding on yellow perch.





Many anglers add a belly strip from a sucker or other bait fish to the spoon. The added scent only increases the chance of a lake trout taking it. Some serious anglers will actually remove the treble hook, run it through the middle of the minnow, then reattach the hook. This is a bit more work but does result in a higher hookup ratio.

## **Jigging Rap**

The Rapala Jigging Rap is an ice fishing legend that has been around a long time. It catches a wide variety of species, and lake trout are no exception. The larger #9 and #11 sizes work best as they match the size of the forage. Chrome is an excellent finish when ciscoes are about. Firetiger and perch are very productive in shallower water when lake trout are feeding on yellow perch.

The Jigging Rap has the line tie in the center of the lure. It also has a fin or lip at the tail of the bait. These two combine to give the lure a very erratic action when it falls. It tends to spiral down in a circle, seemingly helpless. This motion will trigger strikes from lake trout. The best presentation is a hard upward jerk of about 2 feet, then the lure is allowed to fall down on slack line. As with most lures, most strikes will occur on the fall.

## **More lake trout tips**

Current under the ice can play a key role in success or failure when ice fishing for lake trout. Despite a body of water being covered with ice, there are often times current flows beneath it. Anglers can easily detect this by watching the line when the lure or bait is dropped down through the hole. At times the current can be so strong it can make it difficult to present a bait or lure properly. Often times, a change in current flow or strength will either trigger a bite or shut one off. Anglers should be aware of this as it is one more component to factor into solving the puzzle.

Anglers can also “troll” through the ice. This may sound odd, but it is just a variation of the tactic of dragging a lure through the water. The difference is when ice fishing, it is a vertical presentation from the bottom to the top. The lure is lowered down and allowed to rest on the bottom. The angler then walks briskly away from the hole, dragging the lure up through the water column. As with all fishing, angler should experiment with the retrieve. It is surprising how hard a lake trout will hit using this technique and how close to the surface it will do so!



# Ice Fishing for Brown Trout

The topic of this chapter is ice fishing for brown trout. Brown trout are a gorgeous fish that adapts well to the very cold water. Like most trout, they feed vigorously under the ice all winter long. For whatever reason, brown trout are less often pursued than some of the other more glamorous species. Hopefully, this information will change that!



Anglers ice fishing for brown trout catch them in both rivers and lakes. The tactics are similar, though there are certainly some differences. Obviously, the locations where fish hold will be much different in rivers than in lakes. However, the tackle used will serve well in both applications.

Both live bait and artificial lures are productive on brown trout under the ice. Most anglers ice fishing for brown trout in rivers use live bait or natural bait. This is mostly due to fish being a bit spooky in shallow water. Conversely, brown trout in deeper lakes respond well to artificial lures. Spoons in particular are very productive lures for brown trout.

## **Brown trout fishing tackle**

The rod and reel required for ice fishing for brown trout will vary a bit based on the water being fished. Anglers fishing lakes and rivers where fish average a pound or two will do well with the same outfit they use for panfish or small walleye. However, anglers fishing big water where there is a chance for true trophy brown trout or even a large lake trout will need to beef up the tackle a bit. A medium action rod around 32 inches long is a better choice when fishing big waters.

The same really goes when it comes to fishing line. Anglers fishing smaller ponds and lakes and rivers will do best to keep it light. Several manufacturers market hybrid line specifically designed for ice fishing. These are usually fluorocarbon lines. 6 pound test is a good all-around size, though anglers can drop it down to 4 pound test in ultra-clear water.

Many anglers fishing deeper lakes have chosen to go to braided line. Braided line has a much higher strength for its diameter. It also has no stretch and great sensitivity. However, braided line can be difficult to use when exposed to the elements. It is a better choice when fishing in a shelter. Anglers using braided line do need to use a 3 foot long fluorocarbon leader testing 6 pounds or 8 pounds. Anglers choosing to use monofilament or fluorocarbon line will do well with 8 pound test.

## **Brown trout fishing lures**

The two most popular artificial lures used when ice fishing for brown trout are jigging spoons and Rapala Jigging Raps. Jigging spoons come in a wide variety of manufacturers, sizes, and finishes. Anglers will do best to match the spoon to the size of the forage in the lake, where possible. The traditional ice fishing spoons such as the Kastmaster, Little Cleo, and Flutter Spoon are all good choices.

The Rapala Jigging Rap is a legendary ice fishing lure. It fishes more like a jig as the line tie is in the center and it falls in an erratic, enticing manner. Larger brown trout almost always feed on bait fish. Therefore, the Jigging Rap is a good choice and is a highly productive bait when targeting brown trout.

## **Fishing for brown trout in rivers**

Brown trout are commonly pursued by anglers in rivers. Brown trout and steelhead trout are the two most plentiful species that are found there.

Anglers fishing for brown trout in rivers need to put safety first. Ice thickness can be a bit trickier to determine in areas that have varying current flow.

Smart anglers never take a chance and fish where there is not at least 4 inches of ice!

## **Brown trout locations**

Just as in open water river fishing, location is key when ice fishing as well. Brown trout will generally stage in areas of lower current flow and behind breaks. Brown trout prefer to stage over sandy bottom. This can be difficult to determine under a sheet of ice. One trick is to look at the shoreline, the bottom will reflect the shoreline terrain, whether it be rocks or sand.

It is amazing how shallow brown trout can be caught in rivers under the ice. They are landed in water as shallow as 1 foot deep! They are certainly spooky and difficult to catch in the shallow water. Most brown trout are caught in water between 3 and 5 feet deep. The tail ends of pools will often have an eddy where brown trout will hold in the winter.



Most often, brown trout will be found on or near the bottom. They are not quite as active as their steelhead cousins are. They prefer to find slack water on the bottom and if preferable behind a break. However, they adapt well to the very cold water and will feed aggressively. They are a bit skittish in that shallow water and tactics that work on the lake will not work in the river.



## **Ice fishing in rivers**

Live and natural bait is used most often when ice fishing for brown trout. It simply is not practical to use lures, they are too aggressive and anglers walking around a foot or two overhead will spook the fish. The best bait is fresh spawn, where available. Steelhead spawn is considered the top bait.

However, freshness is the most important factor. Eggs will certainly catch their share of brown trout as well. Commercially prepared baits such as Gulp Dough will work as well and is easy to acquire.

In slack water, anglers can lower the bait down using a #8 light wire live bait hook. A tiny split shot can be added. Many anglers use a 1/32 ounce jig head when fishing in current. Brightly colored jig heads help attract fish. Most anglers fish with tip down rigs or devices such as the Automatic Fisherman. A series of holes is drilled and the rigs are set up with different baits a couple inches from the bottom.

In shallow water, brown trout will be able to detect an angler walking overhead. There is just no way around this. That is the reason that for the most part set lines are used. It is just too difficult to get a brown trout to bite with an angler standing 2 feet over top of them. It is also best to use a hole cover or snow to block the light coming in from the hole.

## **Fishing for brown trout in lakes**

Anglers ice fishing for brown trout find them in lakes all across the north, however many anglers fish for them in Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. While the focus will be on these two lakes, the tips and techniques will produce brown trout for anglers fishing through the ice anywhere.

## **Locating brown trout in lakes**

Brown trout will normally be found on or near structure. At first ice, they will be found shallow on the first break in around 10 feet of water. However, they may also be found on secondary breaks and on channel edges as deep as 50 or 60 feet. Mouths of creeks and rivers can be great spots as well, though anglers need to be careful about ice there. Also, these spots tend to attract the majority of anglers. Many successful anglers ice fishing for brown trout avoid these areas and find their own hot-spots.

The best spots will have a variety of structure. Rocky areas that are adjacent to mud flats can be very productive. Brown trout have a varied diet. They will feed on bait fish primarily. However, crustaceans such as crayfish and larger insects will be happily devoured as well. Brown trout also feed throughout the entire water column.

## **Gage Sackett**

Special thanks to Gage Sackett who lives in Michigan and is an expert at ice fishing for brown trout. He is generous enough to share the tips, techniques, and locations that have produced fish for him.

“If you want the best fishing on Lake Superior, it’s about getting as close as you can get to open water glare ice with little to no snow cover on it. Having no snow on the ice helps a lot of light get through the ice allowing the fish to see your lure/bait from a further distance. The other reason we chase the ice out is there is little to no fishing pressure. Most of the time, we are the furthest ones out on the ice. Having said that, anglers must put safety first! **Anglers should never venture out onto ice that is not safe!**



“Ultimately being the first out on the sheet of ice when fish are a lot more active results in success because they are seeing baits for the first time that year. There is plenty of light going through the ice, and no fishing pressure. There still is good fishing on the thick snow covered ice, but by then there are crowds of hundreds of people stretched down the shoreline. Imagine being a fish and seeing bait after bait after bait. It certainly makes it more difficult to trick a fish into biting.

“We tend to use 2 set lines and one rod to vertically jig. For the set lines we use tip ups or automatic hook setting devices (Jaw Jacker). The set lines consist of a 8-15 lb braided line with 5 feet of monofilament or fluorocarbon leader. A size 6 single hook set 2-10 ft off of the bottom with a lake shiner for

bait completes the rig.

“When jigging for brown trout, I use a 34”-38” medium or med- heavy spinning rod with 6-10 monofilament line. For bait I use Rapala Jigging Raps and jigging spoons. Spoons range in size from 1.5”-3.5”. Jigging spoons are the best all round lure when targeting brown trout through the ice. Spoons are usually tipped with a head or tail of a lake shiner. If you are using larger spoons you can put a full minnow on because it won’t mess up the action of the lure.

“It is a very important your lure has the right flutter or spin while it falls between jigging. Browns are a fast fish and they like fast jigging most of the time. When I see a fish come under my bait, I keep it above it the whole time and as the fish starts to engage I start jigging it up until the fish hits or loses interest. Browns will chase your lure all the way to the bottom of the ice.

“I fish in 15-40 feet of water and brown trout will chase the lure all the way from the bottom to the top of the water column and still lose interest. As soon as the fish loses interest I open my bail let it free fall to the bottom. Often times, the fish will start chasing it back down. When you see the fish reappear on the fish finder, close the bail on the reel and start jigging up fast and the fish will almost always hit right away!

“The Lake Superior fishery consists of a lot more than brown. There are also splake, lake trout, coho salmon, and whitefish that can be caught using similar jigging techniques. When searching for these fish I tend to look for steep breaks, river inlets, points, and rock humps. Also I’ll fish sand and rock flats between sharp breaks. This is what makes Lake Superior different from Lake Michigan brown trout fishing. On Lake Michigan, they fish the harbors for brown trout. Additionally, when you fish Lake Superior you get gorgeous scenery! You don’t just have a big city to look!







“Lake Superior and Lake Michigan are different when it comes to the size of fish. It’s a lot more common to catch a 10 pound brown on Lake Michigan because Lake Michigan has a lot more forage. Fish over 20 pounds are not uncommon. I’m sure they have stocked Lake Michigan for longer.

“In Lake Superior, an 8 lb fish is a trophy, but trout up to 15 lbs are becoming more common every year. The biggest brown I know on Lake Superior caught was 19.5 pounds and that’s a true brown of a lifetime. Targeting these monster browns on Lake Superior is a bit different. This is where being on

the thin ice is the best without the pressure of other fisherman. Your best shot at a trophy is in front of the creeks and rivers as soon as it is safe to fish and to walk on. Again, safety always comes first!

“In the late fall trout swim up the rivers to spawn and they can spawn up until February, we tend to start getting ice late December early January. So, these fish that are going to the river to spawn are also looking for eggs to eat. We use set lines and jig the same, the only difference is we focus on water that is 5 feet deep to 15 feet deep instead of the 15-40 foot range. The rivers push sediment into the lake and it's generally a bit more shallow.

“When we set up for these big browns by the rivers we fish with spawn and lake shiners. We try to mix it up half and half to see what the fish are feeding on. I usually do this on my set lines. When jigging, I slow it down a bit instead of the normally fast pace I use out in deeper water.

“You know you are around a big brown when it comes off the bottom really slow and you make that lure dance until it hits. The smaller browns you get in the lake are aggressive and will chase fast. However, these big ones will chase but won't chase to the top of the water column, but if you are in 10 feet that's only 5 feet off the bottom. The fish being lazier doesn't make jigging as effective either.

“We will often have fish appear on our locator and just slowly sink to the bottom without any interest. But our set lines will produce fish. So we will just use set lines instead of jigging. After there is 5” of ice there is a lot more fishermen adding pressure so we look for our next spot to target!”

## **Ice Fishing for Bass**

This chapter will focus on ice fishing for bass. Largemouth bass and smallmouth bass are both warm water species. In the frigid winter waters, their metabolism slows greatly. Unlike trout and other cold water species, bass activity is significantly reduced in the winter. However, anglers can be successful catching bass under the ice. It does take a change of tactics.





It is best to look at bass as really being large panfish. In reality, that is the family of fish to which they belong. Largemouth bass thrive in water temperatures in the mid-60s to low 70s. Therefore, water temperatures in the mid-30s are significantly below their ideal range. They will feed much less often and on smaller prey. Larger meals are harder to catch and take a long time to digest.

Smallmouth bass are a little more tolerant of the colder water. They are also found farther north in more significant numbers. Smallmouth bass will be a bit more active than largemouth bass under the ice. However, their activity level will still be much lower than in the open water fishing seasons.



## **Tackle and lures to catch bass through the ice**

The same rod and reel combinations that work for crappie, small trout, and panfish will be well suited for anglers ice fishing for bass. Even though bass grow large, especially largemouth bass, the baits and lures that will be used to catch them will be quite small. Light action rods and 4 pound test fluorocarbon lines are the best approach in most situations.

The same applies to jigs and artificial lures as well. Micro jigs in the one 32nd ounce and even as small as 1/64 of an ounce are used to catch bass under the ice. The jig heads can be fished in conjunction with live bait, used with a grub body, or even a grub body tipped with a mealworm or wax worm.

A #3 Rapala Jigging Rap is another productive lure that anglers can use when ice fishing for bass. It is better suited early and late in the ice fishing season, when fish are bit more active. Largemouth bass in particular are just not in the mood to chase down a large meal. Jigging spoons can be effective, again, usually when bass are actively feeding.

## **Bass fishing tactics**

Largemouth and smallmouth bass are actually quite different in habit. These differences continue to exhibit themselves even under the ice. In its simplest form, largemouth bass prefer weeds and smallmouth bass prefer rocks. It isn't that simple, but that really is a good place to start.

Neither largemouth bass or smallmouth bass tend to school up in the winter. Instead, they slowly cruise the bottom, usually hunting alone. This is almost always true of largemouth bass. Smallmouth bass may be found in small clusters of fish, particularly over deeper structure.

## **Ice fishing for largemouth bass**

Largemouth bass prefer weedy areas, most often with a softer muddy bottom. Weeds will generally be found in water 30 feet deep or shallower. When healthy submerged grass beds are available, largemouth bass will cruise the outside edge of the weed line. This usually occurs with a depth change or drop off.

The best spots to look for largemouth bass are flats or basins adjacent to the main river channel. Tributary creeks and back bays will usually not hold largemouth bass in the wintertime. They will generally be seeking the last

available healthy weedy growth. Largemouth will be found on the outside edge of the flat and weed line. In most cases, anglers fishing between 10 feet deep and 25 feet deep will be most successful.

### **Smallmouth bass**



Smallmouth bass will usually be found deeper, in the 40 to 50 foot range. Also, they prefer to stage around hard bottom areas, gravel bottoms, and submerged boulders or rocks. Points that slope off into the main river channel are prime spots. Submerged islands or rocky humps or reefs that rise out of the depths to 30 or 40 feet below the surface are also outstanding places to ice fish for smallmouth bass.

During periods of peak activity, usually at the beginning and towards the end of the ice fishing season, smallmouth bass will move up into shallower flats.

Flats in depths of 10 to 15 feet that are close to the main lake channel with gravel or rocky bottom will be spots where smallmouth bass will move up and feed.

## **Catching bass through the ice**

As mentioned earlier, successful anglers ice fishing for bass scale down their offerings in the winter. Sometimes it seems difficult to imagine the same bass that will inhale a huge soft plastic bait instead preferring a tiny grub on a jig head. However, this is the case. Both largemouth bass and smallmouth bass will readily take tiny offerings that are well suited for panfish.

Weather plays a huge role when it comes to ice fishing for bass. While other cold water species adapt to the frigid conditions, bass will almost always respond better after a slight warming trend. The several days of warm, stable weather following a severe front are usually best. At this time they will rise up from the depths and move shallow to feed. A strong cold front will almost certainly shut off the bite.

Small minnows, nymphs, insects, and other small aquatic animals are the prime forage for bass in the wintertime. This explains why the smaller baits are generally more productive. Day in and day out, a 1/32 ounce jig with a small soft plastic body tipped with a wax worm or mealworm will be the most productive offering. A small live minnow hooked on a jig head and lowered to the bottom can be productive as well.

## **Patience is a virtue when ice fishing for bass**

Anglers ice fishing for bass need to be very patient. Bass will slowly approach the lure or bait, watching it for some time. Anglers want to move the bait just enough to attract the bass, without scaring it off. Gently lifting the bait 6 to 10 inches and then allowing it to fall naturally is a good initial approach. If that does not produce, the angler should be a tad more aggressive and twitch the bait sharply as opposed to a slow pull. As with any other fishing, anglers should vary the retrieve until he or she finds a

presentation that the bass want that day.



There are days when the bass just don't want to take an artificial lure. Post cold front conditions and very cold water temperatures can often cause this. Bass are simply not as active. Several wax worms or mealworms on a jig head may produce a bite. Anglers should very subtly give the jig and bait combination a little bit of motion.

## **Playing bass**

Once the bass has been lured into biting, the angler must land the fish. It takes a light hand and a delicate touch to land a large bass on extremely light tackle. The initial problem is the hook set. Anglers simply cannot use a robust hook set with 4 pound line. Razor-sharp hooks are a must! Limber rods and smooth drags will also be required to consistently land large fish when ice fishing for bass.

## **More bass fishing tips**

There will be days when anglers ice fishing for bass will find them more active. On these days, a larger bait such as the Rapala Jigging Rap would be a good choice. Larger soft plastic baits can be used as well, up to 3 inches long. Anglers using these larger baits will get less bites, but they may catch a larger fish. However, for consistent results it is hard to beat the smaller jigs.

Small live minnows can be used successfully as well. Shiners that are most often used for crappie are about the perfect size. These can be lowered on a jig head down to the bottom. When bass are found in shallower water over weeds, they can be hooked on a small live bait hook and suspended under a float to the desired depth.

## **Ice Fishing for Brook Trout**

The topic of this chapter will be ice fishing for brook trout. Brook trout are a beautiful fish that feed aggressively under the ice. Like most trout, brookies thrive in cold water. They will be found cruising the shallows all winter long. Anglers who understand their behavior will have success ice fishing for these terrific game fish!





The key to success when ice fishing for brook trout is understanding their habits. While many game fish species tend to move deep in the cold weather, with brook trout it is the opposite. Most fish will be caught in water less than 10 feet deep. In fact, the majority of fish will be caught in 5 feet or less.

Brook trout are found in shallow water for one reason; that is where the food is. Brook trout are comfortable in the cold water, therefore forage becomes a primary consideration. These shallow areas hold aquatic insects, bait fish, and eggs from fish that have spawned in the fall.

## **Brook trout fishing tackle**

The tackle required when ice fishing for brook trout is pretty basic. Anglers

should go very light, using a 24 inch to 36 inch light rod with a matching reel. Anglers need to go very light on the line, as the water is quite clear. Four pound test fluorocarbon line is a good choice. However, some anglers even drop it down to two pound test. Several manufacturers produce lines that are specifically designed for ice fishing.

Most brook trout are caught by anglers ice fishing with live or natural bait. Therefore, a selection of hooks is required. Light wire live bait hooks in sizes from #4 down to #10 will cover most situations. A split shot or two may be required when fishing slightly deeper water. A selection of jigs and small jigging spoons pretty much completes the brook trout anglers box.

## **Best spots to catch brookies through the ice**

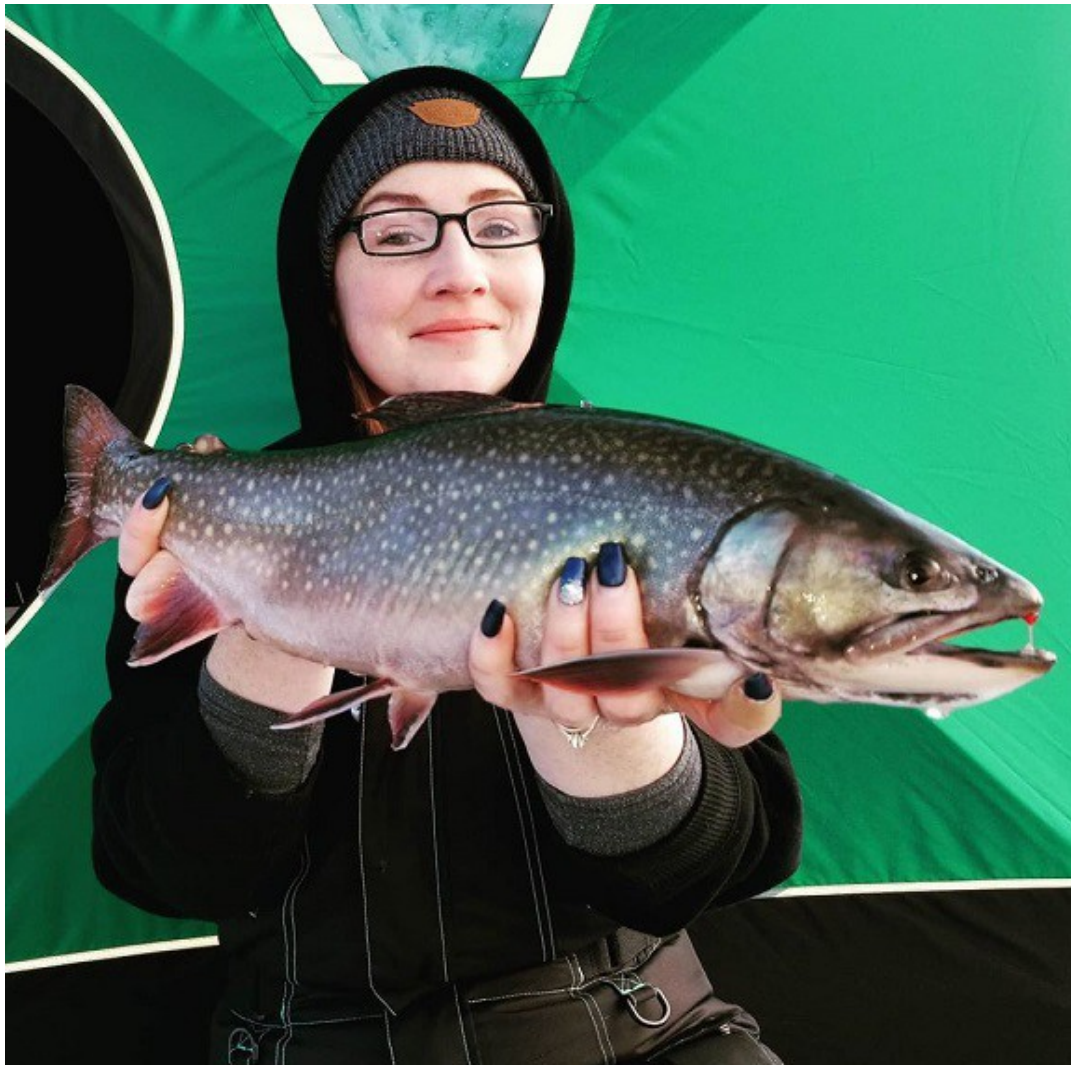
As in all fishing, locating where fish are holding and feeding is of prime importance. The best bait and tactics in the world will not produce if there are no fish around. Anglers ice fishing for brook trout should keep one thing in mind; fish shallow! If there is one mistake that the novice brook trout angler makes, it is fishing too deep as he or she would for other species. Brook trout are comfortable roaming the shallows around boulders and other cover. That is where they do the bulk of their feeding.

Incoming streams are prime spots to locate brook trout under the ice. A brook or stream that enters a sandy flat with some gravel or rock bottom would be a prime location. Points that drop off into deeper water, particularly with cover such as submerged weeds, timber, or rock and gravel are other likely fish holding spots. Any type of water flowing into the lake, especially with these other features would be a great fishing spot! **Watch the ice thickness!!**

Not all brook trout lakes or waters are the same. Some are known more for numbers while others are trophy fisheries. Trophy brook trout are not easy to catch! They live in an environment with a lot of food and they don't grow large by being easy to catch. Conversely, anglers seeking more action would be wise to choose a lake that is more heavily stocked or is known for producing action and numbers as opposed to trophies.







## **Fishing strategies for brook trout**

Another consideration when ice fishing for brook trout is sunlight penetration. Brook trout, particularly in the shallow clear water, bite best in low light conditions. Early and late in the day along with cloudy days are almost always best. Brook trout can be caught in the middle of a bright sunny day. However, they will generally move a bit deeper and it can be harder to get them to bite.

As in all other aspects of ice fishing, there is strategy that comes into play when drilling the holes. Since early-morning is generally best, anglers should get out there early and drill a dozen to 15 holes and water ranging from a foot deep to 10 feet deep. Ideally, these holes will be over weedy flats, shallows with rocky bottom, and the edges of drop-offs in 8 to 10 feet of water.

Working the east side of a lake can extend the early-morning bite as trees will provide shade an hour or two later into the morning.



Most anglers don't really have a choice as to when they get to fish. However, if at all possible it is best to go ice fishing for brook trout a day or so prior to a front moving through. Not only does the low pressure tend to make them bite, these are normally the more cloudy and overcast days. Conversely, the days after the front will result in high pressure and a very bright, sunny day. These are not ideal conditions for brook trout or really most other species.

Since the window for catching brook trout can be small, anglers need to be flexible and constantly keep moving until fish are located. Once a particular area or depth seems to be producing, it is best to then concentrate on that area or that depth range. Where possible, anglers can team up by trying different baits or lures to see what the fish want that day.

## **Catching brook trout using live bait**

As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of anglers ice fishing for brook trout do so using live or natural bait. Top baits include live minnows, nightcrawlers, wax worms, and salmon eggs. Some anglers even up their odds by adding a scent such as Pro Cure to sweeten the bait even further. These baits are readily available at bait and tackle stores.

Since the majority of brook trout fishing is done in shallow water, the best approach when fishing with live bait is generally to use a hook with no weight. The hook is then baited with a salmon egg or two, nightcrawler, or minnow and lowered down through the hole. #8 short shank thin wire live bait hooks are a good place to start. It is best to start out fishing the bait a foot or so above the bottom. Anglers can then move up in the water column if needed. One thing about fishing shallow, there is less of the water to probe.

Smaller minnows are generally the best choice for anglers ice fishing for brook trout. Small minnows will catch both large and small fish, while large minnows will only catch bigger fish. Anglers looking for action over trophies will do well with the smaller baits. However, anglers targeting a trophy brook trout can use a larger shiner or chub.

Anglers can use a small tungsten jig head to present a live bait or salmon egg as well. This works particularly well with wax worms but can be used with nightcrawlers and salmon eggs, too. Most jig heads are brightly colored and this can help attract a brook trout to the bait. This approach works very well when fishing around large boulders and other rocky structure.

## **Tip ups**

Tip ups have the advantage of allowing anglers to fish multiple holes at one time. They can be set up and rigged with a live bait. Then, the angler can move on to put out more tip ups or actively fish a hole with the spinning rod. As with all fishing, anglers need to check local fishing regulations to make sure they are in compliance.

One excellent strategy is to set tip ups over submerged weed beds. Then, the angler can lower down a live minnow and set the tip up so that the minnow hovers just above the tops of the submerged vegetation. This can be easier to do with the tip up than with a fishing rod. Of course, nightcrawlers, salmon eggs, and even frozen or cut bait can be used as well.

At times, anglers will be fishing water so shallow that they will have to raise the height of their tip up. Otherwise, the rig will bottom out on the floor of the lake. Wood blocks can be used to accomplish this. Also, anglers will sometimes see where the flag pops but the line is not running off the spool.

The brook trout may feel resistance and drop the bait. If this occurs, anglers should reset the tip up and then wait a few moments. If the fish does not come back and bite, the hook should be checked to see if there is still bait.

It is very important to have a lively and frisky bait fish on the hook. Since the angler is not actively jigging or fishing the hole, the bait fish was produce all the action. Dead or dying baits do not trigger strikes like active ones do. Therefore, anglers should check their baits every 45 minutes or so. Also, adding a little bit of lake water to the bait bucket when arriving on scene will help the minnows not being shocked by a drastic change of water temperature.



## **Best brook trout lures**

Most anglers ice fishing for brook trout do so with live bait, however, artificial lures will certainly catch their share of fish as well. While jigs are the most popular ice fishing lure, spoons are generally the preferred lure

when pursuing brook trout under the ice. The idea of using an artificial lure such as a spoon is to excite or aggravate a fish into biting when they are otherwise not in a feeding mood.

Spoons provide several of these key elements. They put out both flash and vibration. Spoons are also fairly dense. This makes them an excellent choice towards the middle of the day when brook trout tend to move to the edge of the flat, point, or weed line. An actively vibrating and flashing spoon may catch a fish when live bait is ignored. However, anglers should not get carried away with the motions. In most instances, an 8 inch to 10 inch upward twitch of the rod tip is all that is required. Most anglers tip the spoon with a small minnow or piece of minnow or even a nightcrawler.

There are many effective ice fishing spoons on the market. In fact, there are too many to list. Top spoons for anglers ice fishing for brook trout include, but are not limited to, the Acme Kastmaster, Sweedish Pimple, and Little Cleo. Silver and gold are the most popular finishes. However, some anglers prefer brightly painted lures as well.

Jig heads with a small grub body do have their place when ice fishing for brook trout. They can be especially effective on heavily pressured waters. A tiny 1/64 ounce brightly colored tungsten jig head with a 1 inch soft plastic grub body may produce when nothing else will. Anglers often tip the jig with a waxworm or a piece of nightcrawler. It is best fished very subtly with as light a line as possible.





# Ice Fishing for Burbot

Ice fishing for burbot is overlooked by many anglers. They are an under utilized game fish. Who would not want to catch a fish that grows large, fights hard, and tastes fantastic on a dinner plate? Part of the problem is that there is not a ton of information on these fish, their habits, and spawning cycles. However, in this chapter, these subjects will be covered. Hopefully, anglers will understand burbot better after reading this.



Burbot are a slow swimming fish that mostly feeds on or near the bottom. They use their uniquely camouflaged bodies to ambush prey. Burbot mostly feed on bait fish. However, insects, crustaceans, and other forage are part of their diet as well. Burbot are found in large, deep, cold bodies of water.

Burbot have a highly developed sense of touch and smell. This gives them an advantage when hunting in the dark. Therefore, most serious burbot anglers pursue them at night. No need for an early rise for these fish!

## **Burbot tackle**

Burbot do grow fairly large. Most anglers ice fishing for burbot simply use their walleye and lake trout tackle. 36" to 42" rods with a medium or medium heavy action work well. Burbot are often found in shallow water in the evening and at night. Anglers can use either 20 lb braided line or 10 lb flourocarbon line. In either case, anglers should choose lines designed for ice fishing. Anglers using braid will require a 48" piece of 10-15 lb flourocarbon leader.

Most anglers ice fishing for burbot use a combination of an artificial lure and cut bait. Heavy jigs and jigging spoons sweetened with a strip of cut ciscoe or other bait fish or frozen shiners are the preferred baits. Anglers can also use scented soft plastic baits such as the Gulp line. Also, anglers can use scents such as Pro Cure on soft plastic tubes and other baits.

There are many spoons and jigs that will produce for anglers ice fishing for burbot. These include, but certainly are not limited to the ReelBait Tournament Series LS Flasher Jig, the Trout-N-Pout Spoon, and Frostbite Tantrums and Dinnerbell spoon.

## **Burbot habits**

As in all fishing, understanding fish habits will help anglers ice fishing for burbot. One great aspect of burbot is that they provide an excellent opportunity mid winter when some other species gets tough to catch. Burbot spawn in the winter. They spawn from January through March, depending on location. The fishing "window" is generally 4-6 weeks long.

Interestingly, not every burbot spawns every year. Some take a year off. However, the ones that don't still move up with the other fish and help protect the eggs. This is a very unusual behavior in the fish world.

Burbot will be found in deeper waters during the daylight hours. As the day wanes, fish will move up from 40 feet to 60 feet of water and onto flats in 10 feet to 20 feet of water. This means that flats and points adjacent to deeper areas, especially main lake basins, are often the best spots to fish.

## **Locating burbot**

Humps, points, and flats near the main lake channel and deepest portions of the lake are prime spots to target burbot at sunset and into the night. Rocks, gravel, and weedy bottoms will increase the chance for success. Burbot fishing is tough during the day. However, persistent anglers ice fishing for burbot will find them in the deeper holes.



Anglers should drill a dozen or so holes in varying depths. A good approach is to start at the drop off into the main lake channel or basin. That will be a prime spot! Next, more holes are scattered about on the flat, from 20 feet deep down as shallow as 8 feet deep. Anglers can follow the migration as they move up on the flat as the evening progresses. The north side of the lake, which faces south, can often be better.

## **Burbot techniques**

The one technique that produces for anglers ice fishing for burbot is to bounce a jig or spoon on the bottom several times, then lift it up a foot or so

and subtly jig it. The bottom disturbance attracts the fish, then they can't help but attack the offering that is just dangling in front of their face. This is where the weight of the lure comes into play. The pause is very important as it simulates a wounded bait fish, which is easy prey for the burbot.

A sonar unit is not required for anglers ice fishing for burbot. However, they certainly help. Even if no fish show, anglers should give the “bottom bumping” technique a try. If fish are on the screen but won't bite, anglers should vary the retrieve to see if they can elicit a strike. The routine should be repeated several times before moving on to another hole.

Jigs and spoons are almost always tipped with a strip of ciscoe or a bunch of flathead minnows or shiners. Burbot grow large and want a substantial meal. Anglers should be generous with their strip or gob of minnows. As mentioned earlier, a Gulp bait or soft plastic trailer loaded with Pro Cure will work as well.

## **Ice Fishing for Whitefish**

This chapter will cover ice fishing for whitefish. Whitefish are prized by anglers for several reasons. They grow fairly large, a 15 pound fish is not uncommon. They thrive in the cold water conditions under the ice. Since they are quite active in the cold water, they put up an excellent tussle for anglers using light spinning tackle. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, whitefish are fantastic eating!





Many anglers associate whitefish with deep water fishing. While this is true in the summer, anglers ice fishing for whitefish will find them shallower in the winter than they do in the summer. They will generally be found on flats near deeper water that are around 30 feet deep. Seldom will anglers have to fish deeper than 50 feet for whitefish.

## **Whitefish tackle**

Whitefish grow fairly large, especially by ice fishing standards. The best rods to use are medium to medium heavy rods 28 inches long to 36 inches long along with a matching reel. Heavier rods allow anglers to control the larger lures that are most often used when pursuing whitefish. The same outfits that anglers use for pike and lake trout will be fine when chasing whitefish.

Line choice is a personal matter. Specially designed fluorocarbon ice fishing lines work well for anglers who mostly fish 25 feet or shallower. Braided

lines are usually the choice for anglers fishing deeper.

Braided line has no stretch and excellent sensitivity. 10 pound test is a good choice. Anglers using braided line will need to tie on a 2 to 3 foot fluorocarbon leader between 6 pound test and 8 pound test. Anglers can spool their reel up with six or 8 pound test fluorocarbon ice fishing line as well. However this can be a bit more challenging when fishing for whitefish in deeper water.

## **Whitefish habits**

Whitefish are similar in habits and locations to lake trout. They like cold, clear water and are usually found between 20 feet deep and 50 feet deep. However, generally speaking, whitefish are easier to locate and to catch than are lake trout. They also do not really relate to structure like many other game fish. Whitefish cruise soft bottom and muddy flats in search of food. They also school up more often and in larger numbers than lake trout.

One look at the mouth of a whitefish will tell an angler how it feeds. Similar to a saltwater bone fish, the whitefish uses its nose to root around in the bottom. They are searching for larvae, zebra mussels, aquatic worms, and crustaceans. However, they also feed on larger live bait fish such as gobies and ciscoes. Flats with gravel and small rocks are also prime spots to find feeding whitefish.

Whitefish are not ambush predators. While they will use underwater structure as routes to get to the flats, whitefish cruise large open flats in search of prey. The best time to fish for whitefish is early in the morning, they will be actively feeding at this time. As the morning moves along, whitefish can be more difficult to find. They will often be found suspending 10 to 15 feet up off the bottom.

## **Sonar is crucial for catching whitefish**



Anglers ice fishing for whitefish without a quality sonar unit are at a significant disadvantage. While they are not cheap, a good unit will pay for itself quickly in time saved. This is especially true when fishing deeper water. It is just so difficult to locate the breaks and flats as well as the fish without one. Also, anglers can quickly identify the depth that which fish are holding and watch their reaction to baits as they are presented to them.

## **Whitefish techniques**



Anglers ice fishing for whitefish must first locate them. As in most forms of fishing, this is the most important factor. Once anglers have decided on a flat to probe, a dozen or so holes are drilled throughout, with several on the structure breaks where it drops off into deeper water.

While whitefish do most of their feeding on the bottom, they will readily hit a larger artificial lure that is 10 or 15 feet off the bottom. Therefore, many anglers begin fishing for whitefish about 10 feet off the bottom. A sonar unit can be extremely helpful in helping to locate both fish location and depth that which they are holding. If fish are spotted on the sonar unit, it is best to work the lure a few feet above them. Novice anglers ice fishing for whitefish are often surprised to see how aggressively a whitefish will streak up and attack the lure!

The best approach is to lower the lure down to the desired depth. Then, the angler should lift the lure up several feet and allow it to fall, just barely keeping up with the slack. The lure should be shaken gently, but not too much. And overaggressive motion will turn the fish off. If this does not produce a strike, anglers should drop the lure all the way to the bottom and jiggle it a bit. This will stir up the mud and forage on the bottom, and hopefully attract a whitefish to the bait. This is a very basic form of chumming.

## **More whitefish tips**

If no fish appear on the sonar screen, there is another technique that anglers use when ice fishing for whitefish to draw a fish to the bait. The lure is allowed to fall to the bottom. Then, it is quickly reeled up 15 feet or so and allowed to fall to the bottom again. This is done several times. If no strike occurs, the lure is allowed to rest on the bottom for a few moments. If no strike occurs, it is time to move onto the next hole.



Anglers ice fishing for whitefish will find that by mid morning the bite often slows. One tip from the experienced anglers is to rig up a drop shot style rig. With this the angler ties on a heavy lure then attaches a small jig a couple feet above it. The jig can have a soft plastic trailer, scented soft plastic bait, or even a chunk of fish. The rig is allowed to fall to the bottom, then jigged very gently. It is important not to overdo it! Sometimes when whitefish are finicky and not feeding actively, this will elicit an extra strike or two.

## **Whitefish lures**

Most anglers ice fishing for whitefish do so using artificial lures. Whitefish are aggressive and when encountered on the submerged flats are usually in a feeding mood. Heavier lures get down to the bottom and into the strike zone quickly. Anglers can certainly tip their lures as well. This is mostly done with live or cut bait fish of some sort. Some anglers tip their lures with a small soft plastic tube. This adds flash and color as well is a receptacle for holding some type of scent such as Pro Cure.



The top three artificial lures used by anglers ice fishing for whitefish are the Rapala Jigging Rap, Badd Boyz jig, and Meeks Jig. All three are very similar in that the line tie is in the center and they are really a combination of hard bodied plugs and vertically fished jigs.

## **Jigging Rap**

The Rapala Jigging Rap is an ice fishing legend. It has been catching fish through the ice for many decades now. While it is a hard body plug, it is fished vertically like a jig. The line tie is in the center and it has a fin on the tail. These two combined to give the lure a very enticing action as it falls in a circular manner. Colors vary, but the old school black back silver sided baits still produce very well as they mimic ciscoes and shiners that whitefish feed on.

## **Badd Boyz jig**

The Badd Boyz jig is a proven whitefish lure, for many experienced anglers ice fishing for whitefish, it is there “go to” bait. The large single hook on the rear easily allows for anglers to tip the jig, whether it be a soft plastic trailer or a cut minnow.

## **Meeks**

The Meeks jig is similar to the bad boys jig and certainly has its share of followers. It does have the advantage of having a small barb which facilitates adding a soft plastic trailer or tube easier. Darker colored Meeks jigs seem to work best.