

Fishing – Ice Fishing



Winneshiek County Conservation Equipment and Recommendations:

- **Who:** 5th grade and up
- **What:** 10 poles, staff trained in Fish Iowa! programming
- **Where:** Lake Meyer Park, Silver Springs Park. Call 563.534.7145 for more information.

Introduction

Ice fishing is a winter sport enjoyed by many. Proper preparation, equipment, and strategies, as well as safe ice, are required to have a successful ice-fishing trip. The best times to ice fish are early winter just after safe ice forms and late winter just before thaw. Discover what lives under the ice in an Iowa lake or pond in the winter!

A Brief History

Spearing fish through ice is one of the oldest and most ingenious fishing methods of native people, but it has come a long way since its early days.

In conventional practice, fishermen lower fish-shaped decoys into holes cut through the surface of a frozen lake. Fish decoys were usually made from wood and made to simulate most anything that might make a meal for a game fish. The fisherman laid flat on the ice, covered by a dark teepee, and readied his spear to stab the approaching prey. Although there may have been decoy use among ice fishermen in Northeast Asia in the distant past, the earliest found examples are from Eskimos, with some pieces believed to be more than 1,000 years old.

Early native peoples of present day Alaska and Canada have left us examples of carved wood, bone, and ivory spears, barbs, and decoys, tools produced even before the Iron Age. In the late nineteenth century, with the advent of steel, spears could be forged and welded.

For centuries native peoples relied on chisels to cut holes in ice for winter fishing. From the fur trade era to the mid-twentieth century, ice chisels came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Early blades were made of copper, and later blades were made of iron. Today, anglers use homemade or manufactured metal chisels, or they use hand- or gas-powered ice augers instead.

Ice fishing methods have seen many changes over the years. The use of augers, tip-ups, bait, and shelters have made the modern ice angler mobile, and adding sonar makes catching fish much easier. The days of drilling one hole and hoping a fish will swim by are starting to fade. With sonar and fast augers, serious anglers will drill upwards of 100 holes in a single day in the search for fish.

Equipment & Supplies

- Appropriate winter clothing, including extra warm socks and insulated, waterproof boots. *Outdoor Recreation: General Information and Basic Guidelines* in Section 2a for details.
- Bait (commonly used: wax worms, meal worms, minnows)
- 5-gallon pail. Holds equipment; use for a seat; can also be inverted, holding air, to float on in an emergency
- Ice fishing poles (rigged with ice fishing hook, bobber, and sinkers)
- Ice auger. Hand or gas powered, used to drill a hole through the ice
- Ice skimmer. Strainer-type instrument used to clear the hole of ice chips which prevents the hole from freezing back over while fishing
- Tackle box with basics (tape measure or length limit ruler, needle nose pliers, hooks, sinkers, bobbers)

Safety Equipment

- Life jacket
- Small board or dowel with a nail or spike attached perpendicularly to one end to help you get a grip on the ice and pull yourself out if you fall through
- Floating, throwable device (like a throw jug or throw rope) that can be thrown from shore to someone who has fallen through the ice so they can be safely pulled out

Optional Equipment

- Ice shelter
- Piece of cardboard or carpet to stand/put feet on
- Sled to haul equipment

Terms & Definitions

Many general fishing terms and definitions can be found in *Fishing I – General Information*.

bobber – ice fishing bobbers are usually made from sponge or foam because they do not freeze as easily

hooks – for ice fishing, try small (#8-10) with a bead or bright color to attract attention

ice fishing – the activity of catching fish with lines and fish hooks or spears through an opening in the ice on a frozen body of water

ice fishing pole – short (less than 3’); stiff; typically uses light weight line (6 pound test or less)

jig – slight, periodic wrist movements of the line to create move the bait

lures – objects used to attract fish to the line; usually bright colored for ice fishing

spud bar – ice chisel, used to make a hole through the ice

tip-up – type of pole that signals with a flag that a fish is on the line (used for big fish)

Regulations

Fishing regulations in Iowa are set by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. For a complete list of rules, refer to the Iowa DNR website or the current Iowa Fishing Regulations.

A few of the basic rules include:

- A fishing license is required for any person age 16 and older
- You must carry your license with you when fishing
- Check length and daily limits for the body of water you are fishing

- When fishing by hook and line, you may not use more than 2 hooks per pole and 2 poles per person
- Make sure the bait you are using is legal for the body of water you are fishing
- Ask permission to fish on privately owned ponds and stream banks
- Iowa regulations limit hook and line fishing to no more than two hooks per line and two lines per person. When ice fishing you may fish a combination of one tip-up fishing device and one additional line or two tip-up devices with no additional lines.
- Make sure the bait you are using is legal for the body of water you are fishing
- Ask permission to fish on privately owned ponds and stream banks

Skills & Strategies

See knot tying under the skills and strategies of *Fishing II – Spincasting*.

Process for Ice Fishing

1. Find the fish.
 - To find the bottom of the body of water, let out line and allow your terminal tackle (or a depth finding clip) to sink until there is slack in your line. Once the line goes slack, your lure has reached the bottom and you can work up from there.
 - Set bait to different depths (on the bottom, one foot off bottom, etc); work up through the water column until you start having bites on your bait.
 - Try different set-ups of bait and lures, and different locations on the ice.
 - Fish are more active from dawn until mid-morning, and late afternoon until sundown.
 - Fish will commonly move to deeper water as winter progresses
2. When the line is in the water, **jig** the line
3. Keep your hole open using an ice skimmer

Safety

- 4 inches of clear, blue ice is needed to hold one adult person
- 5-6 inches of clear, blue ice is needed for groups of 3 or more people
- Avoid dark areas of ice, which are unstable; be aware of areas where ice may be weakened or thinner (heavy snow cover, immersed objects protruding, areas of current)
- Go with a buddy; tell someone where you are going and when you will return
- Take a throw jug, board with nail or spike, life jacket, and rope (50' or more)

Extensions

Science: weather, water properties, winter ecology, fish adaptations

Resources

- Fish Iowa's Ice Fishing Module: Developed by the Iowa DNR Aquatic Education Program. Provides training, information, diagrams, activities and lessons.
<http://www.iowadnr.gov/education/files/icefish.pdf>