

The Northwest Corner's HOT BLUEGILL ICE ACTION

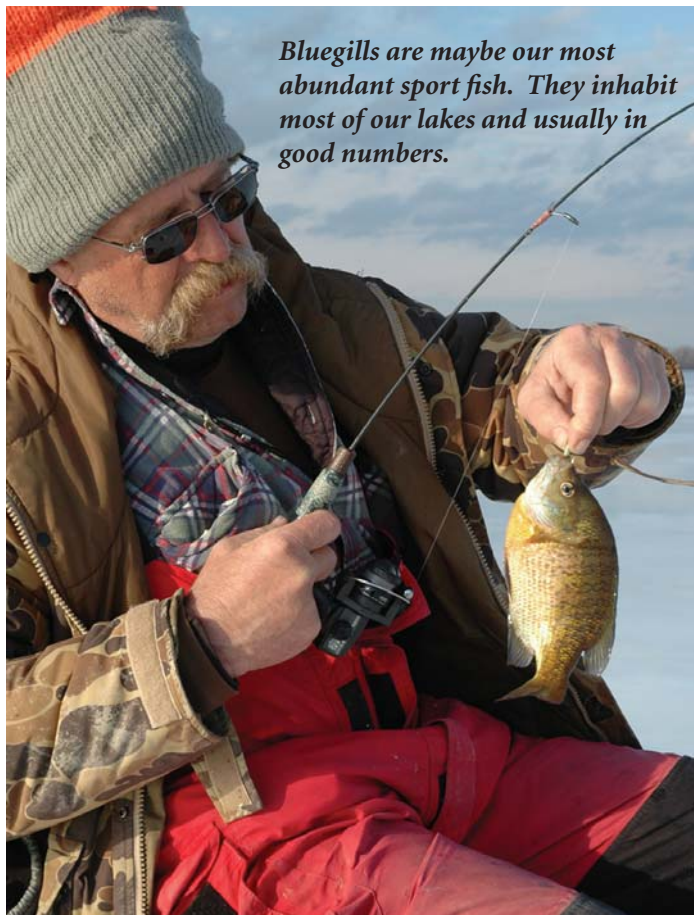
by Mike Bleech

photos by the author



Charlie Brant had such a big grin on his face that it cracked his ice-coated moustache. As we had done the year before, our first ice-fishing outing was at Misery Bay and the results were about the same. It took a little scouting to find the bluegills, but when we did we found them big-time. They were aggressive, big and full of fight.

Bluegills are maybe our most abundant sport fish. They inhabit most of our lakes and usually in good numbers. But finding really good bluegill fisheries is another matter. You can fillet 6-inch bluegills, but putting the knife to 8-inch bluegills is much more satisfying. Those are slabs, the kind that are a hand-full. Sometimes you even get into bluegills longer than 9 inches. These fish will double up a light jigging rod and make anybody grin, though maybe not as much as Charlie who is a true bluegill fanatic and one of a few ice fishermen who takes his bluegill fishing so seriously that he can truly be called an expert.



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What is special about bluegills?

Since they are so abundant many ice-anglers take them for granted. They deserve better. Ounce for ounce they are real sluggers. On the dinner table they can not be beat. And what is wrong with abundance?

Since Misery Bay is about as

northwest as we can get in Pennsylvania it is a good place to start looking at ice-fishing for bluegill in the northwest corner of the Commonwealth. Misery Bay is part of an excellent ice-fishery at Presque Isle Bay. This sub-bay tends to ice over sooner than most lakes and ponds in the Commonwealth, making it a great place to start the season as Charlie and I often do. Maximum depth is about 11 feet and like most bluegill habitat it is weedy. We have found that the deeper pockets tend to hold the best bluegill.

We seldom get huge bluegill here but 8-inch bluegill are quite common.

Last winter we had an exceptionally great ice-fishing adventure here. I had to take a brief exit from the ice to visit the local VA Hospital. When I returned it was snowing hard and the bluegills were aggressive. When we left at sundown a foot of fresh snow was on the ground. I needed to put the truck into four-wheel drive to get out of the parking lot. As we drove back over Presque Isle State Park there was less and less snow toward the park entrance. Nearing the entrance two coyotes were alongside the road. Our truck did not seem to bother them and we watched them for several minutes.

Presque Isle Bay, though technically part of Lake Erie, on its own would be one of our larger lakes with a surface area of 3,300 acres. Later in the winter bluegill fishing is usually very good toward the upper end of Presque Isle Bay sometimes in water as deep as 20 feet. There are tackle

Fried Bluegill Coating

A simple mixture for coating bluegills consists of equal parts of white flour and yellow cornmeal with your seasoning of choice. Among my favorite seasonings are Creole, Cajun, lemon pepper and onion powder. I also add salt to taste. Just roll wet fillets in this mix and fry in hot oil, preferably peanut oil. Make sure the oil is hot and the fillets will come out light and not greasy.

For another delicious panfish recipe, see this issue's "Fishin' from the Kitchen," on page 59.—MB.

shops in the area where you can get reliable tips on finding the best bluegill fishing.

Eaton Reservoir, another Erie County waterway with a surface area of 246 acres, is a place where you might find larger bluegill, sometimes 9 inches, though as at most places smaller bluegills are the norm. Ice-fishing pressure tends to be light here.

One hotspot at Eaton Reservoir is the point of a large bay to the right from a parking area near the dam. Look for the outer edge of the main weed bed for the larger bluegills.

Take I-90 east to the Route 89 exit, follow Route 89 south for just under 2 miles watching on your left for Dam Site Road. Turn left onto Dam Site Road and follow it until reaching the "T" intersection after roughly 2 miles. At this intersection turn right onto Black Road and go about 1 mile.

Through the past couple of decades, 1,860-acre Lake Wilhelm has been one of the best panfish lakes in Pennsylvania. Bluegill here are very abundant and if you are choosy you can often put together a mess of fish over 8 inches.

Scott Peterson has spent a lifetime at this lake, even before it was a lake. He is so devoted to ice-fishing that he went into the ice-fishing business.

"Some of the best bluegill fishing in that lake is up in the stumps just below the I-79 bridge and just above it."

Of course one of the many nice things about ice-fishing for bluegills is that they tend to be cooperative throughout the ice-fishing period more so than other sport fish.

Depths there, Peterson said, are about 5 feet to 8 feet. Get into the weeds and close to stumps.

"What seems to work up there is hackle so they have a slower fall," Peterson suggested.

The specific jig he mentioned is the hackle ant. Drop rate can have a big effect on bluegill fishing success, and this varies from lake to lake or from day to day.

Another hot area is close to the dam. The trick here is getting into the sunken creek channel, a depth of about 24 feet. Stay outside this channel and you may catch bluegill, but to get the slabs stay in the channel. This pattern works well both early and late in the ice-fishing season.

You will need heavier jigs to fish this deeper water. Small jigging spoons tipped with maggots work well.

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operative throughout the ice-fishing period more so than other sport fish. Even during midwinter when fishing is slow for most other fish you can often find bluegill action.

Peterson keeps a close watch on Conneaut Lake, the largest natural lake completely within Pennsylvania, 934 acres.

"It really turned on last year," he said. "Awesome bluegill fishing!"

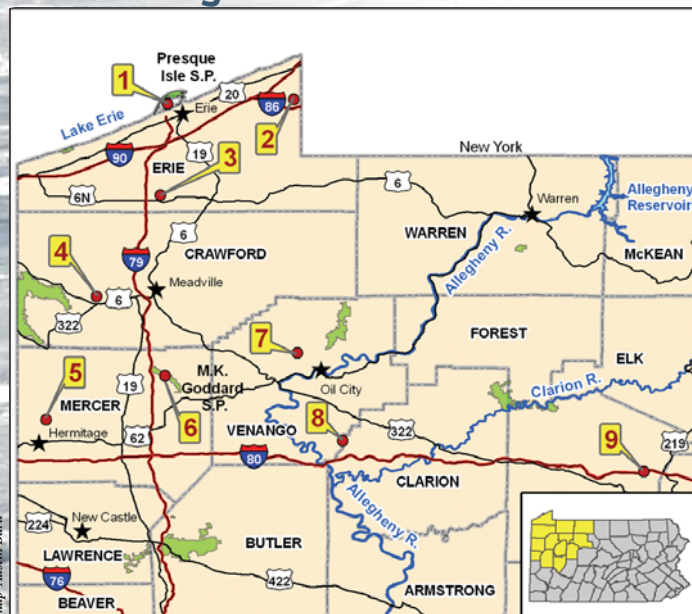
The hotspot, he said, was in a large weed bed at the lower end of the lake at a depth of about 10 feet. The water off this weed bed drops into about 40 feet but weeds end at about 12 feet. Last winter a large group of ice shanties clustered there.

Shenango Lake, one of our larger lakes with a surface area of 3,560 acres, has its share of good ice-fishing for bluegills, although most of the ice-fishing attention is directed toward big crappies. To find bluegills here get into the western arm of this Y-shaped lake, in shallower areas where there are weed beds. One problem is that some of the better bluegill areas require some walking.

Shenango Lake is in Mercer County near Sharon. Pennsylvania Route 18 between Sharon and Greenville will get you to the middle of the lake.

What do Big Bass Regulations have to do with bluegill fishing?

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1. Misery Bay and Presque Isle Bay, Presque Isle State Park, Erie Co.
2. Eaton Reservoir, Erie Co.
3. Edinboro Lake, Erie Co.
4. Conneaut Lake, Crawford Co.
5. Shenango Lake, Mercer Co.
6. Lake Wilhelm, M.K. Goddard State Park, Mercer Co.
7. Justus Lake, Venango Co.
8. Kahle Lake, Venango Co./Clarion Co.
9. Kyle Lake, Jefferson Co.

Here is a good lesson on fisheries biology, which is something every serious Pennsylvania angler should study to some degree. Big bass prey upon bluegills. This keeps the number of bluegills in check which in turn promotes growth. At Justus Lake, in Venango County, Big Bass Regulations set in place in 1998 did just that. Of course this does not mean that you are going to load the ice with slab bluegills anywhere you drill a hole through the ice. But the big gills are here.

Justus Lake, which has a surface area of 144 acres, is part of Two Mile Run County Park, so access is excellent. It is located off routes 417 and 428, between Franklin, Oil City & Titusville.

Another lake with Big Bass Regulations is Kyle Lake, in Jefferson County. A survey in 2006 turned up a good number of bluegills in the 7-inch to 8-inch size class. The majority of pumpkinseeds captured were also in this size class. This could mean there are a few exceptional sunfish awaiting ice-fishermen this winter.

This Commonwealth-owned lake has a surface area of 165 acres. To reach it take PA Route 830 west from Falls Creek, cross over I-80 and turn left onto Kyle Run Road.

Often confused with Kyle Lake is Kahle Lake, which is located not far away and is similarly a Commonwealth-owned lake. Surveyed regularly, the spring 2007 survey showed an increase in bluegill size. Here you might even find bluegills to 10 inches with 9-inch bluegills a very realistic possibility.

Kahle Lake, straddling Venango and Clarion counties, is located off PA Route 38 about four miles northwest of Emlenton. It has a surface area of 251 acres. There are two main access areas, one of each side of the lake.

Somewhat overlooked by ice-anglers, Edinboro Lake can at times be a gem. This lake seems to run hot and cold from one winter to the next. When it is hot you can anticipate abundant bluegills in the 7-inch to 8-inch class. It is of manageable size, 252 acres, so you can explore to find pockets of filleting-size bluegills.

The northwest corner of Pennsylvania has plenty more good lakes and ponds where you might find good ice-fishing for bluegills. Get out there and enjoy this scrappy, great-tasting sport fish. ☐

Winter Fishing

Be sure to check the Fish & Boat Commission's web site for lots of information on winter fishing. The "Winter Fishing" pages include links to topics including PA's best ice fishing, ice fishing tackle and techniques, cold-water kayak fishing, ice fishing reports, early season trout-stocked waters, and ice safety and cold-water safety. Enter this address into your browser: www.fish.state.pa.us/ice.htm.