



# Ice Fishing for Beginners

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*photos by the author*

Winter is a great time to explore frozen waters and try out the sport of ice fishing. Opportunities exist around Pennsylvania on ponds and lakes to fish for bass, panfish, pickerel, trout, and other gamefish that are active during the winter. There are a wide variety of methods that anglers can use to target fish through the ice. It is easy to start ice fishing, and you only need a few specific items for your first trip. Wait for cold weather, dress warmly, and get ready to have some wintertime fun.

## Ice fishing equipment

To start ice fishing, gather gear that will work for you when you are standing on frozen water. Some specific equipment like shorter rods, augers, and ice scoops are necessary. Hand-powered augers are inexpensive and lightweight. If you are out with a group of anglers,

powered augers are handy for drilling through thicker ice and creating more holes. Equipment like a life jacket, ice cleats, and ice awls are key to having a safe experience. Other items like sleds, sonar units, heaters, shelters, and comfy seats are optional additions to your array of gear. The most important optional piece of gear is a sonar unit, which may greatly improve your ability to find and target fish in the winter.

### Ice fishing essentials

- Ice auger
- Ice fishing rods or tip-ups
- Ice flies, jigs, and hooks
- Bobbers
- Bait, bait bucket, and bait scoop
- Bucket
- Ice scoop
- Safety equipment



*Ice augers are the most important part of your ice fishing setup. Ice augers come in both powered and hand-driven models. Some newer ice augers attach to cordless drills or may be powered by lithium batteries.*

## Getting on the ice

Safety is the most important part of ice fishing. Even if you see other anglers on the lake or pond, always test the thickness of the ice first before venturing out. Ensure that there is a minimum of 4 inches of ice thickness on a body of water in order to fish safely. Ice thickness may change easily on a body of water due to current, springs, weather, and other variables. Drill a hole a short distance from shore before exploring further, and use your ice scoop to measure the depth of the ice.

If you have a depth map of the body of water you are fishing, analyze the contour lines for key fish holding areas. Bass and pickerel often hold along weedlines near large flats. Crappies may suspend over the deepest hole in the lake during the winter. Sunfish and other panfish often cruise through deep, sparse weedbeds. Walleyes may frequent points and humps that lead into deep water. Once you select your spot to fish, drill a variety of holes in the ice before starting. It is good to have at least six holes to explore. Some anglers with powered ice augers may drill 50 or even 100 holes to more widely assess where the most fish are located. If you have a sonar unit, take it from hole



*Basic ice fishing gear includes a short rod, an ice scoop, ice-specific line, bait scoop, bait container, and container of ice flies and terminal tackle. Artificial scented bait may be useful if you want to get on the ice without visiting a bait shop first.*

to hole, checking to see if there are any suspended fish hovering above the lake bottom. When you have found a likely spot, it is time to drop your line.

## Bobber fishing

The first technique that anglers often try when ice fishing is suspending bait below a bobber. Waxworms and other insect larvae are popular bait for panfish, while small minnows like Fathead Minnows are regular options for anglers looking to catch Walleyes, bass, and crappies. Keeping your bait just off the bottom usually appeals to the greatest amount of fish. If you do not have a sonar unit, attach a clip weight to the end of your hook, and lower your line to find the bottom. Raise it up 6- to 12-inches. Then, place your bobber on the line. Remove the weight, add bait, and you are ready to fish. Thin, lightweight bobbers are popular for ice fishing since these bobbers do not offer much resistance to the fish when fish bite. As you sit on the ice looking at your bobber, wiggle it regularly or move it up and down, then allow it to resettle. If you see a bite, get ready to set the hook. When fishing with waxworms or other larvae, set the hook with movement.



*Yellow Perch are aggressive biters under the ice and often fall for jigging presentations. Try tipping your jig with a waxworm or minnow for better action.*

Sunfish, in particular, may only move the bobber a small amount when taking the bait. When fishing with minnows you may want to let the fish pull the bobber down a small amount before setting the hook.

## Jigging for fish

If you are having challenges finding fish, jigging is a good way to locate fish that are active and explore a large area of the water. Jigging works well with a sonar unit to see if there are any fish below a hole and if those fish are following your lure. Check a wide variety of holes to find fish, then drop your jig down toward the bottom. Alternate between small up-and-down movements of your rod and short pauses. Keep your finger on the line to feel subtle bites. If you are using sonar, try slowly raising your bait or lure away from the fish, then watch to see if it follows. Often, this slow lift can trigger a fish to think its prey is escaping and prompt a bite.

## Tip-up fishing

The most passive method of ice fishing for beginners is tip-up fishing. It is a great option for children and groups on the ice. Most tip-ups are simple devices that use a spool of line resting in the water, combined with a flag that springs into a vertical position or “tips up” when a fish bites the bait and begins to take out line. Tip-up

fishing is done entirely with bait, and the fish targeted often include pickerel and Largemouth Bass. Other large species like Northern Pike and Walleye are also good tip-up targets. Smaller species like crappies and Yellow Perch can occasionally be caught on tip-ups as well. Often, tip-up rigs use minnows or other small fish like suckers as bait. Large predatory fish that cruise through lakes and ponds sense the vibrations from the fish at a distance and may hone in on the struggling fish. Try rigging the minnow by lightly hooking it through the back, just behind the dorsal fin. This provides a long life for your bait, as well as a natural presentation.

After rigging your tip-up and waiting for a bite, your chance at catching a fish will be when the flag tips up. Swiftly and safely make your way over to the tip-up. Look to see if the spindle is turning. If it is spinning, a fish is swimming away with the bait. Carefully lift the tip-up out of the hole. Bumping the edges of the hole with the line or tip-up may cause the fish to drop the bait. With a swift pull on the line, firmly set the hook on the fish, then bring the line in hand-over-hand, until the fish is on the ice. If you are targeting pickerel or pike, unhook the fish carefully to avoid razor-sharp teeth. Using a wire leader when fishing may keep you from losing these fish to cut lines. ☐



*This Largemouth Bass took a minnow fished below a tip-up that was placed along a weedline.*