

# Fishing with the Ice Men of Sweet Arrow



*by Tyler Frantz*

*photos by the author*

When winter's grip finally takes hold in southeastern Pennsylvania, hope begins to stir anew for a select group of Schuylkill County anglers. It is the same fishing contingency that shows up year-round at Sweet Arrow Lake, located just east of Pine Grove, Schuylkill County, in nearly all weather conditions. Only this time of year, anglers arrive hoping for ice.

What used to be an annual rite of passage, during a time when consistently colder winters were the norm, is no longer a given. Now, Sweet Arrow Lake may only ice over at a safe enough thickness to fish once every 2 or 3 years. When it does, however, one can bet their britches the "Ice Men of Sweet Arrow" will be out there with augers and Schooley rods in tow to prospect for finned treasures beneath the ice.

Twin brothers Ronald Krause and Donald Krause, along with fellow local angler Dale Hummel, have ice fished on Sweet Arrow Lake for at least 40 years. Hummel's son, Clint, now in his mid-forties, has also been fishing with his dad and the Krause brothers for 35 years, learning the ways and customs of the "chosen frozen."

For three consecutive years, the Krause and Hummel families have invited me to join them in their ice fishing

forays, but due to uncooperative weather patterns, our collaborative ice orientation was delayed until February 13, 2021, when I finally got the call that conditions were safe enough to make a go at it.

I arrived around 7:00 a.m. to find the Krause brothers with holes drilled and lines already in the water. The Hummel men were unloading their truck and slipping on warmer layers as I loaded up a sled with a bucketful of fishing gear. I was cold, but I was grateful to be at the lake.

"They say ice is safe when it is at least 4 inches thick, but we prefer 5 inches just to be safe," said Ronald, as we joined them. "We would probably have better fishing if we could get out past the channel," said his brother Donald, "but it is a little slushier than we like it to be today. We will stay here and play it safe."

It was instantly evident these longtime ice anglers always err on the side of caution—an imperative approach to ensure the safety of everyone on the ice. It is also clear this is not their first ice fishing rodeo, as their simplistic setup is built for efficiency and their knowledge of what works best has been tested through years of personal experience.

When a group of anglers typically averages 20 plus fish per day (Ronald's personal best alone is 47 in one day), one tends to pay attention to their tactics. The morning routine went something like this:

Shovel out the snow, open two holes within reach with a 6- to 7-inch auger and scoop out the slush with a



*Clint Hummel displays a beautiful sunfish pulled through the ice at Sweet Arrow Lake, Schuylkill County.*

slotted spoon. Affix small waxworm baited ice jigs to 4- to 6-pound-test line on a basic Schooley rod with an attached spring bobber for detecting subtle action in the line.

Drop the jig to the bottom, either by feel or by using a clip-on weight that may be later removed, and back the jig up two full turns to fish 12 inches or so off the bottom. Insert a peg in the reel to mark the depth.

What followed was a mix of dead sticking and jigging (6- to 10-inch pops at a time and then relaxing back down), some alternating between standing and sitting, and a great deal of patience. Time is leisurely passed talking about hunting season, families, schooling, community activities, health, aging, and food, all while tending the rods.

The anglers run only two lines at a time, both within close proximity, so it is easier to manage. When a bite is detected, they swiftly and steadily lift up the line, so the hook sets itself. This is equally effective on bass, crappies, perch, sunfish, and occasionally catfish, trout, and suckers.

Rather than waste time reeling and resetting the depth, the anglers prefer to gather line hand over hand, so they can unhook the fish, rebait the jig, and get their line back in the water as quickly as possible in case a school lurks below eager to bite again.

The group freely shared practical wisdom—fishing on overcast days is best or wearing wool socks will keep your toes warm. Keep your live bait in a hole-punched snuff can and store it on an inside pocket, so the maggots or waxworms do not freeze. I was grateful for the advice, and I listened carefully.

A few hours drifted like undisturbed snow in the middle of the lake. Most anglers caught a few fish, but I was still trying. Finally, a sunfish grabbed my line, and Ronald said, “Thank you Lord for the blessing!”

I know it is partly in celebration of my good fortune, and partly because the Ice Men of Sweet Arrow have



*Small ice jigs come in a variety of colors. Tip the jigs with a morsel of live bait when fishing through the ice.*

finally been granted another chance to do what they cherish most—ice fishing—which they so yearn for every time another winter rolls around. ☐



*Ronald Krause proudly shows off his catch at Sweet Arrow Lake, Schuylkill County.*