



GEARING UP FOR ICE FISHING

by Tyler Frantz

photos by the author

Ice fishing in Pennsylvania can be basic or advanced, and anglers can spend a little or a lot of money on this wintertime activity. While there are luxuries that come with high-end gear, it only takes a modest assortment of essentials to get started. Consider the following as a simple guide for breaking into ice fishing without breaking the bank.

Sled

Most of the gear described in this article can be carried by hand in a 5-gallon bucket, pack basket, or shoulder bag, but it is more convenient to invest in a deep-sided utility sled.

Plastic sleds take a lot of weight off your shoulders and serve as a clean, organized home base for all your gear. They slide well over both snow and ice, making it easy to find what you need when you need it, and most models cost less than \$100.

Shovel

Put a lightweight snow shovel in your sled to clear a patch of ice for drilling multiple holes. A shovel is also a handy tool for checking for safe ice, which should be a minimum of 4 inches thick to support 200 pounds.

Ice auger

A manual ice auger can be purchased for less than \$100. Most



models offer adjustable handles that can be customized to the height of the people using them and can be reduced in size for easier transport. Use the ice auger to drill holes for fishing and to regularly gauge ice thickness. It's easier and safer than chopping ice open with a hatchet and costs only a fraction of an electric or gas-powered auger.

Scoop or ladle

Once you drill your holes, remove the shavings and keep the ice open for fishing. An inexpensive, perforated ice scooper costs a few dollars or use a slotted ladle for removing slush from the hole. Measure 4 inches from the tip of the spoon up to the handle and draw a line with permanent marker as an easy way to double check ice thickness throughout the day.

Rods

Ice rods are generally shorter and lighter than other types of fishing rods. Micro-jigging ice rods use an open-face bail much like a standard spinning reel and work well on larger fish. However, some ice anglers prefer to keep their depth set and do a hand-over-hand line retrieval for panfish, and that's where Schooley rods thrive. There

are plenty of affordable options for ice-specific rods. Consider buying at least three rods.

Jigs and bait

Micro ice jigs can be highly effective for enticing fish that are suspended vertically beneath the ice. Most are painted in bright colors and are made of a quick sinking lead or tungsten to get them to drop rapidly. Consider rigging them with a bit of live bait such as a maggot or mealworm.

Depth finder

A cheap clamp-on depth finder weight is extremely helpful in locating the bottom. Simply pinch it to your fishing line and drop it into the water until the line goes slack. Then, mark your line depth, retrieve and remove the depth finder, affix your bait, and drop your offering back into the hole at the desired depth.

Add-ons

There are a few add-ons that should be given consideration such as rod holders, a comfortable seat, and even an inexpensive pop-up hunting blind anchored with snow to serve as a makeshift shelter. An emergency rope and throwable flotation device can be lifesavers, too. Everything fits in a sled and start-up costs are minimal. ☐

To check State Park ice conditions:



dcnr.pa.gov/StateParks/WinterReport/Pages/default.aspx

Ice rods are compact, lightweight, and come in a variety of styles. Choose an inexpensive model to get started and buy at least three rods to increase efficiency.



A Yellow Perch caught while ice fishing.

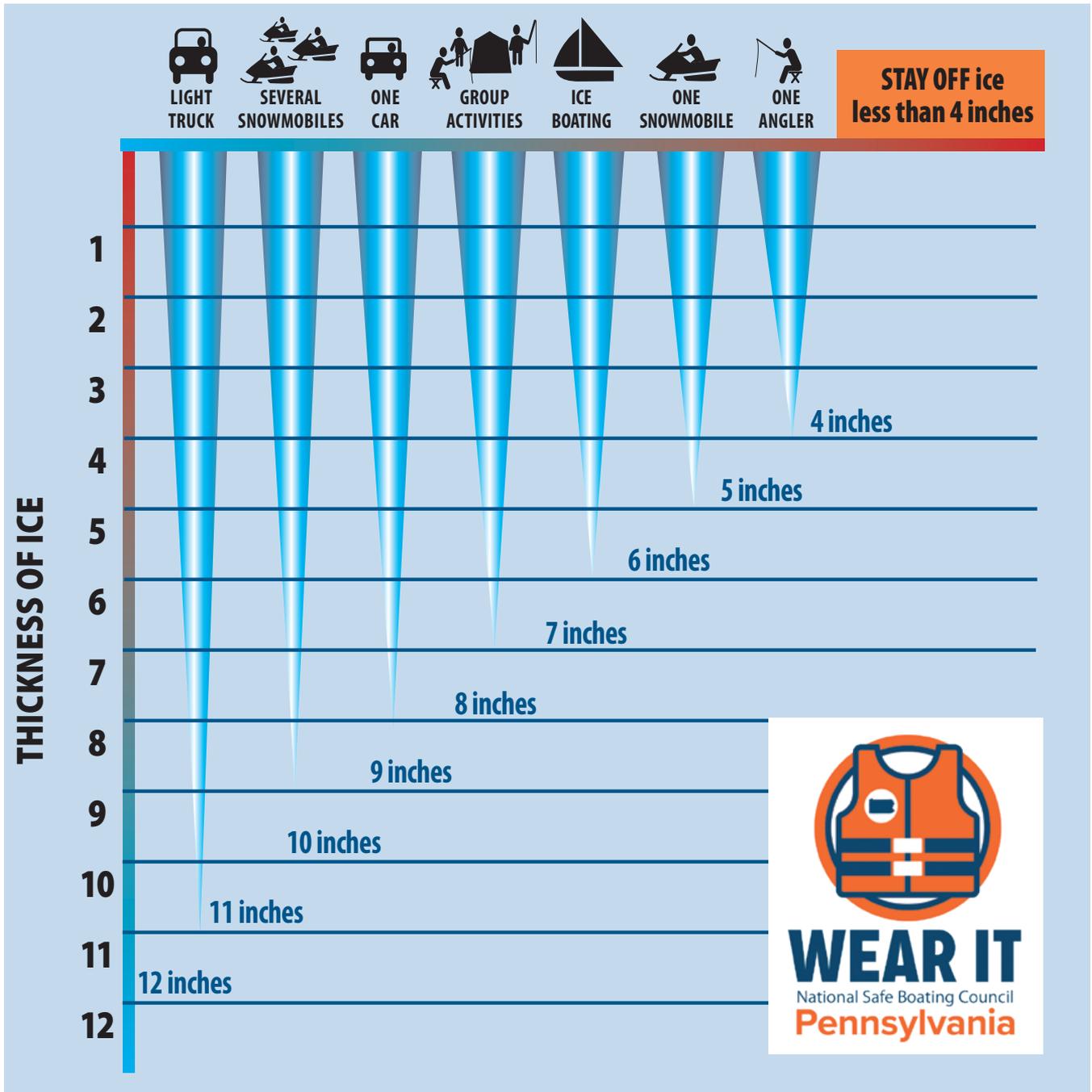


A deep-sided utility sled simplifies transporting gear across the snow and ice, and it can serve as a great home base for all your equipment.

Ice Safety Guide

Ice is never 100% safe.

Minimum ice thickness guidelines for new, clear ice.



There are many factors that influence ice strength including water chemistry, wind, and sunlight. Please note: these are general ice thickness guidelines. Carefully check ice conditions before venturing onto the ice.