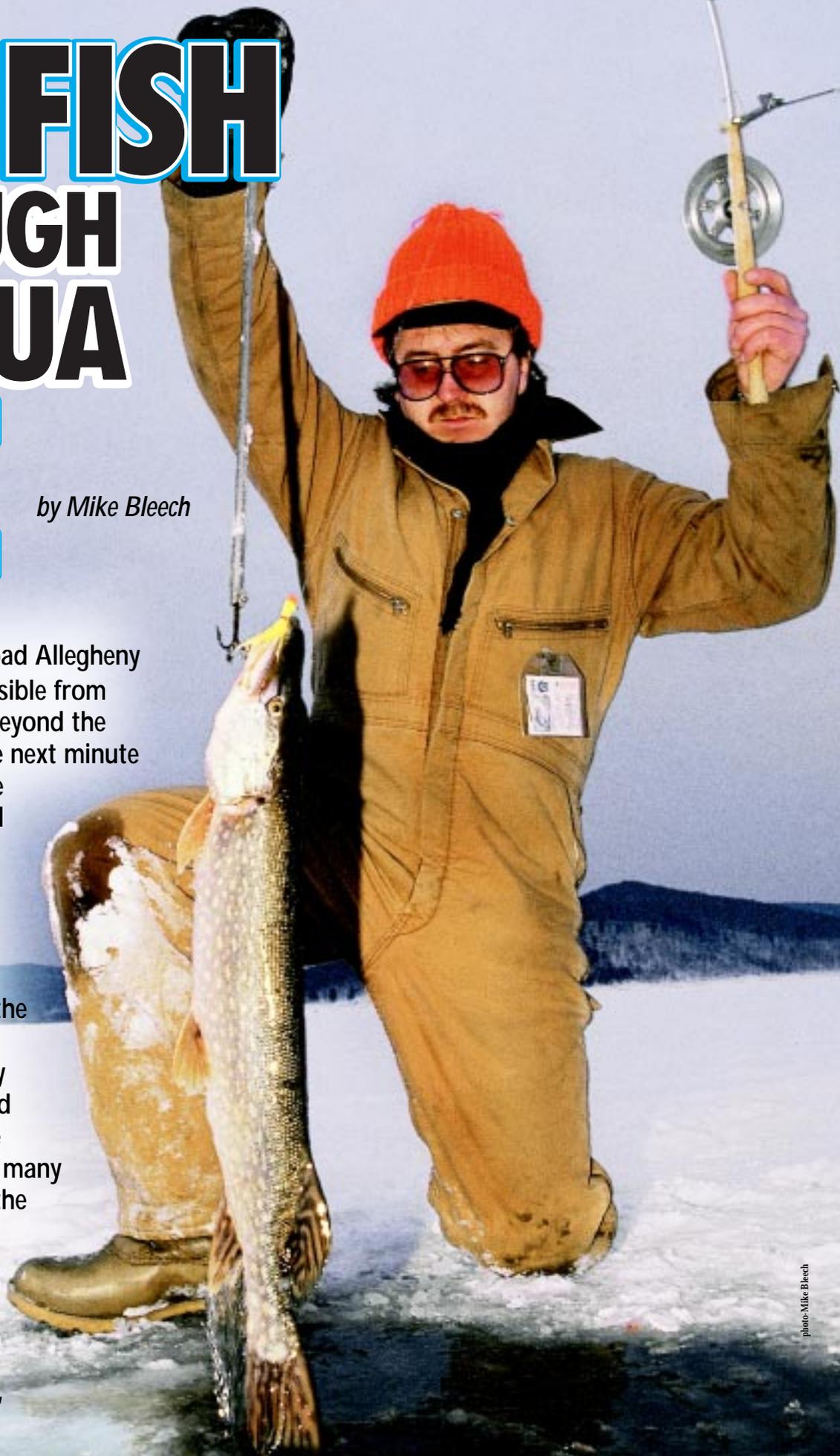


# BIG FISH THROUGH KINZUA ICE

*by Mike Bleech*

One minute the broad Allegheny Reservoir valley was visible from Kinzua Creek to well beyond the New York border. The next minute a storm rolled over the hills from the west and wind-driven snow obliterated my closest tip-ups. I turned my back to the wind, hunkering down on a plastic bucket, pulled the draw cord tight in the coyote ruff hood of my goose down parka, and waited it out. If I have learned anything from many years of ice fishing at the Allegheny Reservoir—more commonly called “Kinzua”—it is to dress properly. Cold blasts from the northwest are the rule, not the exception.



When the snow and wind passed, all of my tip-up flags were up. I assumed all had been tripped by the wind. I had been there since early morning without a bit of fish action. Indeed, the first two tip-ups I checked were untouched. But at the third, I found slack line, a lot of slack line, and when I came to the end of the slack line there was movement. Something was swimming with my bait in its mouth.

I was patient. The fish was moving toward me. You have to be patient in midwinter. Fish are typically tentative. I waited until the fish started moving away. Then I set the hook. The fish did not seem like anything special at first. It obviously had some weight, but it came toward the hole without a lot of fuss. I peered through the hole, waiting to grab the fish when its head broke water.

The instant the fish became visible, I knew I would never catch it. It was far too big to be pulled through the seven-inch hole. Instead of the walleye I was attempting to catch, it was a musky. I will not make any estimate of its size because I never saw more than a small portion of it while it made that one brief visit to the hole. It just glided by, and then it was gone. There was no struggle. It just took all of my line. Then, fortunately for its sake, it cut the line close to the hook.

Just about everyone who regularly ice fishes Kinzua has a story like that. Walleye numbers have slowly improved during the past several years to the point at which ice anglers often catch limits. Perch have returned. But panfish are not the mainstay here as they are at most ice fishing lakes. Big fish get folks excited here—big trout, big muskies, big pike and big walleyes.

One such fish was the 12-pound, 33-inch walleye Mark Papalia pulled through the ice last winter, during the last weekend of January. It struck a shiner on a tip-up set in about 12 feet of water in the lower main arm.

Kinzua has a history of giving up huge walleyes since the mid-1970s. Most of the largest were caught through the ice. These fish were sometimes the largest walleyes caught in Pennsylvania each year. In 1976, a 13-pound, 12-ounce walleye caught from the Kinzua Arm was the largest.

The state record was approached several times. It was finally broken in 1979 by a 16-pound, 12-ounce, 34 1/4-inch walleye. The following year, Mike Holly, of Bradford, pulled the current record, 17 pounds, 9 ounces, 36 1/2 inches, through Kinzua ice.

A walleye just two ounces shy of the record was caught in 1991 through the ice in the Kinzua Arm. The New York state record walleye, 16 pounds, 7 ounces, was also caught at Kinzua in 1994. However, this fish was not caught through the ice.



Kinzua also produced the current state record northern pike. It was not caught through the ice, yet ice fishing for pike is excellent. Some groups have been placing Christmas trees in the lake, so pike fishing has improved considerably.

Last winter, two age classes comprised most of the northern pike catch. One group was about keeper size, 24 inches. The other included fish of 32 to 36 inches. Of course, they will be larger still this winter. The potential for

catching a trophy pike through the ice has probably never been better.

Trout, mostly browns, are a regular part of the ice fishing catch, though they are not caught as frequently as walleyes or pike. Trout up to 6 pounds are common. One of the largest was an 11-pound brown caught in late January by Carl Zimmer, a Sheffield angler who spends much time on Kinzua ice. Zimmer was fishing in Sugar Bay in about 18 feet of water during the very warm 1998 winter.

The only ice on Kinzua when Zimmer caught his big brown trout was toward the heads of the bays. Just a week before, a 41 1/2-pound musky was caught from open water in the main arm. Muskies are sometimes hooked by ice anglers, but the bigger ones are too large to pull through the six-inch to eight-inch holes drilled by most ice anglers.

Kinzua also occasionally gives up other big fish through its ice. Rainbow trout are stocked regularly, but they are not caught as often as browns. Channel catfish up to 12 pounds were fairly common during the late 1970s, but they are unusual now. Lake trout and Atlantic salmon have also been stocked here in small numbers, though not recently.

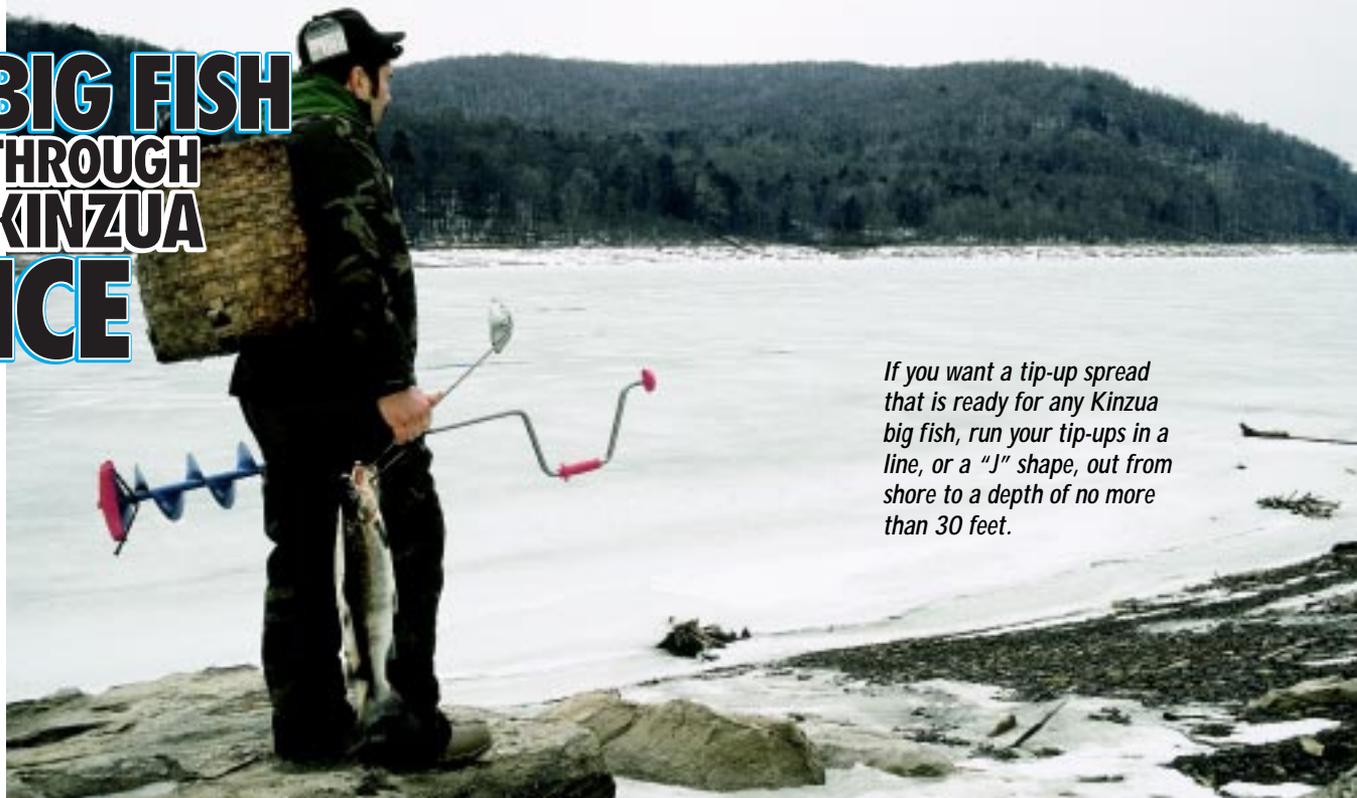
## Strategies

Ice anglers at the Allegheny Reservoir rely more on tip-ups than ice anglers on most other Pennsylvania lakes. Most use at least four tip-ups and no more than one jigging rod. Any jigging rod left unattended here is likely to be pulled through the ice. Many regulars use tip-ups almost exclusively.

Emerald shiners are the favorite tip-up bait so much so that some of the most successful ice anglers will not fish without them. Fortunately, they are usually available at most area bait shops. The favorite bait size of anglers who concentrate on big game is four to six inches.

There is considerable disagreement about how shiners should be hooked, and which type of hook, treble or single wide-gap, is best. Some veteran ice anglers hook their shiners through the lips, believing that fish generally turn the shiner head-first to swallow it. Some hook them near the dorsal fin, thinking this is the most likely place to get the hook into the mouth of a fish. Early or late in the ice fish-

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ing season when fish are generally most active, it probably does not matter. But during midwinter when many of the largest walleyes are caught, hooking shiners near the dorsal fin with a treble hook probably has the advantage.

Talk to a dozen Kinzua ice fishing veterans and you will probably get a dozen different strategies on patterns for setting tip-ups. But if you combine several strategies, you arrive at a strategy that covers several bases.

Start your tip-up pattern near shore, and near some type of steep structure such as a steep point, a cliff, or a large boulder. Pike and trout are the reason for this starting point. Pike and trout often roam just a few feet under the ice, and pike, especially, near shore. Set the bait about three to five feet beneath the ice. If pike are your primary objective, set two or three tip-ups close to shore with a reasonable distance between tip-ups, and if the water is deep enough, vary the depths of the baits. For example, if the depth is about 15 feet, set one at three feet, one at eight feet, and another at 12 feet.

Keep in mind that the fishing regulations require that tip-ups be close enough to be under your immediate control.

If you want a tip-up spread that is ready for any Kinzua big fish, run your tip-ups in a line, or a "J" shape, out from shore to a depth of no more than 30 feet. Beyond 30 feet you will catch mostly smaller walleyes, and bringing them up from depths greater than about 33 feet will kill most. If the bottom slope is relatively gentle, the line should be roughly perpendicular to the shoreline. On steeper slopes, run the line at a more acute angle so you can spread the holes at least 20 feet apart. This will cover a reasonable amount of water, and it will usually avoid fish tangling two lines. Walleyes seldom take out more than 10 to 15 feet of line. Pike and trout often take much more.

Setting the depth of the bait depends on the fish you hope to catch. For walleyes, the bait should usually be set within a foot of the bottom. If trout are your objective, set at least a couple of baits no more than five feet under the ice, no matter what the depth.

Once you establish a pattern, if most hits come on one or two tip-ups, concentrate more of your rigs in that same depth range. I prefer, regardless of the pattern, to keep at least one tip-up close to shore.

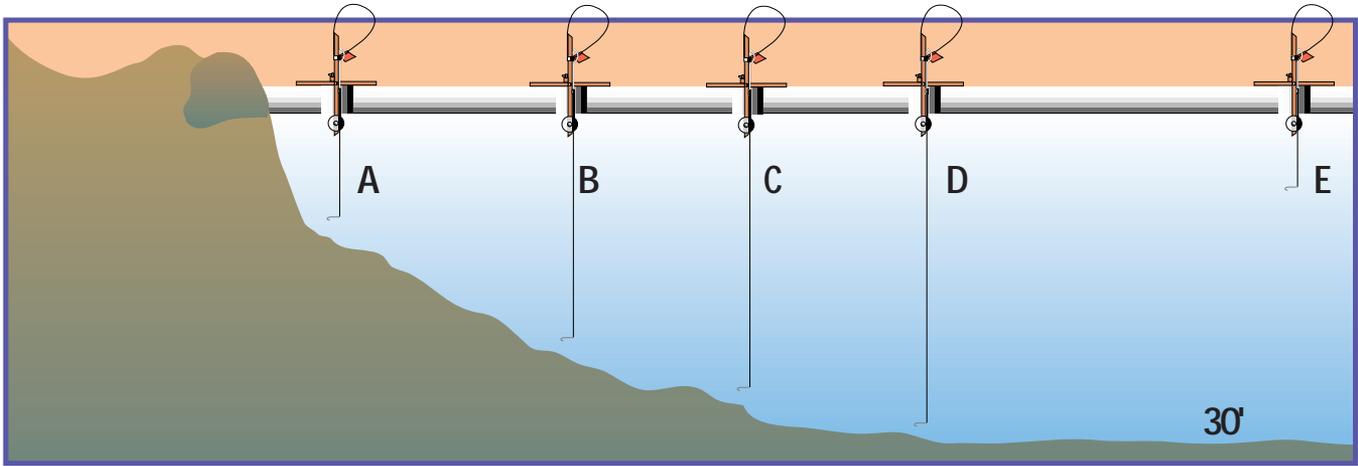
I also reserve one of my five allotted rigs for jigging. Several holes are drilled for this purpose with at least one close to each tip-up—no more than five feet away—so I can jig there if it appears that a school of walleyes is in the area. On the flip side of that formula, if I locate fish by jigging, I move tip-ups into the same area.

At most lakes, you might sometimes notice that one particular hole gets hot, but you cannot catch a nibble from any other hole no matter how close they are. I assume in a case like this that the hole is just close enough, and on the correct side, of a very good piece of structure or cover. Countless boulders, stumps and sunken logs are scattered on the bottom of Kinzua.

## Where to go

Access is the major obstacle to ice fishing at Kinzua. The lake is large with few good access points. At some access points, a treacherous walk down a very steep bank is required.

On the west side of the lake, the only good access is at Webbs Ferry, close to the New York border. Even here, unless you have a 4x4 with chains, you might have to walk a few hundred yards to the ice. There is another road to the ice at Roper Hollow, but this long, steep, narrow road is not maintained during winter.



graphic-Ted Walke

### For More Information

For local information about the Allegheny Reservoir area, contact the following:

- Allegheny National Forest Vacation Bureau  
P.O. Drawer G, Junction 219 & 770  
Custer City, PA 16725  
phone: 814-368-9370
- Northern Alleghenies Vacation Region  
315 Second Avenue  
Warren, PA 16365  
phone: 814-726-1222
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
Kinzua Dam, 1205 Kinzua Road  
Warren, PA 16365  
phone: 814-726-0661

### Kinzua Tip-Up Spread

Set tip-ups at a variety of depths if you hope to catch a variety of Kinzua's big fish. Tip-up "A" is set near a shoreline boulder. The bait is about five feet under the ice. This is a great set-up for pike, trout or muskies. Tip-ups "B," "C" and "D" are intended primarily for walleyes, but they might catch anything. These baits are set about a foot above the bottom. Tip-up "E" is set just a few feet under the ice over deep water. It is intended to catch trout primarily, but maybe pike. Move "B," "C" and "D" into about the same depth if a pattern develops.

Along the east side, many anglers walk to the ice from Route 59 between the dam and the bridge over the Kinzua Arm, and at the swimming beach on the north side of the Route 59 bridge. Ice anglers coming from the Bradford area have good success by walking to the ice from Route 321 near the head of Sugar Bay. Willow Bay, just south of the New York border along Route 346, is another popular area.

The area close to the New York border generally is best early in the ice fishing season. But currents can make the ice treacherous there. Later in the season, the better action often moves down the lake. Some anglers get to the ice at Webbs Ferry or Willow Bay and walk down the lake on the ice.

Kinzua is notorious for weak spots, even when most of the ice is very thick. Many of these weak spots are caused by gas escaping from old wells. Never strike out alone. Carry rope and ice spikes. Some smart ice anglers wear life jackets.

Snowmobiles, ATVs and all other motorized vehicles are prohibited from operating on the ice at Kinzua, and from driving to the edge of the ice. ☐

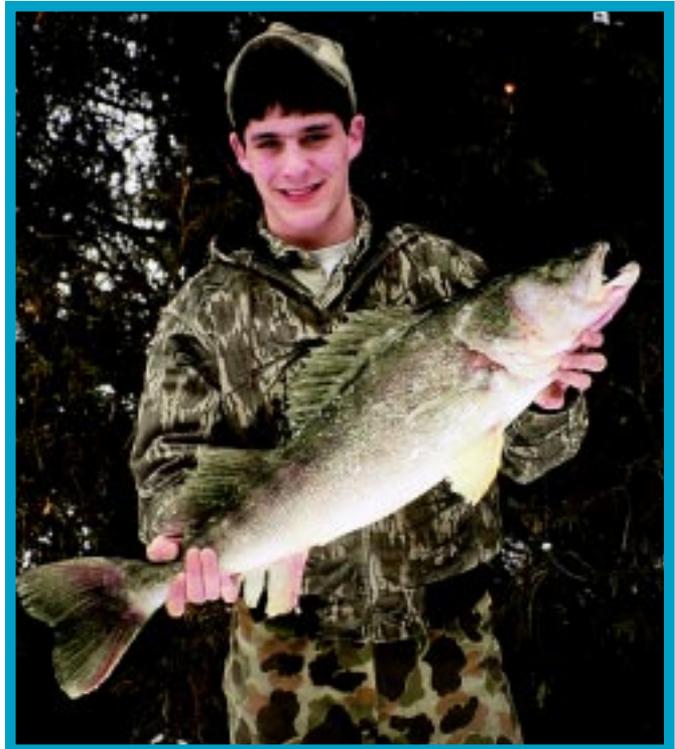


photo-Mike Bleech

Mark Papalia hauled this 12-pound walleye through the ice late last January. A catch like this is what lures ice anglers to Kinzua.