

WCO Diary



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by WCO Jonathan R. Kay

“Hut Jumping”

Lake Arthur, in my patrol district, seems to yield substantial catches of bass, pike and panfish during the winter, when the ice thickness has reached its peak and the barometer has leveled off.

Foot patrol on this frozen expanse has both its rewards and shortcomings. Usually, the main violations I encounter are short fish, too many devices, and fishing without a license. Unfortunately, I've found that the violations I discover leave me hundreds of yards away from my warm patrol vehicle.

During these patrols, though, I've found a way to beat the cold. From shore I identify a series of ice huts scattered across the lake. Just as if I were “connecting the dots,” I plan my patrol route so that a warm hut is never too far away. With last winter's temperatures hovering around zero, this patrol strategy really paid off. And yes, I was actually checking ice fishermen last year with temperatures bottoming out at -10 degrees, and that doesn't take into account the wind chill!

You might wonder how a WCO and two ice fishermen fit into a two-man hut. Well, there is a regulation in the Fish & Boat Code that requires ice fishermen to have all rods, lines and tip-ups “under immediate control,” and given the lack of room in these toasty, warm ice shanties, I usually insist that at least one angler stands outside for a few minutes to make absolutely sure he or she has “immediate control” of the tip-ups! Of course, these folks laugh and play along with my obvious attempt to make a place for myself next to their propane stove.

While “hut jumping,” as I like to call it, anglers tend to use me as a delivery service. As I make my way across the lake, anglers want to know where the fish are biting, how deep everyone is jigging and which baits anglers are using. They even go so far as to ask me to pass along messages to their buddies who are fishing at the other end of the lake. I'm a good-spirited guy, so I try to deliver when I can.

As friendly as I like to be, though, the purpose of my door-to-door visits is to enforce the law, making sure that everyone is abiding by the rules.

Catching violators on the ice tends to be a difficult task when one wears a green uniform. I might as well have a neon sign over my head that flashes, “Fish Warden.”

If just one angler sees me coming, the rest of the group knows it before I get within 200 yards. However, coveralls and a bucket full of tip-ups in hand usually solve my identity crisis! In this game, surprise is the key to catching a violator who wouldn't hesitate for a second to sink his ill-gotten catch down an 8-inch hole in the ice. This is the type of “ice fisherman” who WCOs work so hard to catch.

Although the weather can be downright miserable, I enjoy the time I spend with anglers while I'm traversing the ice. Maybe you will visit Lake Arthur and try your hand at ice fishing. Just save a spot for me next to your stove! ☐

Meet the New “WCO Diary” Columnist

I was raised in Moscow, PA, a small town in Lackawanna County. I spent most of my time hunting, fishing and exploring the hilly terrain surrounding the community. Following high school I enlisted in the Army and served five years at Fort Hood, Texas. I finished my enlistment with a combat tour in southwest Asia. I returned to Penn's Woods to pursue a degree at Penn State University. I met my wife, Karen, while in school, and we married just before I accepted a job as a forest ranger at Bald Eagle State Forest, Union County. In 1999, I was hired by the Fish & Boat Commission as a waterways conservation officer, and in 2000, I began my career as a WCO in Butler County.—WCO Jonathan R. Kay.



photo-courtesy of the author