

WCO Diary

by WCO
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Skim Ice and Muskies

The early winter portion of the year poses an interesting dilemma for Keystone State anglers and boaters. Near-freezing daytime temperatures make waters dangerously cold for boating, and skim ice makes shore fishing virtually impossible. In many cases, anglers and boaters set aside their fishing poles and boating equipment to pursue other outdoor activities, such as hunting and trapping.

But there are those who seek the rewards of fishing from boats in these extremes to target predators such as muskies and northern pike. Die-hard anglers know that muskies cruise the edges of skim ice for baitfish, and that they can be enticed by stickbait offerings. Although these conditions may be harsh, the rewards can be great. Catches of lunker muskellunge along ice fields are not uncommon.

In my Butler County district, there is a showing of such dedicated anglers who brave the elements in search of this "fish of a thousand casts." As the skim ice on Lake Arthur begins to close in, boat fishermen use gaff poles and oars to break the frozen crust near shore, determined to reach the ever-decreasing open water in the middle of the lake. As the season progresses and the ice gets thicker, even the most tenacious musky angler must relent to Mother Nature's design and surrender the lake for the remainder of the boat-fishing season.

There was, however, a notable exception that convinced me why waterway patrols, even in these conditions, are so important.

One very cold evening in December, I was on patrol at the Bear Run Access at Lake Arthur. As the sun went down, so did the temperatures. The wind was whipping from the west, which blew a



steady, light swirl of snow across the freezing expanse. Temperatures dipped to zero, making fingers numb and breathing difficult. The cold bit deeply through layers of winter clothes and stung exposed skin.

I had been watching a boat fisherman who was motoring through open lake water that was so cold, the surface was turning to slush. As things would have it, he and I were the only two people on the entire lake. My work shift was nearing an end, but I decided not to leave until this sole angler had returned to the dock. Had I left, there would have been no one to help this lone fisherman in an emergency.

As darkness and the bitter cold set in, the boat angler reached a sea of skim ice and became stuck. Instead of retreating and heading back to the boat launch, the angler stood at the bow of his boat to break the ice, intent on driving deeper into the ice field to pursue muskies.

"This is not good," I said to myself as I watched the event through my binoculars. His outboard motor was still thrusting forward as he stood at the bow with his gaff pole. One slip, I thought, and this guy is in big trouble. I wondered how I would be able to help this brave soul if he plunged into the icy lake. With 200 yards of hardening slush between us, nothing short of a rescue boat would be needed to pluck him from the water.

Since he was operating his motorboat after sunset without exhibiting navigation lights, I had an opportunity and a responsibility to address his unsafe actions. Using my patrol vehicle's red light, siren and loudspeaker, I ordered the boat operator to my location.

Once he was safely ashore, I inspected his craft and found that, in addition to the navigation lights violation, he did not have a personal flotation device (life jacket) on board. Furthermore, his boat was equipped with an engine kill switch lanyard that he had not used. If he had fallen into the water with a kill switch attached to him, his boat would likely have been his only salvation.

Following a lengthy discussion about boating safety and the seriousness of cold-water injury, I issued citations for the boating violations. It struck me that he, too, recognized the hazard in which he placed himself because he accepted his citations without making a fuss.

We all love the outdoors. However, nothing to this end is worth risking your life. There will always be muskies, and there will always be a change of seasons. ☐