

Ice Fishing in Pennsylvania

by Stan Paulakovich

The popularity of ice fishing has increased greatly during the last several decades. Many waters deserted by anglers during the summer and fall become beehives of activity with the first safe ice. The upsurge in the number of ice anglers is caused primarily by the refinement of the sport's clothing and equipment. Today's hard-water anglers not only catch fish, but they do it in comfort.



Photo-Kevin Phillips

Clothing

The basic needs for good ice fishing clothing start with footwear. Rubber boots with built-in insulation or the kind that allows wearing separate felt liners is mandatory. They keep your feet dry and warm. Of necessity, good ice boots are bulky and clumsy. Still, they let you wear several pairs of light socks to keep your feet loose and mobile.

Leather boots and the cheap synthetic boots with simulated furs can't keep your feet warm over several hours on the ice. Anything that allows moisture to permeate clothing should be avoided. Felt-lined boots, like those used by snowmobilers, and "moon boots," developed some years back, are proving to be acceptable footwear for the ice.

Dress on the ice should be made up of a few thin layers instead of one bulky layer. This strategy traps and retains warm air. Snowmobile suits, the one-piece type, over several thin layers of clothing do wonders for keeping you warm. Make sure the suit is water-repellent and wind-resistant. Remember to shed some of your clothing during the time of heavy exertion when you are setting up. This prevents perspiration from dampening your inner wear and wasting body heat. Any clothing that is shed can be replaced after the holes have been drilled and the tip-ups have been set.

Good headgear is equally important in maintaining comfort on the ice. Up to 80 percent of the body's heat escapes from the head and neck. A woolen Navy-type watch cap pulled down snugly over the head and then a hood or parka top keeps out even the most biting winds. If you do feel overly warm, simply doffing the hood cools you off.

Gloves for ice fishing are a matter of personal preference. Most anglers like bulky, soft-leather mittens with a warm lining. These gloves are big enough to allow wearing light gloves inside. Most tasks can be done with just the light gloves on, and then you cover them with the mittens during inactive periods. It's a good idea to have an extra

pair of gloves along as a spare. Wet gloves quickly become useless on the ice.

Today's breathable fabrics for gloves, hats, and coats help get rid of moisture buildup.

Windbreaks, shelters

Most Pennsylvania lakes and ponds endure piercing wintry winds, and without some kind of shelter, even the best-dressed angler becomes miserable. The simplest windbreak is most welcome on the most blustery days.

Making windbreaks made of light framework covered with plastic, canvas, or even cardboard is inexpensive and easy to construct. They can be attached to a box or sled for quick moves over the ice. You can buy more refined shelters in various sizes that are easy to assemble and offer almost total protection from the wind. Prices range up to several hundred dollars. Remember that on Fish & Boat Commission lakes, shelters must be removed from the ice after each day's fishing.

Drilling holes

Drilling the hole through the ice poses no problem on Pennsylvania waters. A spud bar, pipe, or pole with a chisel-like blade on the end suffices for ice up to a foot or so thick. Beyond that depth, the tapered, jagged hole edges that a bar creates are rough on tip-ups. The diameter of your ice fishing hole is limited to 10 inches. Be sure to tie a loop from the spud bar around your wrist while digging the hole. Many spud bars have slipped from ice anglers' grasps, and these bars now lie on the bottom of countless lakes and ponds.

Hand-driven augers, the spiral or the spoon-blade kind, are a lot easier and faster to use. Good ice augers cost between \$30 and \$40. An 8-inch diameter auger is ample for most ice fishing. However, if you're after mainly panfish, a 6-inch or 7-inch hole is fine. If muskies, walleyes, or pike are your quarry, you'll want an 8-inch hole.

Power augers feature a lightweight engine that turns an auger-like bit through even the thickest ice in a re-

markably short time. On some of our northern-tier lakes, where ice can be two feet thick, this tool is a lifesaver. Power augers are great for jig anglers who like to move constantly from one hole to another, when fishing slows. They're also ideal for family groups or for those who for reasons of age or health cannot drill many holes. Power augers come in sizes up to 10 inches and range in cost to around \$500.

The last set-up item you need is a strainer, or ice skimmer. This tool is necessary to remove the ice chips that fill the hole while digging or drilling. You can buy one for a few dollars, or you can make your own from a circular piece of metal with holes punched in it.

Tackle

The kind of fishing equipment you need depends on what you're fishing for. Panfish anglers specialize in the jigging rod, a short rod about two feet long. Sometimes a discarded tip section of a spinning rod or fly rod and some sort of attached handle works well. A small, light reel, or pegs or screws, onto which the line can be wound, is all that's needed. Commercially made ice fishing rods these days come in fiberglass, graphite, and composite materials, with prices increasing across this range.

Tip-ups come in a variety of styles ranging from standard manual kinds to magnetic and windlass models. These devices hold the bait at a set level and signal the angler with a flag when a fish has taken the bait and moved off. Prices range from just a few dollars for the simplest ones to \$10 or more for the more complicated rigs.

Carrying your gear onto a lake and bringing it all back at the end of the day call for a few extras. An old sled with a wooden box attached makes a handy carrying and storage vehicle for ice fishing. A plastic 5-gallon bucket doubles as a seat and as a container for the fish you catch. Heavy plastic storage boxes, like those used by dairies for carrying milk cartons, can also serve as seats and

storage bins. These kinds of cartons are available in many department stores. Buckets and boxes are also handy for transporting tip-ups, jigging rods, strainer, baits, and other equipment.

Your ice fishing trips should also include a few precautionary items. Homemade ice awls stored in an easily accessible outer-garment pocket could save your life. So also could wearing a life jacket on the ice. A life jacket might also keep you warm. Bring a small bag of sand to sprinkle around your ice hole for better traction. A small first aid kit might also come in handy if you or someone in your party becomes injured.

Ice cleats or grippers for your feet are another practical item. Good cleats can prevent a nasty fall. Many commercial ice cleats are on the market today, ranging in price from \$5 to \$10.

Another item is protective guards for the razor-sharp edges of your drills or spud bars. Brushing against one of these sharp edges can be disastrous.

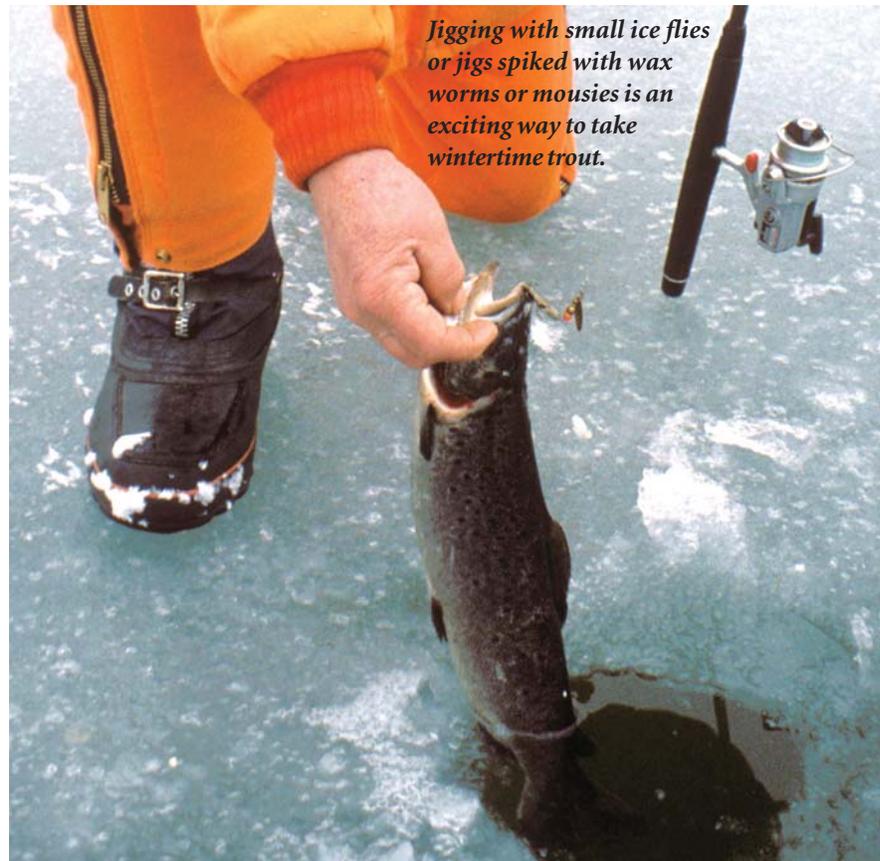
If you're fishing waters that harbor pike or muskies, a hand gaff is a useful item. It's a necessity for getting a big fish up through the hole.

Disposable hand-warmers are also useful.

Baits

The choice of baits for ice fishing is limitless. For pumpkinseeds, bluegills, crappies, perch, and trout, the most productive natural baits are small worms, grubs, and mealworms. Small minnows work well for perch and crappies. Bass, walleyes, pickerel, and pike favor larger minnows. Grocery store baits like cheese, corn, and marshmallows, and salmon eggs, are effective for trout. Cut baits, including strips of previously caught fish, are great for crappies and perch. Perch eyes added to a teardrop jig or spoon sometimes catch perch when nothing else will. Weighted wet flies and spinners used singly and in combination with bait take any of these fishes at times.

The grubs most commonly used in ice fishing are wax worms and



mousies. These baits can be purchased at most sporting goods stores. They're a lot cheaper if you buy them in large quantities from a mail-order bait shop. Corn borers, goldenrod gall worms, and mealworms can be collected in the fall, and sometimes these baits can be bought. Mealworms are not hard to raise at home.

Spoons are the most popular ice fishing lures. They range in size from a half-inch to several inches long. Used with or without bait, they are tops for catching fish when jigged slowly. The smallest varieties, called teardrops, spiked with a mousie grub or wax worm, are irresistible to any of the sunfish family. Medium-sized spoons do well with a grub added for crappies and perch. Larger spoons, up to 3 inches long, and willow leaf-bladed spinners are fine for bass and occasionally walleyes.

Finding fish

Finding fish at a lake that covers acres and acres is sometimes the most difficult part of an ice fishing trip. Where

groups of anglers gather and the ice around them is strewn with good catches, it's not hard to determine where you're going to fish. But when the lake is empty of anglers, you'll have to rely on other observations. A hydrographic lake map is a big help. Most lake maps have essential data like stream beds, dropoffs, and major structure. They also give you a good idea of a waterway's depths. If no maps are available, the terrain surrounding the lake can give you a good idea of which sections are shallow and where the deep waters are. A lead weight tied to your line can verify the depth in a hurry.

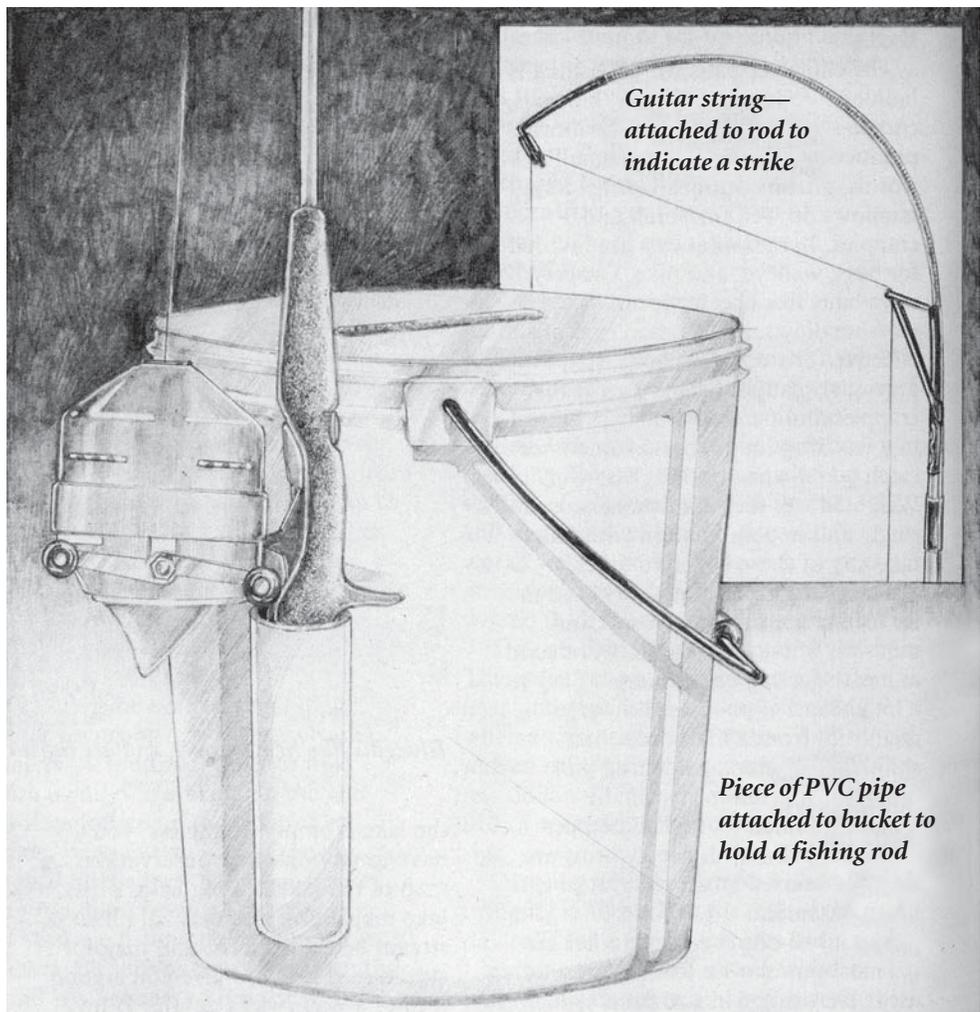
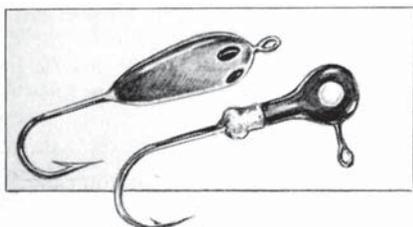
Knowing the depths and the bottom structure can be the key to locating various species of fish. Portable depth finders and fish finders work well on clear ice and can pinpoint bottom composition and even schools of fish. Popular portable models include LCDs that can do double duty for open water and ice fishing, and color flashers. There is a small delay between the time when the fish passes by and you see the return signal on the LCD mod-

els, but flashers provide instant feedback and let you see your jig as well as the fish. Portable LCD models can be found for under \$100. Flashers can cost over \$350. When ice gets old and cloudy, it may be necessary to put the transducer in a small hole through the ice.

Another popular device is the underwater camera. Amazingly, water clarity is very good under the ice unless you're fishing a reservoir after a recent rain or after snow melts, which clouds the water. Many cameras now have LCD lights that provide more illumination in deeper water. Typically, natural light is sufficient to see fish at depths up to 20 or 30 feet in most lakes and reservoirs. Although it is nice to watch a fish swim up to a bait or lure and actually grab it, the power of using these devices lies in locating underwater habitats (brushpiles, gravel bars, or other structure) on which to set up and fish.

A Global Positioning System (GPS) is also an important tool in an ice angler's toolbox. It provides a way to mark a spot on a map so that you can return to find it on another day. Many anglers mark structure with GPS so that they can navigate back when the lake freezes over.

Pleasurable winter fishing depends on one thing: Catching fish. Good knowledge of the habits of the fish you're looking for and their habitats, and a wise selection of baits and lures, make catching fish likely instead of a hit-or-miss proposition.



*Guitar string—
attached to rod to
indicate a strike*

*Piece of PVC pipe
attached to bucket to
hold a fishing rod*

Bluegills

Bluegills occupy every corner of the state and make up a good portion of each winter's catch. At times, they are very easy to catch.

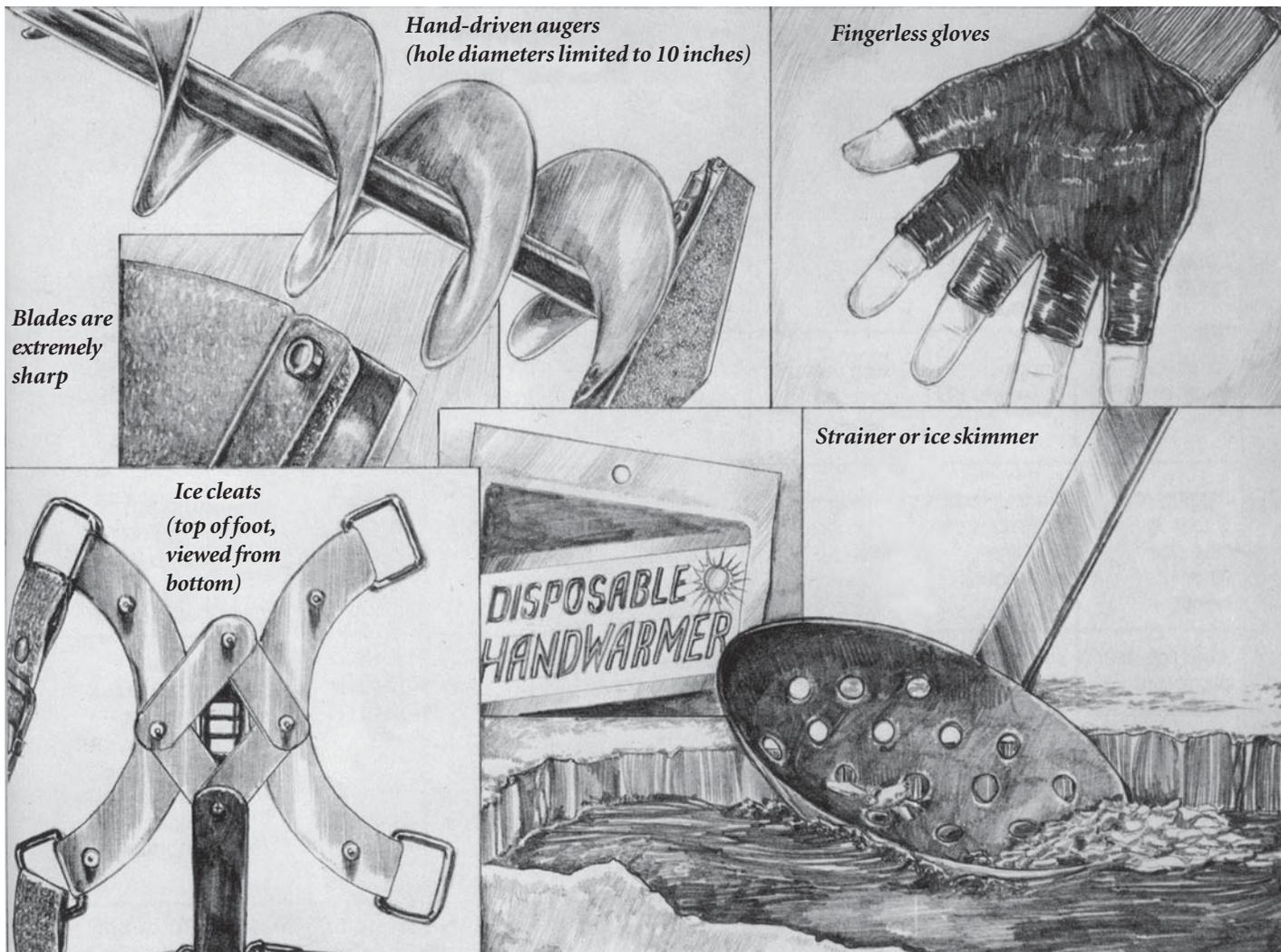
Baits and lures for bluegills should be small. A tiny ice jig or teardrop on a size 10 hook, spiked with a wax worm or mousie grub, are the top sunfish catchers. Bluegills are small-mouthed creatures that suck in the bait so gently that they barely move the bobber or wire tip on your rod. Tip-ups are usually ineffective for taking bluegills.

Leaders for your jigging rods should be extremely fine, such as 2-pound test. To accentuate the delicate bite of this fish, tiny bobbers floating on the surface of fine-wire extensions on the rod tip are a necessity. Move the baits gently and watch for the telltale movement of the bobber or rod tip to signal your strike.

Good daylight feeders, bluegills are most active in the warmest parts of the day. They start to feed about mid-morning and slow down at sunset. They like heavy cover and most often are found in 8 to 15 feet of water, right in the thickest brush. Bluegills often feed at the level of suspended cover. It's wise to have several holes dug that cover various depths, so that you can easily move when the action slows.

Trout

Trout lakes can be found from one end of the Commonwealth to the other. Most of them receive an ample stocking of trout just before the usual freeze-up time and during the winter. Even though the daily limit for winter trout is three fish (Extended Season), the romance of taking these regal fish is well worth the effort. For trout, tip-up an-



glers rely on small minnows, garden worms, or the standard summertime baits. Cheese, corn, marshmallows, and salmon eggs as bait, 6-pound-test to 8-pound-test line, and size 8 or 10 hooks are standard.

Jigging with small ice flies or jigs spiked with wax worms or mousies is an exciting way to take wintertime trout. Small hooks and light leaders are necessary for jigging for trout. Successful hard-water trout anglers prefer size 12 or 14 hooks and 4-pound-test line to fool even the wariest trout.

Concentrate on fishing mid-range waters for winter trout. Depths that range from 6 or 8 feet down to 18 to 20 feet hold most of the trout. Look for sandy or rocky bottoms and start your fishing near the bottom. Don't hesitate to try any ranges between if the trout are not active down below. Trout are

movers and you might find them at any level.

Crappies

Crappies are school fish, so when you catch one, it's a good bet that more will soon be flopping on the ice. Crappies prefer deeper waterway sections and are usually found in waters of 10 to 25 feet. They suspend at varying depths in huge schools and drift along like clouds. That's why a fish finder is important—so that an angler can raise the bait to work a passing school of suspended crappies. Bridge piers, rock ledges, and old creek beds are good locations for finding these schools.

The best times for catching crappies are the last hour in the evening and the first few hours of darkness. When feeding crappies move into an area, every angler in that section will be busy.

Fingerless gloves

Strainer or ice skimmer

Tip-ups baited with small minnows on a light-wire size 8 hook, and splitshot to keep the minnow down, are fine crappie locators. Suspended at different levels, these rigs intercept any school that passes by. When you catch several fish on one tip-up, set all of them to that level. It's also a good idea to break out the jigging rod, and with a size 8 jighead hook with impaled minnow, start to work that zone. Minnows need not be alive for jigging, and they are more effective when lip-hooked. Lures with an impaled grub are also productive when crappies go on a feeding spree.

Perch

Yellow perch are the top ice fishing quarry in the northeast and northwest sections of Pennsylvania. Great table fare, perch are generally located at depths of 20 feet or more. Where lakes



Photo-PPBC file photo

Going after northern pike requires 20- or 30-pound-test line on tip-ups. You'll also need wire leaders because a pike's sharp teeth can easily cut monofilament line.

are shallow, perch hug the bottom, and like crappies they tend to school in age classes. A few of Pennsylvania's deeper lakes have good perch activity at depths to 60 feet. Generally, if you find cover that's on or near the bottom, you can find perch.

Perch are daytime feeders, and lively minnows are the top choice for locating the fish on a tip-up. Use a fine-wire size 8 or 10 hook, and hook the bait through the back behind the dorsal fin. Big perch take a good-sized minnow—those around 3 inches long are fine. Allow the perch plenty of time to swallow the minnow before setting the hook.

With jigging rods, ice lures spiked with wax worms or corn borers are most effective. Strips of belly flesh from previously caught fish or the eyes of small perch are most suitable substitutes for grubs and minnows when fished with an ice lure. Stick to light lines when fishing for perch. Line like 4-pound-test monofilament is fairly invisible, pliable enough, and strong enough to handle just about every perch.

Largemouth bass

Largemouth bass aren't the most consistent biters when there's an ice cover. It seems as if a bass is never going to swallow your bait and move off. Bass are prowlers and move very slowly

through water that has lots of cover. Fish for them in the 10-foot to 20-foot range close to deep pockets and channels.

On tip-ups, use a heavier line, such as 8-pound-test monofilament. A size 4 to 6 hook with a 3-inch minnow hooked through the back and allowed to swim freely is your best bet. Allow any bass that takes your bait plenty of time to swallow the offering before setting the hook. Occasionally, nightcrawlers on a tip-up rig will tempt a wandering bass. Fish these suspended a foot or so above the bottom.

Jigging for largemouths is tedious but sometimes takes lunkers. Use 8-pound-test line and attach a large spoon to the end. The 3-inch, narrow spoons that shake and wobble when jigged are good rigs. Jig your lures slowly and move to adjoining holes every 10 minutes or so. Daylight hours are best for largemouths. The mid-portion of the day produces better than other times.

Northern pike, pickerel

For northern pike, the standard method is to use 20- or 30-pound-test line on tip-ups. Wire leaders are required because a pike's needle-sharp teeth can cut monofilament line. Get a thin, braided-wire leader that is soft and pliable and use 12-inch lengths. On a size 1 or 2 hook attach a 4-inch to 6-inch minnow behind the dorsal fin.

Fish your baits close to the bottom but try one set with the bait just a few feet under the ice.

Pike grab a minnow, run a short distance with it, and stop. Then they turn the bait and swallow it. Wait for them to run the second time before setting the hook. Large dead baits cut in half, or even frozen smelt from the supermarket, are good pike baits.

Northeast and southeast Pennsylvania counties have few pike waters, but you'll find chain pickerel hotspots. These waterways offer excellent fishing through the ice. For best results, most anglers stick with 3-inch or 4-inch minnows on tip-ups. Big pickerel weigh 6 or 7 pounds, so heavy monofilament is not a necessity.

Muskies

Muskies are occasionally caught by ice anglers who are after bass or walleyes. These fish are generally caught on minnows. If you ice fish specifically for muskies, use 20-pound-test to 30-pound-test monofilament, wire leaders, and size 1 or 1/0 hooks. Large minnows or suckers up to 8 inches long make good baits.

Daylight hours offer the best chances for catching muskies and all members of the pike family. Gaffs are required to get these big fish through the ice hole, whenever you're lucky enough to fool one.

Musky regulations vary in some waterways. Check the *Pennsylvania Fishing Summary* for the waterways you intend to fish, or view regulations online at the Fish & Boat Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us.

Walleyes

Walleyes are probably the most difficult Pennsylvania fish to take through the ice. Walleyes are reluctant feeders during daylight hours. Your best chances for success are early in the morning at first light and late in the afternoon just before dark. Walleyes favor a lively 2-inch or 3-inch minnow hooked on a light-wire size 6 hook and held close to the bot-

tom by a splitshot on the line. When taking a minnow, the walleye seems to take forever. Most anglers become impatient with a walleye's fiddling around and succeed only in jerking the bait out of the walleye's mouth when trying to set the hook.

Walleyes remain in deeper channels and pockets during the day and move to the edges of weed beds and dropoffs in the evening. The baitfish that they feed on are located in these places. Twenty-five to 30 feet is not an unrealistic depth at which to fish for daytime walleyes, and 15 to 20 feet is about right for the evening.

A few walleyes are taken by jigging at these depths with a lead-head jig-and-minnow combination or a jig and nightcrawler. When a walleye hits this rig, set the hook immediately. Lines of 8-pound to 10-pound test are sufficient for walleye jigging, but use slightly heavier line for fishing tip-ups.

Lastly, be sure to check your *Pennsylvania Fishing Summary* for more details on license requirements, waterways with special regulations, safety information, and other important angling details. ☐

The late Stan Paulakovich, an ice-fishing enthusiast for many years, retired in the mid-1980s as supervisor of the Commission's Southeast Law Enforcement Region. This article appeared in a different form in the December 1985 Pennsylvania Angler. Thanks go to two Fish & Boat Commission ice-fishing experts, Guy Bowersox, Bureau of Law Enforcement assistant to the director, and John Arway, chief of the Environmental Services Division, for help in updating the text.



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photos-Waterways Conservation Officer Dave Koneski

Home-built sleds and 5-gallon plastic cans let you conveniently transport gear onto and off of the ice.

ICE FISHING

TACKLE & TECHNIQUES

BEST AREA	FISH	BLUEGILLS	CRAPPIES	YELLOW PERCH	LARGEMOUTH BASS	NORTHERN PIKE	WALLEYES	TROUT
	WHEN	Daylight hours	One hour before sunset, two hours after sunset	Daylight hours, late afternoon	Daylight hours	Daylight hours	Sunset, after dark	Daylight hours
	WHERE	10 to 20 feet in cover	Bridge piers, channels, 10 to 25 feet deep	Deep water up to 50 feet near cover	Weed beds and brushy areas 5 feet to 20 feet deep	Weed beds up to 20 feet	Deep-water dropoffs up to 40 feet, 4 to 10 feet at sunset	Sandy or rocky bottoms 5 to 20 feet deep
	TACKLE	Jigging rods, 2- to 4-pound-test line, size 10 or size 12 hooks	Jigging rods or tip-ups, 4-pound line, size 10 hooks	Jigging rod or tip-ups, 4-pound line, size 10 hooks	Jigging rod or tip-ups, 8-pound line, size 4 to size 8 hooks	Tip-ups, 15-pound line, size 2 or size 4 hooks	Tip-ups, 6- to 10-pound line, size 6 or size 8 hooks	Tip-ups or jigging rods, 6- to 8-pound line, size 8 to size 10 hooks
	WHAT & HOW	Small jigs. Teardrops with bait, grubs, waxworms. Weighted flies with bait. Fish off the bottom and suspended.	Small jigs or spoons with bait. Minnows. Grubs, waxworms. Small minnows on tip-ups off the bottom and suspended.	Small jigs or lures with live or cut baits. Medium-sized minnows on tip-ups near the bottom.	Large and extra-large minnows on tip-ups. Shiny spoons or spinners off the bottom.	Large and extra-large minnows on tip-ups. Cut bait like smelt or suckers off the bottom.	Medium-sized minnows fished just off the bottom. Medium-sized jigs tipped with waxworms.	Small minnows, worms, cheese, corn, salmon eggs, marshmallows fished near the bottom.
	SE	Tuscarora Lk, Lk Ontelaunee, Lk Nockamixon	Muddy Run Lk, Lk Ontelaunee, Lk Nockamixon	Lk Ontelaunee, Lk Nockamixon, Marsh Ck Lk	Struble Lk, Blue Marsh Lk, Middle Creek Lk	(for pickerel) Marsh Ck Lk, Lk Nockamixon	Lk Nockamixon, Tuscarora Lk, Struble Lk	Tuscarora Lk, Leaser Lk, Minsi Lk
	NE	Mauch Chunk Lk, Gouldsboro Lk, Lk Carey, White Oak Pd, Lower Woods Pd, Beltzville Lk, Lackawanna Lk, Pecks Pd, Promised Land Lk	FE Walters Dm, Harveys Lk, White Oak Pd, Lower Woods Pd, Mauch Chunk Lk, Francis Slocum Lk	Lk Wallenpaupack, Pecks Pd, Duck Harbor Pd, Promised Land Lk, Beltzville Lk, Mauch Chunk Lk	Prompton Dm, Bradys Lk, White Oak Pd, Lower Woods Pd, Beltzville Lk, Mauch Chunk Lk, Stevens Lk, Lackawanna Lk, Francis Slocum Lk, Shohola Lk	(for pickerel) Tobyhanna Lk, Belmont Lk, Quaker Lk, Long Pd, Shohola Lk	Beltzville Lk, Belmont Lk, Prompton Dm, Lower Woods Pd, Harveys Lk, Mauch Chunk Lk, Francis Slocum Lk	FE Walters Dm, Fairview Lk, Upper Woods Pd, Harveys Lk
	SC	Meadow Grounds Lk, Koon Lk, Gordon Lk	Shawnee Lk, Koon Lk, Gordon Lk	Lk Marburg, Lk Redman	Shawnee Lk, Lk Marburg, Lk Redman	Lk Marburg, Shawnee Lk	Canoe Lk, Shawnee Lk	Holman Lk, Stoevers Dm
	NC	Stevenson Lk, Cowanesque Rs, Rose Valley Lk, Lk Chillisquaqua	Foster Joseph Sayers Lk, Beechwood Lk, Lk Hammond, Hills Ck Lk, Lk Chillisquaqua	Rose Valley Lk, Hills Creek Lk, Allegheny Rs, Foster Joseph Sayers Lk	Rose Valley Lk, Black Moshannon Lk, Kyle Lk, Lk Chillisquaqua	Allegheny Rs, Lk Chillisquaqua	Allegheny Rs	Alvin R. Bush Dm, Walker Lk, Beechwood Lk, Hamilton Lk, Cloe Lk
	SW	Raccoon Ck Lk, High Point Lk, Yellow Ck Lk, Keystone Power Dm	Keystone Power Dm, Hereford Manor Lks, Glendale Lk, Glade Run Lk	High Point Lk, Youghiogheny R Lk, Yellow Ck Lk	Glendale Lk, Keystone Power Dm, Yellow Ck Lk	Youghiogheny R Lk, Yellow Ck Lk, High Point Lk, Glendale Lk	High Point Lk, Glendale Lk, Keystone Power Dm	Hereford Manor Lk Lower, Glade Run Lk, Laurel Hill Lk
NW	Tamarack Lk, Pymatuning Rs, Edinboro Lk, Presque Isle Bay	Presque Isle Bay, Pymatuning Rs, Lk Wilhelm	Pymatuning Rs, Presque Isle Bay, Allegheny Rs, Lk Erie	Lk Arthur, Lk Wilhelm, Hartstown Rs	Presque Isle Bay, Conneaut Lk, Allegheny Rs	Pymatuning Rs, Allegheny Rs, Conneaut Lk, Lk Wilhelm	Chapman Dm, Eaton Rs, Cloe Lk, Lk Pleasant, Justus Lk	