

The Gamest Fish Under the Ice

by Mike Bleech photos by the author

Ahead we could see a lone ice fisherman who was intently involved with something other than a perch. We were on our way from the parking lot on Presque Isle to an area where several anglers were scattered on the ice. During the entire 20-minute walk, the ice fisherman fought just one fish, icing it just as we drew near. With his back to us, we could not see what he had caught.

I walked over to him to see his prize. When he heard the sound of my ice cleats, he turned. I saw a very broad grin and the cause of that grin, a 6-pound steelhead. After listening to his excited story, I rejoined my two partners for the day, Scott Peterson and Charlie Brant.

"I'd sure like to hook one of those," Peterson said.

Peterson had never caught a steelhead through the ice, so naturally it was Brant who hooked the first steelhead among our group. The battle was thrilling.

And, of course, I was next to hook a steelhead, about the same size as the two that we had already seen that day. Brant and I each lost another, but Peterson did not get his wish that day.

Steelheads are incidental catches to most ice anglers. Yellow perch are the stars of the show. There may be no better-tasting fish than a Presque Isle Bay perch, which has been placed on ice as soon as it is caught. But for sporting value, none beat the steelhead.

Steelhead may be caught while ice fishing just about anywhere in Presque Isle Bay and in connecting smaller bays, ponds or lagoons. Marina Lake, usually simply called the Marina, Misery Bay and Horseshoe Pond are particularly good places to ice fish for steelhead.

Ice fishing for steelhead is not limited to Presque Isle Bay and connecting waters. Several anglers who target steelhead through the ice drill their holes at the Walnut Creek Access basin or just outside the mouths of some of the tributary creeks, notably Trout Run and Godfrey Run. Steelheads are also caught through the ice at North East Marina.

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Steelhead can be caught at numerous locations in and around Presque Isle Bay, including Misery Bay where this angler patiently jigs.

Most steelheads are hooked on small jigs intended for perch and on very light line. It may seem strange that such large fish are interested in such small lures, but in the creeks single eggs and grubs are effective baits.



Fighting a fish on a handline is very intense.

Charlie Brant was jigging for bluegill when this steelhead struck.

Special regulations apply at the mouths of Trout Run and Godfrey Run. It is unlawful to fish from 10:00 p.m. until 5:00 a.m. on the following day within 50 yards of the mouth of both Trout Run and Godfrey Run while fishing the Lake Erie shoreline. Fishing is not allowed in either stream.

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If you plan to target steelhead through the ice, there are a few things you can do which will increase your odds of tangling with one of these brawlers.

First, bring your tip-ups. Most panfish anglers do not use tip-ups in Presque Isle Bay, because they are only marginally effective. With perch, bluegills or crappies, active tip-ups are more of a nuisance than an advantage. For steelhead fishing, tip-ups provide a couple of clear advantages.

The most obvious advantage is that you have more lines in the water. Five lines stand a considerably better chance of hooking a steelhead than one line. The best set-up may be four tip-ups and one jigging rod. Unlike jigging for panfish, the second jigging rod poses a potential problem. If the rod is out of arm's reach or if you are preoccupied, the steelhead may pull the jigging rod through the ice.

A second advantage of using four tip-ups with one jigging rod is covering more water. This does not mean just more water horizontally. It also means that you can cover more water vertically. You can vary the depth at which the tip-up baits are set.

Steelheads typically use the entire water column. In fact, most fish use the entire water column more than anglers realize. It is for this reason, in waters such as Presque Isle Bay where the water may be 20 feet or deeper, that sonar is a huge advantage for ice fishing.

At least until a pattern is established, vary the depth of the tip-up baits from within a foot of the bottom to about 3 feet under the tip-up spool. It is not unusual to see a steelhead hit or swing at a lure just before it is lifted out of the water.

You will probably not have tip-ups specifically for steelhead. Steelhead can be very line-shy, but hand-lining steelhead hooked on a tip-up is difficult, so 6-pound-test line is a good compromise. The way to accomplish this is to tie a 6-pound-test leader to the end of the main line on your tip-up. Clear monofilament line is good, but fluorocarbon line may be better.

Shiners are usually the best bait for steelhead. Use shiners that are a bit longer than those typically used by panfish anglers to avoid hits by smelt and panfish. Some ice anglers effectively use egg sacks.

Steelhead will hit tiny teardrop jigs, but larger jigs with larger hooks may improve your chances of getting steelhead through the ice. Jigging spoons are very effective, especially when tipped with shiners. For this purpose, use smaller shiners than you use for baiting tip-ups. Leadheads tipped with shiners will also attract steelhead.

What a great way to spend a winter day, catching the gamest fish under the ice. Dress warmly and remember ice safety rules. ☐



A power auger is a great help once the ice gets thick. Most Presque Isle Bay ice anglers use small-diameter augers intended for yellow perch, but if you target steelhead 7-inch or 8-inch is better.



In addition to Presque Isle Bay, steelheads are caught through the ice at North East Marina, the basin at Walnut Creek Access and off the mouths of some tributary creeks.