

PANFISH ON ICE:

A Beginner's Guide

by Darl Black

photos by the author



Ice fishing continues to slowly grow in popularity. For some, it's our long, cold boring winters that drive people to the ice for something to do. For others, it's simply a way to put fresh fish on the table. One thing is for sure, the introduction of better equipment is making ice fishing more comfortable, easier to undertake and simply more fun for the entire family.

Temperature control

Critical to enjoying ice fishing is keeping warm without sweating, and that is achieved by layering. Lugging equipment across the ice and drilling holes generates body heat that must be allowed to escape. You don't want to be bundled too tightly in heavy clothing and must be able to shed and add layers as needed. Breathability is essential in a layering system. Do not suit up in any fabric that has a rubberized or non-breathable coating, because it will trap water vapor.

Start with long undergarments made from high-tech material, which is highly breathable. Avoid cotton clothing, because it absorbs perspiration and then makes you feel cold. The middle insulation layer reduces heat loss. Select pullovers, vests and pants of polar fleece, Thinsulate or goose down. The outermost layer must be wind and waterproof, but breathable—coats and bibs made with Gore-Tex, Dry Plus or a similar material.



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Camera: The underwater viewing camera is the greatest invention for reducing boredom on the ice. Is a camera absolutely necessary for catching fish? Not really, but it is helpful in fine-tuning bait and lure movement to trigger bites. Its greatest benefit is visual enjoyment of what goes on underwater. Cameras vary in price depending on features.

Shelter: If you plan to fish only on mild and sunny days, you don't need a shelter (as long as you are properly attired). However, fish don't always bite on nice days. If you

Footwear must offer sufficient insulation as well. Boots with removable liners are particularly nice. When purchasing footwear, be sure to try them on with sock liners and thick insulating socks.

Your head and neck should be protected with a hood, in addition to a warm winter hat—not a summer ball cap. Take extra pairs of gloves, because they will get wet. Over mittens are beneficial. Don't forget to include air activated heat packs in your boots to keep toes toasty and in your coat pockets to warm chilled hands.

Equipment and tackle

Auger: An auger is an ice drill—either powered or manual. A gas-powered auger may seem like an unnecessary expense until you drill a few holes in 12 inches of ice with a hand auger. If you plan to ice fish only occasionally, you can get by with a manual hand auger for around \$100.

Depth finder: You are fishing blind on the ice without a depth finder. Today, several sonar companies offer compact units in self-contained weatherproof cases with downsized batteries. Prices range from around \$300 to \$400 for a complete portable ice fishing station. Also, there is an inexpensive one-hand digital unit that can provide basic depth readings.



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are serious about being on the ice when fish are biting, you need to have some type of shelter. One-man pop-up shelters may be purchased for a little over \$100. Ice fishing is a buddy activity for most people, so you may need to consider a two or three-man shelter costing around \$250 to \$350.

If you plan to fish without a shelter, many anglers utilize a five gallon bucket as a seat. The bucket can double as an equipment carrier. Buy an inexpensive closed-cell foam backpack sleeping pad, and cut it in half. Use one piece as a seat cushion for the bucket and the other piece between the ice and your boots—it makes a big difference in keeping your feet warm.

Rods and reels: Panfish species are generally targeted with some type of jigging lure or bait and jig combo. Purchase specially designed ice fishing rod and reel combos that are intended for extremely light lines, freezing temperatures and cramped quarters.

Lines: The importance of using line specifically formulated for ice fishing cannot be emphasized enough. Panfish outfits are typically spooled with 2- to 4-pound-test line. However, experts insist more bites will be achieved with 1-pound-test line or less.

Lures: With insect hatches non-existent this time of year and crustaceans hard to find, many panfish feed primarily on zooplankton. These microscopic organisms move up and down in the water column based on sunlight availability, but do not traverse longitudinal distances like baitfish.

The best bait for bluegill is a tiny, almost weightless ice dot or ice jig tipped with a maggot or wax worm. Gyration from the larvae are typically all that is needed to trigger a bite once a bluegill finds the lure. However, the rod may be intermittently quivered to assist bluegills in locating the bait. The depth setting of the bait should be changed every 15 minutes.



When baited with a small fathead minnow or emerald shiner, crappies fall victim to the same ice dots. A plain small Aberdeen bait hook with a minnow suspended below a small bobber works, too.

Actively feeding crappies may also be taken on vertically jigged minnow-imitating lures including spoons, vibrating blades and vertical swim-jig lures in sizes 1/16- to 1/8-ounce. For these lures, apply incredibly subtle action—slow, short lifts and drops. In the case of the spoon, simply utilize a rod tip quiver.

Fish location

One way to locate fish under the ice is to look for the largest group of ice anglers. Most ice anglers don't seem to mind company—as long as you don't drill too close to their set-up. Following the crowd doesn't necessarily mean you are fishing the best spot. It's a good idea to know how to find fish on your own.

Bluegills and sunfish usually stay around some form of cover as long as their food source is available. Focus on weed beds with some remaining green vegetation, as well as brush-piles or stumps on a flat.

Although wintertime crappies eat zooplankton, they prefer to target small minnows. Minnow schools move around, and whether they are present or not is most often the critical triggering factor for crappies.

A rise or hump with wood cover, a channel edge or a deep weedline are excellent areas for crappies. Inactive crappies like to suspend over deeper water, near a quick depth change.

Timing can have an impact on what species you catch. When it comes to feeding, bluegills are not nearly as finicky as crappies. Sunny midday hours can be productive for bluegills. Meanwhile, crappies tend to prefer winter's low light hours before 10 a.m. and after 3 p.m. Quality-sized crappies are notorious for active feeding from dusk to full dark. 🐟