



# Farm Pond

# FUN

# On Ice

by *Ben Moyer* photos by the author

When wintry conditions are right, it's easy to grab your farm pond gear and have some fun.

Dale (Dieter) Davis lurched off his 5-gallon bucket seat and shuffled toward a dark, 7-inch circle where he'd bored through six inches of hard, clear ice. At the hole, he waited, poised over a stubby rod whose springy tip dipped and rose in half-inch pulses. Sensing the right moment, Dieter swept the rod upward. Moments later, he slid a chunky, gold-breasted bluegill out onto the ice.

"I didn't really believe we'd catch anything," he admitted through a wind-burned grin. "But this is more fun than watching football."

He tossed the bluegill onto our growing pile of sunfish and baited up again.

Ice fishing can be that kind of surprise in Pennsylvania's extreme southwest corner, where dependable ice is an occasional event. The past two winters, though, had been more like those frigid seasons of childhood memory. I'd convinced Dieter, a fantasy-footballer who can recall far fewer winters than I, to abandon the Sunday afternoon "tube" and try ice fishing.





Farm ponds everywhere in the state are the ideal places to take advantage of brief stints of safe ice. You don't need electronics or elaborate gear. You can store almost everything you need in a five-gallon bucket, grab it and fish every time the mercury plunges enough to make sound ice. Of course, you can use high-tech tackle if you want to, but the beauty of ice fishing farm ponds, especially at the southern fringe of real winter, is that you can take a minimalist approach and still have a ton of fun, every time conditions are right. Bluegills are our primary target through farm pond, hard water. The bluegills where we fish grow to impressive "slab" size, pull hard through the hole, and our families are delighted when we bring home a mound of those sweet firm fillets.

Farm pond bluegills are only slightly more of a challenge to catch through the ice than through the liquid surface of warmer months. The greatest puzzle is of a seasonal nature. During the early winter, under first ice on the ponds we fish, bluegills seem to be spread out across shallow water, keyed on underwater weed beds. We've found it tough to make good catches possibly because of the disturbance we make fishing over such shallow depths. But when winter blows in after the New Year, we fish the deepest points in the pond and always find fish.

Our gear for farm pond ice is as elemental as you can get. We use a hand-powered, 7-inch auger. It's cheaper than gas-fueled models, and we think muscle-power is the better approach for farm ponds. Hand drilling is far less disruptive, which is important on small waters. To reduce our noise, we drill only six or so holes over the deepest parts of the pond. On small ponds, having lots of location options is less important than cutting down vibration and noise.

We use the inexpensive, stubby, little, two-foot Schooley rods made for panfish. You can order these rods online or find them at most outdoor retail stores in fall and early winter. They sell out quickly, though, during cold snaps due to their low cost. These rods feature an elegantly simple plastic reel mounted atop the grip, peg-insert depth control,



a sensitive spring-bobber tip and an aluminum bipod that fits onto the plastic handle, so the rig can be perched over the hole at the ideal angle. The rods are ready to fish when you buy them, but we refit our rods with a higher-quality 4-pound-test line made for ice fishing.

Any short ice rod with good line and a conventional spinning reel works just as well. The important common element is the sensitive spring-bobber tip, which reveals even the faint bites of winter bluegills, so you can set the hook at the right time.

Besides the auger, rods and bait, all you really need, tacklewise, is an ice skimmer to keep the holes clear.

Terminal tackle for farm pond bluegills continues the theme of simplicity. No bait that we've found beats a simple  $\frac{1}{32}$  oz. teardrop jig, tipped with a waxworm or mousie larvae. Jig colors, though, sometimes seem to make a difference. Red and orange, at times, attract more bites than jigs of blue or green.

Other subtle details can also be important on particular days. At times, we catch more bluegills by hooking the waxworm or mousie larvae at the mid-point of the body, so the bait is presented perpendicular to the line. At other times, sometimes during the same trip, we'll notice more action with the worm hooked in the end, so it hangs straight down. One aspect of the technique never varies. We catch far more fish when the bait hangs absolutely motionless below the hole. Winter bluegills are apparently on the lookout for an easy meal, one offering no resistance. Consistent jigging adds little to the presentation. But, interestingly, you can often entice action during a slow period by faintly jigging the rod tip or



swirling it in a circular motion around the hole. Bluegills are attracted to the movement, but they seldom actually bite until the bait falls motionless once again.

The right depth is not hard to pin down on farm ponds. We always start by dropping our baits to the bottom, then reeling in a few turns of line, so the jig-and-bait are suspended just inches above the bottom silt. Most times, we'll get a bite within minutes. If not, we reel up a few more turns until we hit the depth where fish are suspending.

When we don't hit fish within a few feet of the bottom, we try the opposite approach, dropping the bait only deep enough, so it's still visible through the hole. Experimenting in this way, we're testing the entire water column in the small and relatively shallow ponds we fish.

Bites are always subtle. We watch the spring-bobber tip until we're sure the fish has committed. Then, we lift the rod with a short, sweeping motion. Hook-ups are more consistent than when bait fishing beneath a bobber in the summer, probably because there is no angle in the line between the rod tip and the hook.

Nice-sized crappies also inhabit these ponds. We've tried

jigging small, curly-tail plastics but with limited success. Our best crappie catches come on really small live minnows, less than two inches long. Although crappies often strike large lures meant for bass in spring and summer, they seem put off by larger baits under the ice. We've done best on cloudy days when fishing these small minnows high in the water column, within sight of the ice, on a lightweight bare hook.

To be honest, we've never hit the ice at the crack of dawn, but there is generally a good bite around mid-morning. After that, spates of action come in waves as the fish circulate around the deeper part of the pond or just grow hungry again. Late day, though, is dependably good. If the fishing has been slow at the pond, stay until twilight for your best chance to put fish on the ice.

Speaking of fish on the ice, we especially enjoy having a fish fry as part of the outing. Such a feast is easily accomplished on farm ponds because of the small amount of other gear you need to take along, leaving ample room to tote a cook stove and skillet.

Dieter or my son, Aaron, continue to fish for bluegills while I fillet our catch on the ice. We sash the fillets in beaten egg in a plastic bag, transfer them to another bag filled with corn meal and fry them until they are golden brown in hot oil. Nestled on a roll with ketchup or cocktail sauce, it's the freshest fish sandwich you can get, and lurching on your recent catch adds a lot to the day's satisfaction.

On small ponds, we try to keep our walking to a minimum and avoid scraping sleds or seats across the ice. We've noticed that loud and clumsy movements spook the fish and can slow down the action for an hour or more. This may not be critical on larger and deeper lakes, but on farm ponds, stealth is an ally.

Safety is no less a consideration when ice fishing farm ponds than when out on a bay of a big open lake. Many farm ponds have metal overflow pipes or docks that absorb solar heat. Stay away from such hazards. They can cause ice near them to be thinner than the general surface. Likewise, avoid zones where springs or streams flow in and spillway outflows where currents slow freezing.

We always wear life jackets when ice fishing and sling ice picks on elastic cords across our shoulders, within easy reach in an emergency. As an extra precaution, we tie a long rope to a willow tree on the bank and loop the rope around our holes and seats on the ice while we fish.

Never ice fish alone. Obedience to that unbreakable rule is why I talked Dieter into going along. Now, he's an ice angler for life.

Ice fishing is just too much fun to pass up, and farm ponds make ice angling an option for thousands of potential hard water warriors across the state who would never contemplate a trip to Presque Isle Bay, Erie County, or Lake Wallenpaupack, Pike and Wayne counties. Gearing up to ice fish farm ponds is simple and inexpensive. If there's a pond in your family, one available through friends or one available by asking permission, don't let another winter go by without giving ice fishing a try. You can always tape the game. ☐