

Ice Fishing from Docks

by Marilyn Black

Avid anglers seek out methods and places to go fishing year round. In winter months, this can be challenging if safe ice does not form or last long.

Some people are tempted to venture onto early season ice too soon, rather than wait until the recommended ice thickness occurs. Eager to pursue feisty panfish, anglers step onto ice, which is not yet at least 4 inches thick (safely supporting one person and gear). Once fresh shoreline ice crumbles under their weight, anglers with drenched boots usually turn around and return to land instead of facing greater risks.

A similar situation may arise at the tail end of the traditional ice fishing season, as what was once safe ice melts. A few anglers wanting last-ice perch, crappies and bluegills push the limits and enter dangerous territory, sometimes by placing wooden planks across the open-water rims to reach the remaining ice sheet. Lulled by prior safe excursions on the ice in the preceding weeks, these anglers foolishly put themselves and their gear in jeopardy.

Solution to thin ice

Ice fishing from docks offers a much safer, and frankly easier, alternative to risky angling behavior. Busy docks, which moored boats and did not allow fishing for most of the year, become an entirely different and welcoming place for anglers once the boats are placed in storage, as an increasing number of dock managers are realizing.

Dock fishing also assists anglers who are fearful of walking on ice of any depth. I happen to be among those who are terrified of stepping on ice, probably a result of prior falls on ice as a youngster.

Jamestown Marina

In recent years, I have made it a practice to do early ice fishing from docks at the Jamestown Marina within Pymatuning State Park. These are wide, permanent docks that extend out over deep water that hold nice numbers of frisky panfish. This marina's parking lot is kept plowed of snow, providing convenient walking from car to fishing spots.

Pymatuning State Park Manager Peter Houghton said, "When the Jamestown Marina was renovated in 2002, we changed from narrow, annually removed docks to a system of 6-foot wide docks, which are in place all year. The next winter, we allowed folks to use the docks as fishing platforms in the winter. These initial anglers did not litter or abuse the docks, so we've continued to make this experience available as official policy now. After all, ice fishing and mooring are two different seasons, so why not increase the recreational opportunities for residents and visitors? I'm a fan of multiple use whenever possible."

He continued, "Cold weather anglers appreciate using the docks, especially when the ice is thin or in years when you don't find safe ice on the main body of Pymatuning Reservoir. Anglers are welcome from mid-November to mid-March, because the mooring season runs April 1 to October 31. Renters pay good money for their boat mooring slots, so anglers should stay out of the docks and marinas during these months out of respect."

Houghton believes the four factors that make the best combination for successful ice dock fishing are dock construction style, permanent dock structure, sufficient water depth and angler interest. For instance, he does not recommend the docks at Linesville or Espyville within Pymatuning State Park, because typically only 2 feet of water are under these docks during winter months.

photo-Marilyn Black

Matt Grove (left) and Joe Beech of Industry, Beaver County, travel to Pymatuning State Park to ice fish from marina docks.

Last year, I chatted with Matt Grove and Joe Beech who agree that the Jamestown Marina docks are excellent for ice fishing. They travel from Industry, Beaver County, to utilize the Pymatuning State Park facilities.

Other locations

At Maurice K. Goddard State Park in eastern Mercer County, there are four main piers in the marina on Lake Wilhelm, which stay in year round. Pontoon boats moor there April 1 through October 31. Winter anglers have been using these piers for ice fishing since prior to the 2007 arrival of Park Manager William Wasser. Wasser said, “We’ll continue to encourage fishing on the main piers as long as people make good use of them. Marina tenants have made no complaints. With last year’s scarcity of ice, the piers came in handy; and we like having a safe place to recommend.”

In Cambria County, appropriate docks are found at both Beaver Valley Marina and Prince Gallitzin Marina on Glendale Lake in Prince Gallitzin State Park. Park Manager Dennis Miller said, “We have always allowed fishing from our docks that are left in place over the winter. This increases angler opportunity and does not interfere with boat users, because fishing is allowed November 1 through April 30.”



photo-Dart Black

Nice crappies can be caught right in the marina.

He’s observed anglers doing well catching a variety of fish species when ice fishing from the docks.

At Presque Isle State Park, Erie County, a bubbler system is installed, which prevents ice from forming around the permanent docks in Marina Bay. As Park Community Relations Specialist Mary Jo Rutkowski explained, “Anglers are invited to use the marina docks from November 1 through the end of March. With the bubblers active, this means dock-based anglers cast or drop lines into open water, even when ice covers the rest of Marina Bay. On an average winter weekend day, there may be 400 to 500 ice anglers on Presque Isle Bay, with about 40 to 50 of these anglers accessing the docks. Perch, bluegills and crappies top the list of most commonly caught fish on Presque Isle Bay during the ice fishing season. Steelhead and northern pike are also caught quite frequently.”

photo-Marilyn Black



Joe Beech uses a manual auger to drill a fresh hole in the ice beside the marina dock.



Look for marina signs like this one in Presque Isle State Park to find out if and when dock fishing is permitted.



Crappies are found in the vicinity of the marina docks in winter.



This angler is utilizing a yellow bucket to hold a second ice fishing rod.

photos-Darl Black

Specific dock ice fishing tips

If you're headed to docks for ice fishing, you can streamline your gear. You won't need a portable shelter, and your feet won't be as cold since you won't be standing directly on the ice. At popular spots like the Jamestown Marina, you may even skip bringing an ice auger and just reuse holes that previous ice anglers drilled. You can expect to be sharing the docks with fellow anglers, so bring along a good attitude, and make some new friends as you share fishing tips.

These are good spots to test your underwater camera or ice fishing sonar to determine which piers and holes offer the traits you desire. For example, I prefer at least 8 feet of water with some visible cover on the bottom.

Traditional ice fishing rods and small lures are well-suited to this dock-style fishing. Some people arrange tip-ups, while others utilize more active vertical jigging methods. I target panfish with tiny ice jigs tipped with maggots or Berkley Gulp minnows. Another good presentation has been 1/8-ounce jigging spoons.

You can extend your fishing season and fun by seeking out suitable docks where you can try these combinations as well. ☐



With one tip-up in the rod holder on the dock and another in hand, it's easy to fish two adjacent ice holes.

For more on ice or winter fishing, go to www.fishandboat.com/ice.htm, and visit www.fishandboat.com/icesafe.pdf for an ice safety chart.