

MERCER AND VENANGO COUNTIES ON ICE

by Darl Black
photos by the author



The phone rings one Friday night in January. “How would you like to come to a party Saturday morning?” said Mike Kuna, an ice fishing buddy and co-founder of Keystone Crappie Association.

“Odd time for a party, isn’t it?” I respond.

“Come on, you know this is an ice fishing party. I’m in Mercer County for the weekend and plan to fish up a storm. Bob and his wife are coming up, and another friend and his son are in from Michigan. With this many people in our party, it shouldn’t take us long to figure out what the fish are doing.”

“Where do you plan to fish?” I inquire.

“Well, we can discuss that right now. Let’s review our possibilities.”

Lake Wilhelm, Mercer County

Find it: The centerpiece of Maurice K. Goddard State Park, 1,860-acre Lake Wilhelm is located in northeastern Mercer County. While the upper portion of the lake is readily visible from I-79, there is no exit specifically for the lake. Instead, exit I-79 at Route 358; go west on Route 358 to Clarks Mills and take Lake Wilhelm Road north to the lake. The lake may also be reached by Georgetown Road off Route 19.

Highlights: Most ice anglers on Lake Wilhelm are interested in crappies and bluegills. Walleyes are also present, targeted most often with live suckers on tip-ups. During the 1970s, northern pike were abundant in the newly impounded lake, but the current pike population is low. Only a few are taken each ice season, primarily in the upper reaches of the lake.



Fishing with a group is safer than being on the ice alone, and more lines in the water helps to locate schools of fish quicker.

Ice Access: With four major boat ramps and a marina, plus additional picnic sites, observation areas and several pull-offs along Creek Road, the shoreline of Lake Wilhelm is one of the most accessible lakes

in the state for ice fishing. Generally, the ice is reliably safe throughout the lake except for areas immediately around bridges and in the stump-filled north end.

Fishing Tip: “During first ice, I suggest anglers seeking crappies concentrate on available green weeds,” said ice fishing expert Mike Kuna. “Later in the season, anglers should shift to deeper brush piles. As long as weeds are still green, you’ll find baitfish and crappies hanging out there. When weeds eventually die, crappies move to brush piles and



Walleyes are present on Lake Wilhelm and are most often targeted with live suckers on tip-ups. You can see the I-79 bridge in the background

deep stumps on points and along the main creek channel. If you are willing to search it out, there is a lot of cover. I rarely tip my ice jigs with live bait but use micro soft plastic baits. I've had very good success with plastics in red and orange for Lake Wilhelm crappies."

Shenango River Lake, Mercer County

Find it: This 3,500-acre Army Corps impoundment on the Shenango River is situated in western Mercer County, with United States Route 18 bisecting the reservoir at the village of Clark.

Highlights: Shenango River Lake hosts excellent black and white crappie populations including some trophy-size specimens. Ice anglers also find bluegills, walleyes and northern pike of interest on this lake. However, like Lake Wilhelm, the heyday for pike on Shenango River Lake was in the 1970s. The present day population is marginal.

Ice Access: Access to the ice is challenging. As a flood control lake, Shenango River Lake is drawn down each fall, which seemingly increases the influence of the river current through the reservoir. This water movement erodes the ice around the main channel as well as any bridge areas. Anglers seek out areas of stable ice protected from the current flow. Three specific sites seem to draw the highest number of anglers, and each one is challenging to reach. The "Celery Field" is a long walk down an abandoned railroad bed on the north shore near the Pennsylvania Game Commission building on Lake Road. "Golden Run" area is situated off a secondary ramp and parking lot reached by way of an abandoned section of Old Route 258 east of Clark. In the winter, this is a treacherous drive requiring a four-wheel drive vehicle. A third popular area is Chestnut Run Swim Beach. If the gate is open, it's not a far walk, but if the gate is locked, it's a long haul pulling equipment. However, the potential for big crappies draws anglers regardless of the difficulties.



Big crappies are the major draw for ice fishing on Mercer County's Shenango River Lake.

Fishing Tip: Ken Smith of Sharon is the resident crappie expert on this lake. "Look for wood, shallow wood early and deeper wood later in the ice season. Rarely do we get ice thick enough to venture out to the channel ledges to fish. The ice is always thinner where there is current. Many Shenango River Lake ice anglers still use live minnows on gold hooks for crappies and tiny ice spoons with maggots or wax worms for bluegills. However, nowadays, I employ tungsten jigs and micro soft plastics for all my ice fishing."

Two Mile Run Reservoir (Justus Lake), Venango County

Find It: The 144-acre Justus Lake is located in Venango County's Two Mile Run County Park. Take Route 417 north from Franklin for approximately 6 miles. Watch for a sign indicating a right turn for Two Mile Run County Park, and follow the road to the lake.

Highlights: Justus Lake is unique among the many inland lakes of northwest Pennsylvania. This small impoundment sustains both coldwater and warmwater fish species. Trout are the primary wintertime focus at Justus Lake. The lake receives a fall stocking of trout in October to boost the summer carry-over trout population. However, ice anglers may connect with bluegills, yellow perch, walleyes, muskies and smallmouth bass.

Access: Anglers generally access the ice at one of two sites. The boat launch at the north end of the lake puts anglers within reach of trout, which randomly swim about the shallower water. Although it's a longer pull with a sled, walleye anglers generally set up their tip-ups in deeper water off the swim beach on the lower end of the lake.

Fishing Tip: Mike Horrobin at Jigger Tackle in Franklin said trout anglers rely on live minnows on tip-ups, an ice ant tipped with a wax worm or a colorful ice jig tipped with scented soft plastic. If you prefer a more hands-on approach for trout, try jiggging a small profile ultra-light spoon. If you are looking for a trophy walleye, take into account that the largest walleye recorded from Justus Lake was taken on a 3/8-ounce jigging spoon in 25 feet of water near the swim beach.



Kaitlyn Sellin proudly shows off a Justus Lake, Venango County, trout.

Kahle Lake, Venango County

Find It: Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission owned Kahle Lake is located in the far southeast corner of Venango County, approximately 6 miles north of Emlenton off Route 38.

Highlights: "Without a doubt, Kahle Lake is my favorite ice fishing lake in either Mercer or Venango County," said Mike Kuna. "It's a small body of water, making it easier to learn. And, it produces quality crappies and jumbo perch as well as decent bluegills. Walleyes and largemouth bass are also targeted by some anglers."

Access: There are two boat access areas with parking lots, one on the north side of the lake and one on the south side of the lake. These sites provide the best access to the ice, especially since the lake is currently under a long-term drawdown for repairs.

Fishing Tip: "I have two reliable tips for Kahle Lake," said Mike Kuna. "First, if interested in perch, fish near the dam. Perch tend to roam about deeper water rather than locking into a particular site or structure, so it's a matter of jumping around and drilling a lot of holes until you find them. I would fish a glow spoon with a red micro plastic. For crappies, focus on the middle section of the lake, and seek out the deeper brush and stumps." □



During the winter, Venango County's Kahle Lake holds big perch.