

10 Tips for Safe Ice Fishing



by Ben Moyer

photos by the author

Fishing through the ice can yield an enjoyable and productive day outdoors. But, ice anglers face a range of variable conditions that claim lives every winter across the country's northern latitudes. Planning, knowledge and judgment are your best insurance against ice fishing accidents. No perch or trout is worth risking a tragedy. Follow these tips to make all your ice fishing excursions memorable and safe.

Never fish alone

If there's one outdoor activity that should never be done solo, it's ice fishing. A buddy can save your life in an emergency and help you get warm and dry after a dunking. Besides, ice fishing is more fun when it's shared.

Test the ice

Drill or spud a sample hole from a pier or dock, if available, before venturing out. Make some more experimental holes to measure the ice as you move out from shore. Stay alert for differences in ice thickness and appearance as you move.



Wear a life jacket

A life jacket is as important when ice fishing as when fishing from a boat in summer. A life jacket will keep you afloat if you break through the ice and can help insulate you from cold water

that saps your strength and induces panic. If you're wearing a life jacket, your buddy will have more time to help you reach safety.

Wear ice picks

Ice picks are handheld, spiked devices that you can use to pull yourself out of the water should you break through the ice. Without them, it can be nearly impossible to gain traction with your hands. You can buy ice picks or make them yourself. The paired picks are linked by a length of rope or coil and worn around the neck for quick access if needed.

Carry rope

If you're fishing a reasonable distance from shore, take along a rope long enough to tie off to a tree. Spread the rope on the ice so that it's near your fishing locations and can be grabbed quickly. If it's too far to shore to tie off, carry rope that can be thrown to someone in trouble. Ignore other anglers who may think you're overcautious. Peace of mind adds a lot to fishing enjoyment. Avoid plastic rope that kinks in cold weather.

Make an emergency plan

Discuss with your buddy what you'll each do in case something bad happens. Working through accident scenarios beforehand cuts your response time when speed and sound decisions mean the difference between life and death.



Be aware of changing conditions

There are no guarantees of ice fishing safety. Ice is a natural phenomenon subject to countless variables. Always remain vigilant for factors that can weaken ice. Underwater springs, entering streams, current, wind and snow cover can all erode ice thickness across short distances or during the intervening time between trips. Be very careful after a new snowfall. Snow can hide thin ice, pre-existing holes and inhibit freezing.

Avoid ice fishing on rivers. Flowing water presents too many unknowns, and if you fall through the ice, you can be swept away from the hole.

Stay away from structure

Snags, logs, stumps and rocks absorb sunlight and emit heat. Stay a respectful distance from any natural or manmade material that absorbs solar radiation. Be careful around or over weedbeds. Decomposing plant matter releases heat and can melt the ice from underneath.

Carry a change of dry clothes

Stash a change of dry clothes in your vehicle. If you get wet, a new set of warm, dry clothes will help prevent hypothermia. If your vehicle is a long way off, don't remove your life jacket until you get there. It will help keep you warm until you can change.

Dress right

The right clothes will make your day on the ice more comfortable, and could save your life in an emergency. Wear layers, including a wool sweater or other garment, under a water- and wind-resistant shell. Wool retains your body heat, even when wet. Worn under a life jacket, wool can give you precious seconds to act before the strength-robbing effects of cold water take hold.

Always wear a hat when ice fishing. An uncovered head loses a lot of heat—heat you may need if things go wrong. These and other ice safety tips are more important than the bait you choose or the depth you fish. They'll help you and your loved ones enjoy ice fishing for years to come. ☐

NOTICE

COLD WATER KILLS!

WEAR YOUR LIFE JACKET!

As a new regulation, beginning November 1, 2012, boaters are **required by law to wear a life jacket** on boats less than 16 feet in length or any canoe or kayak during the cold weather months from **November 1 through April 30**.

Life jackets save lives year-round. In addition to this regulation, the Commission strongly encourages all boaters to wear their life jackets during the other months of the year, at all times while on the water.