

Drilling Your Way to Success:

Strategies for Ice Fishing

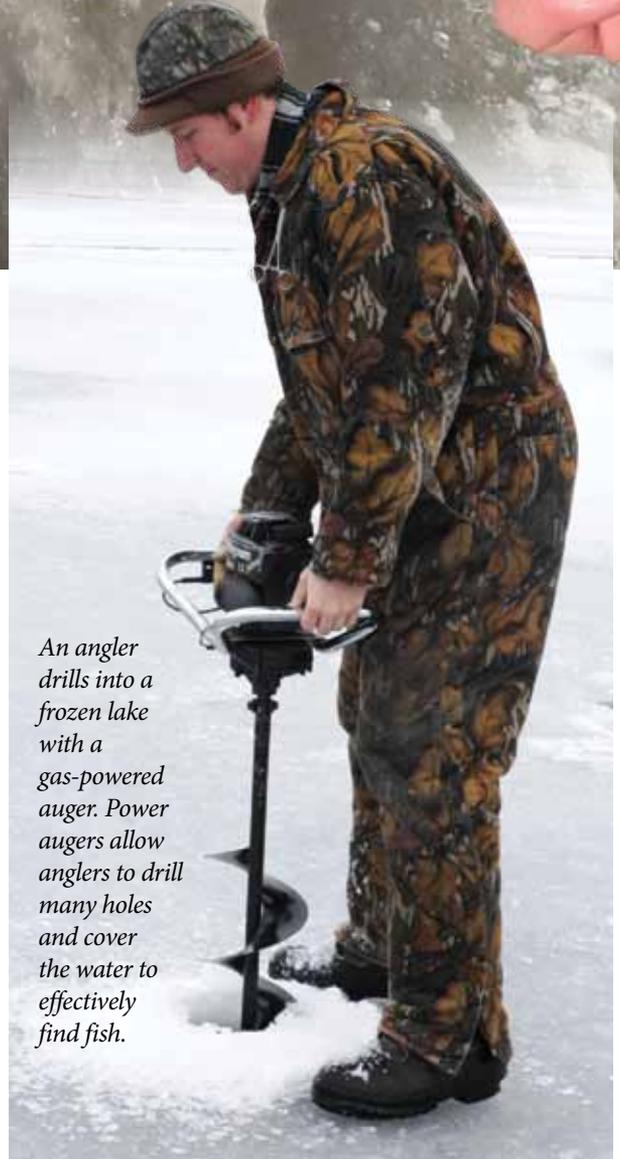
by Carl Haensel photos by the author

Heading out on the ice for a day of wintertime fishing can be a blast. From catching fish to the simple beauty of time on the water, it's great to be outside. To make the most of your time, there are a number of simple, effective strategies that you can use to make ice fishing work well for you.

Keep on drilling

One of the biggest challenges that ice anglers face on a regular basis is not drilling enough holes. Often, people will venture out on the ice, drill a hole or two and sit down and fish for a couple hours without moving. If you are fortunate enough to run into a giant school of active fish this way, that's great. If not, you need to find the fish and not wait for the fish to find you. All fish move regularly under the ice. In the early season, they may relate to shallow weed edges and flats with live vegetation. Later in the season, they may work off deep breaks or drop-offs or even hold suspended in the middle of a lake. When looking for panfish on a large flat or tapering drop-off, it is very realistic to drill at least 50 holes in a couple of hours of fishing. Some truly aggressive anglers will drill 50 holes to start fishing with and another 50 as they move around. While this is obviously best with a power auger, keep the blades on your auger sharp and your arms in shape if you plan on drilling by hand. Even adding another 10 holes to your day can make a big difference. If you are fishing a large flat of moving panfish, shift regularly from hole to hole to see where they are at any given time.

Black Crappie



An angler drills into a frozen lake with a gas-powered auger. Power augers allow anglers to drill many holes and cover the water to effectively find fish.

Side-by-side holes

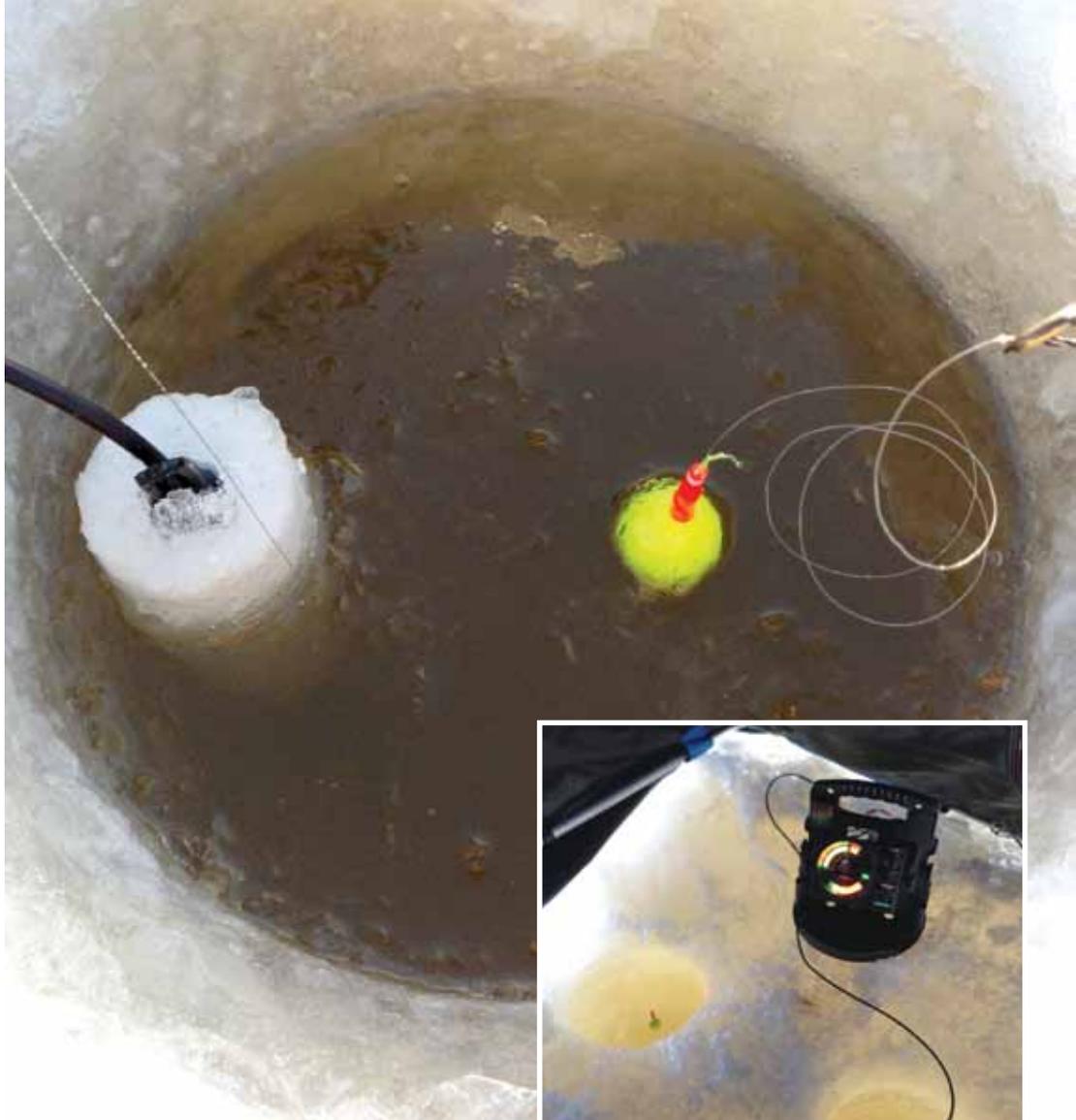
Fishing for panfish is one of the most popular varieties of ice fishing. The fishing can be fast and the fish active in the winter. Once you've found the location of the fish, all you have to do is catch them. Since you will likely be using multiple rods, start by drilling two holes about 12 inches apart from edge to edge. This will allow you to monitor two different rods closely but not have your lines tangle. Then, use two different baits. This affords you many different opportunities. If you are fishing for sunfish, you may have one rod baited with a waxworm and one rod baited with a small Fathead Minnow. Most of the sunfish will hit the waxworm, but big sunfish will sometimes hit the minnow. The minnow will also attract stray crappies, White Bass, Yellow Perch and Largemouth Bass. Another benefit of the two-hole set-up is that it allows you to fish in a flip-over shelter. One of the great opportunities with this strategy is that both holes can be read from the same sonar unit. This makes getting the appropriate level for your bait and trying different techniques much easier.

Neutral buoyancy

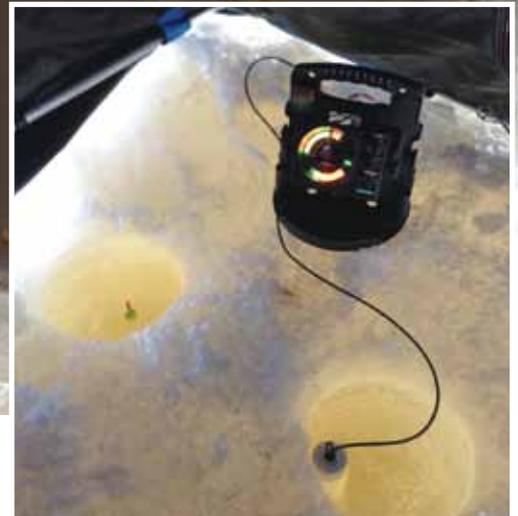
Fish bite lightly in the winter. So lightly that if they feel resistance on the line, they will often just spit it out and move onward without actually taking it entirely into their mouths. Solve this problem by using the smallest bobber possible, and weight it so that it is barely afloat. If your bobber is large, this may take the addition of a number of splitshots. Watch for any slight twitch, and set the hook. This strategy works best for finicky sunfish, crappies, bass and Walleyes.

Fish the drop

Often, anglers plop their bait in the water and let it drop until their bobber suspends it. This method misses the most natural part of the presentation that an ice angler can do, which is the drop. All food that falls into the water in a lake or reservoir settles slowly to the bottom. Mimic this



A neutrally buoyant bobber sits in the water on a cold day of ice fishing. Adjust your bobbers, so it takes the least amount of pressure from a fish to take them underwater.



Here is a side-by-side hole set-up in an ice fishing shelter. Not only does this set-up provide the ability to easily fish multiple rods, but it also makes for better sonar unit visibility.

action by slowly lowering your bait down into the water. Use a short ice fishing spinning rod with your finger on the line to sense the slightest hesitation. If you already have fish showing on your sonar unit, you can try this technique by raising your bait and lure to the surface and slowly lowering it all the way to the bottom. Fish will often swim upward to grab bait as it falls.

Fish the inlets

This strategy requires the greatest amount of safety possible. Anywhere that moving water enters a frozen body of water, there is current under the ice. This current is both a potential fish attractant and a dangerous ice destroyer. Always make sure to regularly test ice thickness in areas with current. It can even change day to day. With this safety caveat

in mind, inlets can be strong attractants for top predators like Muskellunge, pike and pickerel. They will often cruise into a body of water where the current is very weak but still brings scents of foods from long distances. Fish a set of tip-ups loaded with strongly scented baits between the inlet and a flat or drop-off that you think the fish may be working. On the right days, you may just find yourself in line for a bonanza of fish.

Talk to the locals

Thinking about trying a new location? Don't head out without key local information. Stop by a nearby tackle shop to see what may be biting and what hot baits are being used. Visit the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's website at www.fishandboat.com for the latest fishing reports and fisheries management information. ☐



Bluegill

Hook your waxworms lightly near the head to allow them to have movement that will entice fish. They will also stay on the hook better.



This nice Northern Pike was taken through the ice.