

# Bluegills on Ice

by Ben Moyer photos by the author

The Bluegill, *Lepomis macrochirus* as it's known to ichthyologists, is too abundant, too much fun to catch and too good to eat to ignore during the winter. Bluegills offer winter anglers choices. They're a valued target for serious ice anglers, but they can also star in more casual outings aimed simply at staying active outdoors after the hunting seasons. Either way, winter Bluegills are fun and more than worth the minimal effort and expense it takes to pull them up through a 7-inch circle.

A lot of anglers use sonar to help them find Bluegills through the ice. And, while that's certainly the most efficient way to seek winter Bluegills, you can do almost as well on smaller lakes and ponds by simply paying attention to the bottom and shoreline structure when you are fishing the same waters during warmer months. My fishing partners and I like to keep it simple. We note the locations of weedbeds, channels and downed trees during the spring, summer and fall and fish over those features at appropriate times during the winter.

It's always a good rule to get out and fish as soon as the ice is sufficient. At that time, you can catch Bluegills in the same locations you caught them in summer and fall, before they move to deeper water. If you don't hit Bluegills in those familiar haunts, try drilling a few holes over shallow weedbeds under that first ice after freeze-up. Be as quiet as you can over shallow water and give the fish some time to recover from the disturbance before deciding that they're not present.

Early ice Bluegills will bite readily when you find them. If you don't get action within 20 minutes or so, move to a new location. Keep moving until you find fish.

The best advice for winter Bluegills in Pennsylvania is to keep your tackle and technique simple, small and slow. Although



*Bluegills can generally be enticed to bite throughout the day, especially under the first safe ice of winter.*

these fish crave winter nourishment, they're not aggressive about getting it. Winter Bluegills want something small and motionless or moving with subtle, non-threatening motion. Vigorous jiggling will only scare them off.

Purely by coincidence, we hit on what, for us, is the ideal winter rod for Bluegills. Several years ago, we decided on impulse to try ice fishing for the first time. The only ice tackle that was left in the store at the time were several inexpensive, little Schooley rods, about a foot long with simple plastic reel and a spring-bobber at the tip. We bought several and, for Bluegills, have never felt the need for anything more complicated. The rods perch right on the ice, on a built-in bipod. The orange-tipped spring-bobber alerts you to the most timid nibble. However, any similar rig would serve just as well.

The real backbone of your Bluegill ice tackle is the teardrop jig, size #10 or smaller. Although, Bluegills rarely hit a bare jig. Enhance a teardrop jig with a fresh waxworm, maggot or "mousie," and you have the most effective and proven winter Bluegill bait across most of North America's ice belt.

Interestingly, you can sometimes increase your catch by changing the way your live bait is presented on the jig.

Sometimes Bluegills seem to want the bait hooked in the middle of the body, so the worm or maggot rides horizontal, perpendicular to the line and the jig. At other times, Bluegills will show preference for bait hooked at one end, so the bait hangs downward in the same plane as the jig itself. It's surprising how that subtle difference can sometimes attract more bites. Have a friend rig his bait one-way and rig yours the other way. You may soon see a pattern in who's catching the most fish. Then, you can rig all your baits that way.

A good practice is to drop the jig and bait down to the bottom, and crank up a few turns on the reel to suspend it. By experimenting with different depths and locations, you'll find biting fish.

Despite my earlier argument for simplicity, here's a little trick that will help you catch fish with only slightly more complexity in the rig. Use a high visibility ice fishing line of about 4-pound-test line for your primary line on the reel. The heavier, tinted line is easier to handle and will help you detect subtle strikes even when the fish doesn't jiggle the bobber. But, that conspicuous monofilament fishing line is a liability at the business end of your rig. To enjoy the best of both worlds, tie a 2-foot piece of clear leader in 2-pound-test line to the end of your ice line. Tie your jig to the leader, and the Bluegills won't be able to detect line at their end.

We haven't noticed much difference in Bluegills' tendency to bite at various times of day. Generally, you can go out during the most comfortable time of mid-afternoon and make good Bluegill catches. But, if you hope to catch some crappies in the same water, timing is important. Like deer, crappies show a marked increase in activity around dawn and dusk.

*Lakes managed under the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's Panfish Enhancement rules produce quality-size Bluegills and other sunfish.*

When you get a bite, best described as a gentle pull downward on the spring-bobber, simply lift the rod in a smooth, upward motion. Most times, you'll hook up. Hook-up percentages seem to be higher when ice fishing than during the warm months. I think that's due to the direct connection between the angler and the fish. When you're fishing a bobber on a pond in the summer, there's an acute angle in the line between you and the fish. This is not so when ice fishing, so a moderate upward pull is all you need to set the hook.

This is a good point to consider some Bluegill biology. According to the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's publication "Bluegill Management and Fishing in Pennsylvania," prepared by the agency's Warmwater Unit, Bluegill fisheries are complex systems. In some waters, quality-size fish may be limited by Bluegill overpopulation, which causes intense competition for food. While in other fisheries, over-harvest of quality-size fish may be the reason that big Bluegills seem rare. It takes a Bluegill about 5 or 6 years to reach 8 inches in length, so there are a lot of opportunities for fish to rest in an angler's creel before it reaches "slab" size.

Liberal harvests of Bluegills are generally encouraged. To increase your odds of catching nice-size fish, try one of the 17 lakes around the state under Panfish Enhancement regulations. These waters are managed with a 7-inch minimum size on Bluegills and other sunfish. Crappie and Yellow Perch have a minimum size of 9 inches. For panfish species, the combined creel limit is 20 for each species with the total creel not to exceed 50 panfish combined.

This winter don't miss out on catching Bluegills through the ice. It's uncomplicated and productive. You'll wonder why you waited so long to join the fun. ☐

