

Ice Anglers Popular Panfish Mixed Catch

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In Pennsylvania, the most popular panfish include crappies, Yellow Perch, Bluegills and Pumpkinseeds. Some panfish anglers target one specific panfish species. During the ice fishing period, however, most anglers are pleased with mixed catches. One or two species may be preferred, but you will commonly see a variety of panfish on the ice around successful ice anglers.

One primary reason for mixed catches is that similar to identical fishing tactics are used for all of the popular panfish species. Another reason is that all of the popular panfish species may be in the same place, particularly during the ice fishing period. A third reason is that all of the popular panfish are excellent table fare.

Our more popular panfish tend to be of similar size. Crappies are often somewhat larger, commonly longer than 10 inches, compared to 9 inches being a great size for Bluegills and 8 inches being big for Pumpkinseeds. Yellow Perch are often longer than 10 inches. More significantly, their mouths are larger in proportion than other popular panfish, and they tend to take larger prey.

Ice anglers who want to target Yellow Perch or crappies often use larger jigs and baits specifically to avoid smaller fish like Bluegills or Pumpkinseeds. If a mixed catch is desirable, the jig and bait size should be suitable for all species. Bluegills and Pumpkinseeds have proportionately smaller mouths, and they are generally smaller than Yellow Perch or crappies, so jig and bait size should be downsized to the correct size for these smaller panfish.

A nearly universal terminal rig used to ice fish for panfish is a small jig tipped with a grub. Small refers to hook size more so than the overall jig size, within reason. A 1/32-ounce leadhead jig or teardrop jig tipped with a grub will put an ice angler in the game for all of the popular panfish.



Green weeds can be key in locating panfish under the ice. All of the popular panfish often congregate near green weeds.

Experienced ice anglers know that jig color can be very important. Color may not be very important when the panfish are aggressive. When panfish are fussy, connecting with the right color or color pattern may mean the difference between a good catch and no catch. Rather than making the usual suggestions for jig colors, it is appropriate to suggest that serious ice anglers should be prepared with as many colors as possible.

Changing jigs or just jig bodies is simple and takes little time. If it does not get action, there is no reason to use any one color for more than 15 to 20 minutes. Patience has its place in fishing but not so much while ice fishing for panfish. Do not stick with things that do not catch panfish.

In addition to color, 'things' include jig depth and jiggling motion.

Panfish commonly use most of the water column. They may be close to the bottom, just under the ice or anywhere between. This probably relates to the degree of aggressiveness or to the depth where they find natural food. One excellent approach to covering all depths is slowly lowering a jig, stopping every foot or so to wiggle the jig and doing the same while moving the jig from the bottom toward the ice.

Usual jiggling motion is hardly jiggling. Rather, it is more of a wiggle. More aggressive jiggling may be acceptable for Yellow Perch or crappies but not likely for Bluegills or Pumpkinseeds. A baited jig does not necessarily have to be moved. There will be times when the best action is no action. Still, most experienced ice anglers wiggle a jig at least every minute or less just to catch the attention of panfish.

Locating panfish cannot always be done by using any one simple formula. Anyone who suggests differently is not widely experienced. When you hear or read about any so-called fits-everywhere formula for locating panfish, the formula probably was devised on just one lake or maybe a few similar lakes. Not all good panfish lakes have similar characteristics beyond water.



Pumpkinseeds are the smaller of Pennsylvania's more popular panfish. Use a jig tipped with a grub to catch bigger Pumpkinseeds.



Yellow Perch have proportionately larger mouths than other popular panfish. They will attack larger prey, but they also readily take jigs appropriately sized for Bluegills.



Looking for clusters of ice anglers can be the most certain way of locating panfish. At Presque Isle Bay, Erie County, ice anglers may catch all of the more popular panfish.

In many lakes, popular panfish may be in relatively shallow areas that are dense weed beds during the summer. And, there are lakes where the best fishing is in deeper water over featureless bottoms. Often on an otherwise featureless bottoms, any piece of cover or structure will attract panfish.

The most frequently used method for locating panfish is either asking for tips at bait and tackle shops or looking for clusters of ice anglers. Going on experience is the next most frequently used method. All of these searching methods save a lot of time by starting from scratch.

If you crave a platter of fresh fried panfish fillets, keep things as simple as possible. ☐