



Seeing Under the Ice

by Marilyn Black photos by Darl Black

Ice fishing tools have made technological leaps forward recently, especially the angler's ability to view underwater contours, vegetation and even individual fish in the vicinity. Avid ice anglers can increase their fishing success by utilizing electronic cameras, portable depth finders and GPS units in combination.

The equipment

Underwater viewing cameras for in-boat or on-ice use were introduced in 1997. Since that time, they have been significantly upgraded. In addition to improvements of visual image quality to identify fish habitat and profile submerged structures, they have also improved by including on-screen data such as water temperature, depth, camera direction and GPS position. Today's products manufactured by Aqua-Vu, Fish Scout, MarCum and SondeCAM include colorful, vivid real-time video by the camera's optical cable to the screen top-water where the angler can rotate the lens or instruct it to go to zoom settings augmented by infrared lighting.

Meanwhile, flasher sonar units have also become more sophisticated with most brands incorporating colorful video screens or chartplotter screens. Currently, Humminbird, Lowrance, MarCum and Vexilar manufacture fish finders with some offering special ice transducers and ice mode software attuned to the angler who is walking on hard water. Most have built-in GPS antenna and base maps. Some even offer wireless applications, so you can view or control the



This is a MarCum flasher sonar and underwater camera side by side on the ice.

sonar images on a separate smartphone or tablet. Others have recording capability. Most brands also provide a carrying case.

Now that Global Positioning System coordinates and readings are designed into most mobile phones and sonars, serious ice anglers no longer need to carry an additional GPS unit among their gear. The angler can insert routes,

prime spots and other notes onto the in-system base maps of their favorite waterways for convenient access during return trips.

You can even obtain a unified sonar/camera system including a split screen of high-resolution color video and colorized sonar readings with the various electronic features/options found on the previously mentioned separate pieces of equipment.

Using the electronic gear

Dave Lefebre, Erie County, is a professional angler who fishes multiple bass tournament circuits throughout the open water season. However, during the months of “waveless water” as he calls fishable ice, you will find him angling on the ice of Presque Isle Bay, Erie County; Lake LeBoeuf, Erie County; Edinboro Lake, Erie County; Canadohta Lake, Crawford County; and Lake Pleasant, Erie County, as well as Chautauqua Lake and Findley Lake in western New York.

Lefebre combines electronic equipment with pre-ice preparations to maximize his ability to see remaining submerged grass, baitfish, fish, other objects and his lure on specifically found and marked coordinates. “Spending so many hours with my electronics—GPS, camera, flasher—in a controlled waveless setting has helped me really understand what I am seeing and how fish relate to everything,” said Lefebre.

Lefebre prepares for ice fishing success even during the open-water season. “I get out in my boat with my ice fishing



Dave Lefebre is holding a hefty Yellow Perch that was shown on the camera screen at a depth of 8½ feet just a few moments prior to this photograph.



Steve Chaconas enjoyed watching fish approach and grab his lures.

GPS/sonar and mark potential targets. I do this as late as humanly possible; grass is rapidly dying off in the late fall, often breaking through ice with my boat. I want to find the best grass and also the holes in it. Most of the stumps, brush piles and points are already marked from past years in case a pattern develops. Then, I can run it all over the lake,” said Lefebre. He gathers his ice fishing gear, sets up his huts on land to check that all is in order, inspects/replaces line on his ice fishing rods/reels, makes sure all batteries are fully charged and ice augers start.

At the ice shore with gear loaded onto his ice shed, Lefebre pulls the supplies to a prior year’s successful area, drills a hole for the main underwater camera, studies the screen, drills a hole for the rotating camera, before next drilling multiple holes for the sonar transducer and actual fishing, all selected on the basis of what he’s seeing on the screens and knows from prior experience.

Lefebre ranks the flasher as his most important single electronic aid for ice fishing, because the built-in GPS helps him find “old holes” and see the lake contours. “The camera is great for identifying species, grass and other bottom structures, not to mention it’s just very cool to watch the fish swim by and bite your baits,” said Lefebre.

His tip for fellow ice anglers is to practice reading a flasher, and he recommends watching YouTube videos to learn how to interpret the flashes. An error many novice ice anglers make is to drop the bait vertically when a fish shows up on the flasher. Instead, keep the bait above the fish in the water column, thus resulting in more strikes/hits and more catches. And, always keep the batteries charged. ☐