



Southeast's BEST ICE PANFISH

LAKES

by Vic Attardo photos by the author

If Mother Nature doesn't let another ice fishing season slip away—that's a joke—without giving us the frozen material needed to play the game, you should find some good hard water angling for panfish in the southeast region.

A bevy of water bodies in Pennsylvania's lower corner are full of quality Bluegills, Pumpkinseeds and crappies. At some locations, you will also find perch, both white and yellow, to round out the mix.

When I'm looking for fishable ice in this region, the first place I head is Lake Ontelaunee, Berks County. At 1,083 acres, Lake Ontelaunee is mostly a shallow lake, at least where the best ice fishing is found. It has the deserved reputation of being an excellent ice Largemouth Bass lake, but it's also good for Bluegills and crappies. Plenty of anglers walk on water to visit the lake's skinny bays, where winter weeds grow like a summer lawn. Indeed, with no boats allowed, Lake Ontelaunee is never more popular than during the ice season.

The center of attention is Peter's Cove, which is spring fed by Peter's Creek. The back of the cove, below the elevated railroad tracks, is often ice free, so you have to watch where you slide, but there's plenty of frozen area to support dozens of winter anglers. Peter's Cove is a winter hotspot.

That said, the adjacent coves, closer to Route 73 and even the far side of the lake, get their share of ice anglers, where panfish are a solid draw.

Seven out of 10 ice anglers on Lake Ontelaunee work with tip-ups as they try for bass and pickerel with medium shiners. However, these baits also attract good size crappies. Here, you get quality over quantity, and Lake Ontelaunee's bays constantly serve up crappies over 12 inches.

When it comes to Bluegills on Lake Ontelaunee, it's usually the other way around, quantity over quality. The lake's Bluegills aren't exactly stunted mites, but they aren't Bluegill giants either. Eight inches are about tops here. However, if you work with a small jig and larva bait, you can catch loads of Lake Ontelaunee Bluegills.

If that's your goal, find the congested schools of Bluegills rather than the individual actors. On Lake Ontelaunee, schools of Bluegills will occupy areas like crowded commuters on a subway. From day-to-day, there's no telling exactly where they'll be located, but it will be around moderately dense weeds in 5 to 10 feet of water, generally on the shallower end of that range in Peter's Cove.



Waiting for a bite at Antietam Lake, Berks County.

Next on the panfish route, I go to two other Berks County locations, way south of Lake Ontelaunee. While the targets aren't twins, geography makes them closely related.

Hopewell Lake and Scotts Run Lake are both located in French Creek State Park, southern Berks County, but they are as different as cats and dogs. At 68 acres, Hopewell Lake runs the gamut of depths from a wide stretch at the upper end of the lake, near the parking area, that averages about 4 feet to another wide stretch at the lower end, toward the dam, with depths over 10 feet. On the other hand, Scotts Run Lake, at 22 acres, is more uniform across its oval design but still has a maximum depth of 22 feet with an average just over 7 feet. I find Scotts Run Lake a bowl while Hopewell Lake has plenty of dips and rises and is usually weedier.

About a mile apart, Scotts Run Lake is stocked with trout while Hopewell Lake is not. If panfish are your primary target, Hopewell Lake is the place to go. Scotts Run Lake isn't bad for panfish, but Hopewell Lake is better, particularly for quality.



The tell-tale wire of a transducer shows what it took to catch this crappie.



Whether I'm fishing for trout, perch or Bluegills, I pick an area, drop my legal allotment of five devices and wait for the fish to come to me. That's the best way on Antietam Lake. Your area may be dead for 30 minutes or more, but if the fish are hungry and moving, all of a sudden your rods light up.

Finally, I give a shout out to Deep Creek Lake, just outside Green Lane Park, Montgomery County. At 38 acres, Deep Creek Lake is known for its stocked trout, but it also has some big crappies. A few crappie trophies are taken from Deep Creek Lake every ice season, so it's worth working.

Other notable frozen panfish lakes in southeast Pennsylvania are Blue Marsh Lake, Berks County; Lake Nockamixon, Bucks County; Lake Towhee, Bucks County; and Mauch Chunk Lake, Carbon County. All are worth a visit. ☐

The reward at many southeast lakes is a colorful Bluegill



Waiting for a bite at Antietam Lake, Berks County.