

A person wearing a black snow suit, a green beanie, and orange and black patterned gear is using a red auger to drill a hole in the snow. The person is seen from the side, leaning forward. The background is a plain white surface.

The Ice Bite for Walleyes

by Mike Bleech
photos by the author

Most serious Walleye ice fishing enthusiasts will agree that the best ice fishing for Walleyes occurs through early ice. If the Walleye season is still open, late ice can be very good. However, the majority of ice fishing for Walleyes happens during midwinter. Catching Walleyes through the ice through midwinter typically requires anglers to get very serious with refined tactics.

During midwinter, the best time to ice fish for Walleyes is from about an hour before sunset until whenever the Walleyes stop hitting, and until about an hour after sunrise. It seems to usually get slow from about midnight until about 4:00 a.m. This does not mean that fishing for Walleyes during daylight hours is not worth the effort. Far from it.

Have a plan, starting with your ice fishing rigs. My own preference is four tip-ups and one jigging rod, all spooled with 8-pound-test special ice fishing monofilament line.

Tip-ups should be checked to ensure that the spools spin freely, and the flag trips when the spool turns. Check the drag of the jigging reel.

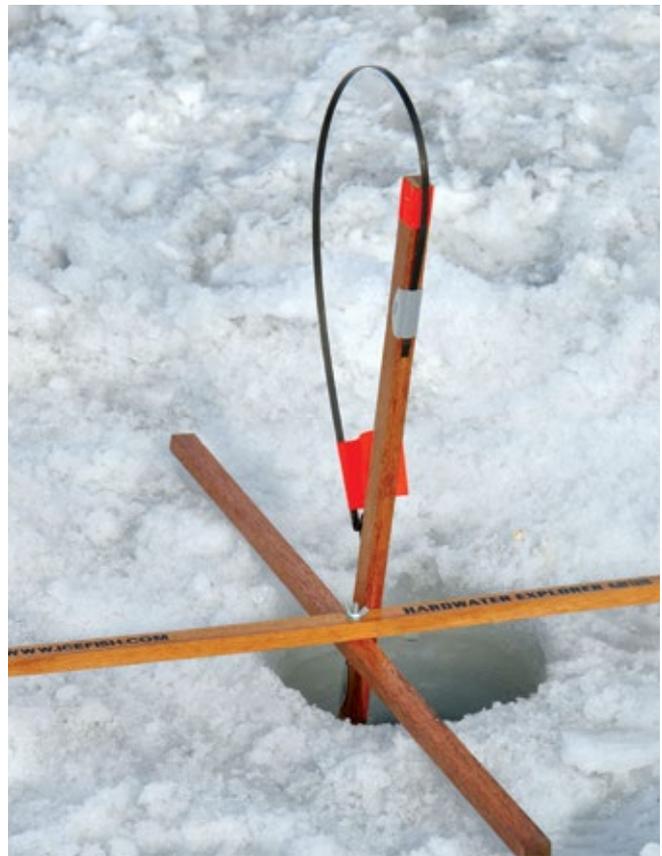
Use minimal weight on the line. At typical winter Walleye depths, usually one medium-sized splitshot is adequate. Obviously, the intent is to minimize anything unnatural that a biting

Walleye may feel. It does not take much to discourage a light biting winter Walleye.

For this reason, do not put a sinker at the end of the line. A Walleye will easily feel it. That is where the hook should be, with the splitshot about 12-inches above the hook.



Herb Wagner uses a portable sonar to check a fresh drilled hole. This minimizes time wasted in poor locations.



A properly tuned and set tip-up is a great tool for fishing for Walleyes through the ice.

Before baiting a hook, use a lead-clamp depth finder to locate bottom. When the weight hits bottom, with a tight line, mark the line at the waterline with a very small splitshot. This way you can easily set the bait as close, or as far, from bottom as you wish. The distance the line marker is above the waterline is the distance the bait is above bottom. Even though tip-up spools are below the waterline, you can easily compensate by pinching the line, then winding the line onto the spool to that point, plus the depth of the spool.

This method of finding bottom is very accurate. Baits can be set within 6 inches of the bottom, even half that, which is often where the bait should be when Walleyes are only slightly active.

Assuming that Walleyes will always be close to bottom is a mistake. If bait fish are suspended 10 feet off the bottom, that is where feeding Walleyes will be located. The best way to look for Walleyes is using sonar. Most serious ice anglers prefer flasher-type sonar, because it shows the current depth of fish. When you see marks that indicate large marks mixed with small marks, get your baits to that depth immediately.

While ice fishing, you will spend most of your time at the jigging rod, so set up the sonar in a hole a few feet from the jigging rod hole. Things can happen quickly. Frequently, check the sonar screen for any sign of Walleyes moving up the water column.

Sometimes, a little wiggle of the jigging rod from time to time, varying to almost constant wiggling or short jigs, may be the only thing that will get Walleyes excited enough to strike.

Decades ago, while running a bait and tackle shop, ice anglers often complained about missing hits. A factory representative for a hook company suggested a wide gap hook with an off-set point. Shortly after receiving the first shipment, I was getting positive comments, and all of the regulars were soon using these hooks.

Hook minnows lightly behind the dorsal fin. This will hang the minnow at a natural angle. If the bait is large enough, it will not get damaged.

Though not absolutely necessary, tip jigs with minnows. These minnows do not need to be as big as the minnows used on tip-ups, because the jig adds to the bait size.

In waterways that frequently produce large Walleyes, midwinter is the time to try to catch them. If you intend to concentrate only on big Walleyes, use larger minnows, chubs or suckers, as long as 8 inches, for bait. For other Walleyes, 4- to 6-inches is fine. For tipping jigs, 3 inches is about the correct size.

Make sure your jigging rod is firmly attached to something to prevent it from being pulled through the ice when you are away from the jigging rod to check tip-ups, or for any other reason. □