



Icing Perch

in Northwest Pennsylvania

Black: *What are your favorite lakes in northwest Pennsylvania for icing perch?*

Graham: In order, they are Presque Isle Bay, Erie County; Kahle Lake, Venango County; and Pymatuning Reservoir, Crawford County. Plus, there is a lake near my home for nice perch that many people don't ice fish—Tionesta Lake, Forest County. Use caution when entering the ice at this flood-control lake due to possible water level changes.

Lefebre: Hands down, Presque Isle Bay, Erie County, is the number one perch water in Pennsylvania. People come from all over Pennsylvania and neighboring states. Safe ice usually comes late to Presque Isle Bay due to the influence of Lake Erie. If you are a novice to the bay, stick to Misery Bay, head of the bay areas or follow tracks of previous anglers to specific areas on the open section of the bay. Second on my list is Pymatuning Reservoir, Crawford County. In recent years, perch at Pymatuning Reservoir rival the size of perch at Presque Isle Bay. For a change of pace, I may go to Lake Pleasant, Erie County. This trout lake supports a population of jumbo perch.

Black: *What do you consider a “keeper-size” perch during the winter?*

Graham: I consider 8 inches as a “keeper” on most inland waters, but the biggest ones come from Presque Isle Bay. My largest Presque Isle Bay ice perch was 15 inches.

by Darl Black
photos by the author

Based on my interaction with winter ice anglers, I feel confident in naming the top three most targeted species during hard water season in northwest Pennsylvania: Bluegills, Black Crappies and Yellow Perch. Ranking among those three is tougher, since most panfish anglers accept all three in their bucket and enjoy catching whichever species is biting at the time.

However, those who focus on a particular species will use specific lures and presentation techniques to improve their odds. Furthermore, there's the added benefit of fishing certain waters that host quantity and quality of the desired panfish.

If Yellow Perch is your favorite, settle back in your easy chair with a cup of hot chocolate as I share the interviews of two dedicated hard water anglers.

Although only in his 20s, R.J. Graham, Tionesta, is one of the best all-around anglers that I have met. Dave Lefebre, Erie, is a well-known professional angler on national bass tours. He is as dedicated to ice fishing during the winter as he is to bass fishing the rest of the year. Between the two of them, they have over 50 winters of experience on the ice.

Lefebre: I spend most of my perch fishing time on Presque Isle Bay. I routinely catch 13- to 14-inch perch. The minimum size I keep is 12 inches. However, on other inland waters, I may keep 10-inch perch. My largest perch through the ice was 2.5 pounds from Presque Isle Bay, of course.

Black: Winter season is broken into stages—early, mid and late ice. What do you consider the best stage to catch perch?

Graham: Actually, I have two favorite times—first ice and late ice. During first safe ice, perch are very active and easier to catch. Then, during late ice, perch are getting ready to spawn and have put on a lot of weight. Just before ice-out is the time for really big ones.

Lefebre: I like all stages of ice, but early ice is my favorite on Presque Isle Bay. Schools of perch move into the bay from Lake Erie during the fall. When we get our first safe ice, the perch are deep and bunched up in the channel basin feasting on Emerald Shiners still moving into the bay. They are easy to locate. By mid-winter, perch have moved onto the shallower flats and spread out. It becomes more difficult to pinpoint perch on the sonar signal amid the weeds.

Black: What is the best time of day to catch perch?

Graham: That's easy. Set up in late afternoon and prepare for evening. Perch really turn on right at dark.

Lefebre: Big perch are far pickier with regard to weather conditions than crappies or Bluegills. On sunny days, it's going to be low light periods—either first light or last light. On cloudy days, perch may bite all day long.

Black: How do you locate perch in the winter?

Graham: My search begins on inland lakes before ice forms. I'm out fishing during the last open water, identifying where various panfish are located and using a GPS to mark these spots. At first safe ice, perch are going to be in the spots they were before the lake froze. Sometimes, those winter start points change due to weed growth—that's why I check each fall. On other waters, ice fishing areas are based on years of success on the ice. My portable sonar is my most important tool in locating schools of perch.

Lefebre: GPS marking of perch in the fall is necessary to find perch at first ice. I look for small oddities along the bottom where perch may stage. When I hit the ice, I use the GPS to put me on those spots. After drilling a number of test holes, I move both sonar transducer and underwater camera from hole to hole to find fish. I can say with confidence that the flasher-style sonar and camera are both critical to my success.

Black: What are your most successful presentations?



Select waters in northwest Pennsylvania offer ice fishing opportunities for Yellow Perch.



Some ice anglers use both a portable sonar and an underwater camera to identify and assist in catching perch.



Winter perch caught on camera looking for a meal.



For icing perch, popular lures include small heavyweight jigs, jigging spoons and Jigging Rap lures.

Graham: My favorite set-up is a 23- to 26-inch medium-light or light spinning rod with a built in spring bobber on the tip. Some reels are spooled with straight 4-pound fluorocarbon, and others are spooled with thin 10-pound ice braid with 2-pound fluorocarbon leader. My go-to bait is a small Kastmaster Jigging Spoon. I use small movements of the spoon—not ripping motion. When I see a fish move into the sonar screen and apparently looking at my bait, I will twitch the spoon higher in the water column. Many times, I simply shake the spoon. While actively jigging, I always have a second rod in another hole rigged with a small ice jig tipped with maggots or perhaps an Emerald Shiner. These presentations produce perch on all the waters I fish.

Lefebre: I never use live minnows for perch. Nor do I use jigging spoons anymore; spoons require a heftier rod and line than I use today. My perch fishing outfit these days is spooled with 2-pound-test line on a very light rod. My most effective lure is the tiniest Jigging Rap—a minnow-shaped weight with a small treble hook in the center and a hook molded into each end. Work it with light erratic pops. Do not hold it still. Keep it moving, so perch do not get a good look at it. Unlike crappies, which only move up to bait, perch will follow the bait up or down. When you see the lure mark and fish mark overlap on the screen, set the hook. ☐