

MAXIMIZING YOUR TIME ON THE ICE



by Jeff Woleslagle photos by the author

We arrived at the lake and loaded the sleds for the drag out onto the ice on a crisp, late January morning with the sun starting to clear the mountaintop to the east. The air temperature was in the mid-20s, and the wind chill was much colder. When our fishing crew hit the water, everyone went to work. Fanning out in several directions,



A pair of Bluegills on the ice.

we drilled holes over different depths, set the tip-ups and began checking the open holes with the sonar units to determine which ones may be productive spots for jigging. The first fish came on a tip-up, baited with a live shiner. It was a beautiful Chain Pickerel. Minutes later, another tip-up produced an even larger Chain Pickerel that took several long runs before coming through the ice. A short time later, a school of active Bluegills was located, and an occasional Yellow Perch was mixed in. By the end of the day, we put a good mix of fish on the ice including a trophy-sized Chain Pickerel. We had steady action all morning long.

I learned a long time ago that ice fishing can be downright uncomfortable at times, and because the weather can often dictate how long you are on the water, it pays to have a game plan to maximize your time outside. Before we even loaded our vehicles, we had a discussion based on our internet research about which area of the lake we would target, what ice conditions we could expect and what other anglers were reporting. Whether you are fishing solo or with a group, you will want to test several depths quickly to zero in on where the fish are located. One of the biggest mistakes I see people make on the ice is remaining in one location for too long. In general, if I do not see action in 30 minutes or less, I know it is time to move on. Of course, there will be days when the barometric pressure

or other factors put the fish in a funk, making it difficult to get bites, but there are usually at least some active fish somewhere.

Much can be done in the comfort of your home before you embark on an ice fishing adventure that will help an angler have more time on ice. Rig your jigging rods and tip-ups before you leave to save cold fingers once you are on the ice. With my fishing group, as soon as the holes are drilled, we are dropping baits. We try a variety of baits, both natural and artificial, and communicate constantly about what is working and where it is working. If we discover that most of the fish are in 20 feet of water and hugging the bottom, we quickly focus our efforts in that zone. If the fish seem to be tight to weed edges or hovering near submerged structures, we will target those areas and move our gear to these spots. Internet research can be a big help as well. Read the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's (PFBC's) regional reports on their website to see where fish are being caught. The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources Bureau of State Parks posts weekly ice conditions for most of its lakes throughout the winter. There are also chat rooms that help ice anglers connect with each other and relay what they are catching and where. When you find fish, mark the location with a GPS, so you can quickly find it again on a future outing. Save the coordinates,



Ben Duncan with a Largemouth Bass.

as spots are often consistently good year after year. Pay close attention to other anglers on the ice as well. Most ice anglers do not mind sharing information. I have learned a great deal by striking up a conversation. The PFBC has placed artificial structures in many lakes in Pennsylvania, and those locations can be great locations to target.

When you get home, prepare your gear for the next outing. It may be tempting to enjoy the inside warmth and put it off, but by reorganizing and restocking your gear, you can be ready quickly the next time an ice fishing opportunity arises. I also like to take a few minutes to write down what was caught, the conditions, the location on the lake and which baits were effective. Keeping a log helps me remember what was productive and to form a game plan the next time I encounter similar conditions.

By planning ahead, being organized and doing a little research, you can maximize your time on the ice this winter. ☑



The author's niece, Sydney Woleslagle, with a Chain Pickerel that took a live shiner.