

“Next Level” Ice Fishing

By TubeDude

Utah ice fishing was generally pretty basic in the early days. We could only use one rod. So that was usually all we took out on the ice. And it was likely to be the same rod we used all year, rather than a specially designed ice fishing rod.

Nice ice fishing sleds were not yet available in Utah so we usually carried all of our gear in a plastic bucket. That bucket was also used as a seat while fishing, and later to carry the fish (if any) along with the other gear back to our vehicles.

Power augers? Manpower only. Those who were not still using axes, spud bars or shovels to chip holes in the ice might have an early model hand auger. But even those old orange man-killers were literally “cutting edge” stuff.

Fish finders? No fancy ice sonars with video game imaging for watching our jigs and the fish and how they come together. Strictly the “biblical system”...seek and ye shall find. Maybe. Unless you had past knowledge of the best places to fish under the ice you spent a lot of time fishing in empty holes...not knowing whether there were fish or not.

Today ice fishing is big business in Utah...and around the country. This has given ice anglers a whole lot more tools and options than those of us who started ice fishing several decades ago. We now have an amazing number of choices in tents, augers, sonar, clothing, sleds, rods, reels, lines...and, of course, lures and baits.

Fortunately, there are a whole lot of knowledgeable ice anglers who have helped refine tackle and techniques to a much higher level. We also have the benefit of the Internet, with an abundance of videos and websites to help the newbies accelerate their learning curves and to enjoy greater success in less time on the ice.

In the following pages I will attempt to download some of the little “tricks of the trade” in ice fishing. Some I have “borrowed” from others. Some I claim credit for coming up with all by my ownself. I pride myself on having a bit of creativity and I am always tweaking and messing with stuff.

The main idea is that just about anybody can tromp out onto the ice...using almost any kind of tackle and bait...fishing almost anywhere on any given lake...and they just might catch a fish...or even a lot of fish. But fishing in the exactly the right place at the right time...with just the right tackle and technique...can vastly improve your percentages.

ICE SAFETY

What does ice safety have to do with next level fishing? Just this. You will have a lot better chance to apply advanced techniques if you remain dry and alive. There are lists and websites detailing the equipment to take...and the chances not to take...while ice fishing. Learn the basic rules of good safety and practice them on every trip.

CHOOSING VENUES

Your choice of where to go on any specific ice trip should be influenced by several factors. Early and late in the season, safety should be especially important. How thick is the ice and what are the snow/slush conditions...or are there open areas, pressure ridges or gaps between the ice sheet and shoreline access. If you don't know...don't go. And if you do go and find poor access or ice conditions go home or go elsewhere.

Good intel helps. Better to go where you know the fishing has been good...for the species you seek...than to chance it on unknown ice. It's great to explore new spots...or to revisit old spots. But there is nothing better than accurate and up to date reports.

Personal knowledge and experience. Most of us have our favorite venues...from successful trips in the past. And it helps to have some GPS waypoints to help shorten our search for a productive spot. But your decision of where and how to fish should be based upon current water levels, past experience under the same set of conditions, etc...or the ability to choose other spots where you did well under these same circumstances.

Your targeted species should also influence your destination. If you are after trout only, then choose a water that has your preferred species. Ditto for perch, crappies, etc. And if you are after larger fish, stay away from spots that are known for an overabundance of dinks. You cain't ketch 'em where they ain't. Optimism alone will not guarantee that you will catch the only big fish in the lake.

Personal capabilities. If you are young and healthy you can comfortably hike a ways to the ice and then pull a heavy sled around all day. But if you have some physical limitations, don't risk an injury or a heart attack. Choose a small lake with easy access. If not, then use a snowmobile, wheeler, snow dog or other powered device...or at least con someone else into pulling your heavy sled for you.

PICKING THE RIGHT TIME

Depending on the venue you choose...and the targeted species...you will want to plan your arrival for the best potential results. On some lakes...for some species...it may not make a lot of difference. But, on most trips there will be "windows" when the chosen species will be more active. And those "peak periods" can change often.

A good example would be walleye in shallow lakes like Utah Lake and Willard. It can be a good idea to get on the ice before daybreak, drill a few holes with a quiet hand auger or electric powered auger. Then allow things to quiet down before beginning to fish. Plant yourself over your first hole and limit your movement. Stay there...working your lure...until you are convinced there are no fish. Then move quietly to your next predrilled hole. Work each hole until you catch fish...or not. There is never a guarantee that you will score, but you will do better with this system than if you showed up after everybody else and started punching holes with a power auger.

Perch bite best during bright days. So you don't have to be on the ice at first light. But if you are also trying for trout you can sometimes get there early and ice a couple of those while waiting for the perch to wake up. Also, perch go to bed after dark. It is rare to catch perch once the sun sets. So forget night fishing for them.

Crappies can be caught all day...on some waters...some of the time. If you can see them on sonar, chances are that they will hit something presented at the right depth in the right way. However, there are some waters in which fishing for crappies can be much better after dark than during the day. There is a hardcore group of Pineview crappieites who do not even go on the ice until almost dark. Then they set up over proven mud bottoms in proven depths and wait for the nightly "bloom" of zooplankton just above the bottom. That's when the crappies come in and fishing can get frantic...or not.

Trout often bite all day and all night. A lot depends on light and clarity conditions. It also depends on what the trout are using as primary forage...zooplankton, small minnows or aquatic invertebrates like insect larvae or snails.

The main trick on most days (or nights) is first finding at what depth the trout are coming through and then presenting your offerings either at that level or slightly above. They will come up in the water column to hit your jigs but seldom dive down for something below them.

Fishing success will vary throughout the ice fishing months based upon changes in snow pack on the ice, changing water chemistry, species spawn cycles, etc. Early in the season the ice is usually clear and there is little snow cover to reduce light levels at any depth. But by February into March there have usually been several heavy snow falls, thawing, refreezing and more snow. That can greatly reduce visibility at any depth...so it can be more effective at times to bring out the glow goodies.

The longer the ice stays on a lake the lower the oxygen levels become...to the point that fish become more sluggish and less active. This results in days when you see more on TV than on the ice. In waters with abundance of underwater weed growth, there is usually some dieoff and decomposition of the vegetation...resulting in whacked out pH and oxygen.

Another thing that can change during a prolonged ice covering is the physical condition of the fish. For example, in lakes with a population of spring-spawning rainbows you will start catching colored up male rainbows...with well-developed milt sacs and pale flesh. And the females will have ripening eggs in the ovaries. They still hit well and fight well, but are not as good to keep for the table.

Perch go through some changes under ice too. Even at first ice, the larger perch you catch will be fat females with developing egg masses. But they are still active and will hit larger lures with larger pieces of bait. However, as they get closer to their early spring spawn the eggs totally fill their abdominal cavities and their feeding activity drops way off. They no longer attack large offerings but will still sip and mouth tiny jigs with just a wisp of crawler...or a perch eye. And the bite is often so light that without some kind of indicator you will never know they sampled your wares.

FISHING THE RIGHT SPOTS

Once you reach the ice on your chosen venue you need to decide where to start. If the lake is about the same level you are used to fishing it, you have an advantage. You don't have to factor in any depth changes in your decision. And if you have GPS waypoints you are even further ahead.

But what if this is your first trip to the lake? If you are lucky, you can follow the trails in the snow made by previous ice anglers. If you find an area with signs of activity...and some blood spots on the ice...that might be a good place to drill some holes or to open up some left before. If you get lucky, the fish will still be around. If not, you can at least get a depth reading as a target to look for in drilling your own holes later.

If you are the first one on the ice...in brand new snow...then you gotta start drillin' and lookin'. It helps if you already know a bit about the lake, from fishing it in open water. You can search out underwater points where the bottom extends out from shore into deeper water. These structures often attract and hold fish. Drill holes out along them at different depths and use your sonar to locate fish.

If there is an old streambed running through the lake, try drilling on the contour edges as well as in the middle. Fish often use these old channels as fish "highways" and there will be fish moving through from time to time.

The same can be said for wherever a steep bank comes down into the lake. Drill a series of holes at different depths and try to find the depth preferred by your quarry.

There are a few sonar models that allow you to "shoot through the ice"...without having to drill a hole first. These have transducers that you can place flat on clear ice...after splashing on a bit of water...and shoot down through the ice and the water column to see what is below.

By rigging up your sonar in your sled...with the transducer free to set down wherever you stop...you can cover a lot of ice quickly and eliminate a lot of fishless water before you find enough fish to make a stop worthwhile. Just carry a container of warmed water and dribble a bit before putting the 'ducer down on every stop.

This "running and gunning" approach only works on new clear ice...or on ice with a thin snow covering that can be easily swept aside for the trial shoot. Cloudy ice or ice with a lot of cracks and bubbles will not work well. But this tactic can put you on fish a lot faster than having to drill a hole at every stop. I have had days on new ice in which I had to "quick draw" over many acres of water before I finally found a concentration of fish.



This is a "Showdown" vertical display sonar rigged for "run and gun" through-the-ice prospecting. The whole unit is in an easy to carry case. If you bring along an insulated container with warm water you can make a quick stop, dribble some water on the ice, set the transducer in the water and get an instant reading of what is below. There appears to be no fishy presence in this shot on 12" of clear hard ice at Starvation.

ASSEMBLING YOUR TACKLE

Your personal preference in rods and reels is not nearly as important as how well you know how to use them. There are more than a few ice anglers that use that stuff only to store line...and prefer to hold the line in their hands to feel and hook fish. And they often do quite well by "handlining". It can be fun too.

Even the most experienced and successful ice anglers cannot all agree on the best lengths, materials and actions on their ice rods. Some of that has to do with what species they fish for...or what types of baits and lures they fish most. They try to get a balance between rod length, action, strength, sensitivity, etc. And personal preferences go all over the map on those things.

The one thing I have trouble understanding is why someone would want to fish with a super flimsy 18 inch rod...even in the confines of a low-ceiling ice tent. With a super short rod you might as well be using a handline. And you would probably have a better hookup percentage with one.

Those wimpy little noodle rods don't have enough backbone to set the hook in a decent perch, much less something bigger and badder. I laugh every time I see someone throw their shoulder out of joint when they stand up and whiff those "fairy wands" in an effort to connect...usually followed by "I missed him...again."

Some who prefer rods with a softer tip make the argument that they are better able to see bites. If that is the only reason why they sacrifice fish hooking and control for more sensitivity, there is always the potential addition of a wire “spring bobber” on the end of the rod. It will show the “whisper” bites but still allow you to set the hook firmly.



Bite sensitive “spring bobbers” attach easily to the ends of rods. If you need help seeing light bites these can help a lot. And if you have a bit of backbone in your rod it will provide all the hook setting power you need.

There has been a noticeable swing toward the use of longer rods...with more backbone. A lot of “seasoned” ice anglers are now waving ice sticks from 36” to 46”. And there is a wider choice in longer lengths and stiffer actions from most dealers.

One principle at work here is being able to move more line on the hookset with a longer rod. Less need to stand up and throw your arms skyward to make a connection with a whippy short stick. A quick upward whip of the wrist...with a longer and firmer rod...moves more line faster and with more authority.

The other principle is sticking the hook. I like to use the example that when you want to put a nail into a board you don’t push it in...you hammer it in. The same principle applies to setting the hook in a fish. If you just pull on the hook you may stick the point in a bit, but not enough to go past the barb and keep the fish on the line during the battle. You will lose a lot of fish between hookset and the ice hole. But if you whack ‘em hard on the hookset...or even make a followup hookset...the hook is driven past the barb and it is game on. So, longer rods with more backbone will land you more big fish...or just more fish all together.

Reels? Again it is a matter of personal preference. No single reel is exactly right for everybody. Your choice should be based on the type of line you will be using, depths you will be fishing, species you will be seeking, lures you will be using, etc.

Ultralight spinning reels seem to be the choice for most ice anglers. They are simple to use and pretty much the same as what most anglers use the rest of the year. They are familiar and comfortable. If you choose a spinning reel, make sure it has a good drag system and that it is properly lubricated to function well in cold weather. Reels with a heavy thick lubricant often get stiff in the cold and using them is a chore.

If you are fishing deeper water, with bigger lures, for bigger fish you may want to consider using a small baitcaster. The line comes directly off the reel...with no coils and loops...and there is more control when hooking and playing a larger fish...especially with a properly set smooth drag. The one thing some baitcaster ice anglers dislike is the propensity for ice to build up in the small eye of the levelwind mechanism.

Inline ice fishing reels are a fairly new addition to the market. These are a kind of hybrid between single action fly reels and baitcast reels. They hang down under the rod, like a fly reel, but have multiplying gears like a baitcaster. And they can release the line on freespool. They are available in left or right hand retrieve. More and more ice addicts are switching to these reels.



More and more ice anglers are opting for “inline” ice reels. They have right or left hand retrieve options and hang under the rod like a spinning reel or fly reel. The big plus for these reels is the reduction in line twist.

Lines? Lots of options. To properly choose the right line for your brand of ice fishing you need to consider line strength, flexibility, visibility, abrasion resistance, water absorption, icing tendencies, etc.

Your choice of line strength should be based upon the potential for hooking larger fish...rather on the size of the average fish you will be catching. It's much better to catch fewer dinks than to lose a braggin' size one at the hole because of poor line.

Some ice lines are super limp and resist “coiling”. However, the softer the line the less abrasion resistance in most cases. If you are fishing very light lures you do not want coils in your line. They just about eliminate any chance of seeing a bite...if the fish has to pull the kinks out of the line before a bite registers. On the other hand, big fish will often circle the hole a few times during the battle...rubbing the line on the rough edges. Poor abrasion resistance can result in losing some bigger fish.

A lot of ice anglers seem to subscribe to the fly fisherman's thinking...that super fine lines are necessary to reduce spooking the fish. There are times when fishing in clear shallow water for persnickety bluegills that line visibility can be important. But much ice fishing is done in deeper water, under snow-covered ice...with poor visibility. Under those conditions the fish do not see even much stronger lines. Instead of hair-thin fluoro many anglers do fine with 8-10 pound mono. And they lose fewer large fish at the holes too.

A few words on braids and “super lines”. The biggest positives are the lack of stretch and the super sensitivity...to help feel even the lightest bites. However, some of these lines tend to absorb water and freeze up. Not good for ice fishing.

WHICH SONAR?

Flashers, graphs, down-imaging, side-scan...circular display or vertical? A whole lot of technology options for ice anglers. But, as with most other components of the sport your ultimate choice is a matter of both personal preference and budget.

If all you want from sonar is finding the depth and seeing some fish, almost anything will do. But if you want to be able to play video games...bringing your offerings and the fish together on screen and then teasing them into biting...you may have to invest more than you want in order to get what you want.

Perhaps the single greatest feature you should have on your sonar is “real time” display. It should be able to show you not only the fish...and at what depth they are swimming...but should also show your jigs as they move up or down in the water column. This allows you to intercept fish coming through at a depth different than what you have been fishing...and hopefully to entice them to munch.

On the other hand, there are still ice anglers who like having a continuous running display on a recorded track...like displays on open water sonars. And it is true that a fish moving in and out of your transducer cone quickly will never be noticed by you if you have a flasher type sonar. So your choice will depend on how much you watch your sonar and how much you just check it periodically to see what is going on in the area.

The simultaneous positive and negative of sonar is that it shows the presence of fish. But it also lets you know that your jig, bait or presentation sucks...if you can't get bit. At least it provides the opportunity to keep changing up everything until you find something that works...maybe.

It pays to spend more time studying your options carefully before plunking down your net spendable for a new sonar setup. Besides reading all of the online reviews and manufacturers' hype you should "ask the man who owns one"...getting feedback from others who are using the unit you are thinking about. Even better is to wangle an invite to go on the ice with someone who has that unit and let them put it through its paces for you.

The bottom line is that a good sonar system is absolutely essential to anyone who truly wants to fish with finesse. Without sonar, you are limited to fishing in whatever holes you drill and hoping for the best. Sonar will let you know if there are fish present...and at what depth...and will allow you to watch their reactions to your offerings and presentation. It will let you know what works...and what doesn't work...so you can make adjustments "on the fly". Sometimes the most minor change in technique can make all the difference in how the fish react.

WHICH AUGER?

It's difficult to imagine going ice fishing without an auger. Even the simplest hand-crank auger is infinitely preferable to beating a hole in the ice with an axe or crowbar. And for early season ice fishing...when the ice is hard, clear and less than six inches thick...most anglers can get by with the hand crank. After all, they are lighter and the better models can chew through a few inches of ice...quickly and quietly.

There are still a lot of noisy gas augers on the ice each year...much to the dismay of "enlightened" ice anglers who have "evolved" to the quieter electric models. Guys who formerly thought nothing of moving in near someone else and firing up their gas engine models...and drilling endless holes...now get torqued whenever they hear anybody else's gas auger...even some distance away.

Do gas augers really spook fish? That depends on who you talk to. Some will say that all of the fish on their sonars disappeared as soon as someone nearby started drilling holes with theirs. Others will say that the noise seemed to bring in some fish...just to check out what the commotion was all about. It probably goes both ways. But if you are into finesse ice fishing, the more quiet your presence the better chance you have of finding and catching fish...with some species on some waters more influenced by noise than others.

STEALTH MODE

What is stealth mode? Basically it is organizing and coordinating your entry on the ice, your movement across the ice, drilling holes and actual fishing movements to be as quiet and minimal as possible. If you are fishing in deep water...like Bear Lake or Flaming Gorge...it is not nearly as critical to be so quiet. But on shallow lakes...like Utah Lake, Willard Bay and some trout waters...excess noise and commotion will spook the fish away from you and greatly reduce your chances of success.

SELECTING BAITS

We all have days when nothing we serve up seems to be on the menu for the fish. But we see other anglers hauling up fish after fish. And when we swallow our pride and go ask them “Whatcha usin’?” we find them baiting with something we have never tried before...or at least didn’t think to bring on this trip.

The good news is that we usually don’t have to carry more than two or three kinds of bait on any given trip...if we have done our homework and planned accordingly. It helps to have past experience on your targeted lake...and with the species you anticipate catching. What has worked well in the past is likely to be a good choice on your next trip. But if this is a first time trip to a specific water, you should seek out reports or try to chat with someone else who knows it well. And be sure to take a likely range of baits.

Along with the actual type of bait, you need to consider the amount of bait to use. Should you use a whole crawler...or just a tiny pinch on the tip of a micro jig? Early in the season the fish are more active...and will be more likely to aggressively chomp bigger lures and bigger baits. That’s when you can add larger pieces of cut bait or whole minnows.

For some species...at some times of year...less is more. And you will get more hits on just a tiny bit of “sweetener” on a small jig...especially late in the ice season when light levels are lower under heavy snow cover and water chemistry is degrading under prolonged ice cover. When fish metabolism slows down, they eat less...and smaller bites.

A good example would be perch. Large females...with body cavities full of eggs, ahead of the impending early spawn...cannot hold large meals. And they are moving slowly. So a tiny jig with a tiny bit of worm...or a perch eye...will get more munches than something a lot bigger. Even just a drop of scent on a bare lure is sometimes the ticket.

SELECTING THE RIGHT LURE

There are a bewildering number of sizes, shapes, colors and actions available for ice lures. Most of them will work...at some time...on some waters...for some species. And some ice fishing lures will catch fish without any “sweetener” added. However, in a vast majority of ice fishing situations baited lures work far better than those without. And our lures simply become BDS...bait delivery systems.



This picture shows some of the more popular types of ice fishing lures...and some of the colors favored by most ice anglers...if not by most fish.

The size and shape of your lure should be influenced by the species you are targeting and the bait you are using. For example, early season white bass are aggressive and hammer large lures and big pieces of bait...like crawler or white bass meat. On the other hand, late season perch may only respond to very small jigs with just a pinch of crawler.

What is the best lure color for ice fishing? That’s like asking “How high is up?” There is no universal definitive answer. Fish do not see colors the same way we do. In many cases they respond best to colors they can see the best under prevailing conditions of depth, light, water clarity, etc.

But there is no disputing that on some days...under some conditions...one color will decidedly outproduce other colors. And the next day...or later on the same day...that color might not get a sniff. It's always good to have a selection.

Fish (and fishermen) do have a few colors that seem to always be favored. Basic white, chartreuse and black are three such colors. After that we have hot red, hot pink, hot orange and other "fluorescent" colors. But don't overlook the drab basics...like brown, green and purple. In fact, in early season shallow waters the fish are still accustomed to finding and eating natural food items...like aquatic invertebrates...most of which are pretty drab but still visible in the existing light conditions.

How about glow? Again, early in the season...with good visibility and active fish...you may not do well with glow goodies. But after the fish slow down and the water quality and visibility degrades a bit, a bit of glow can help bring in fish from a greater distance and help stimulate at least a reaction bite. Ultimately, it will be your choice of baits and how you rig them that seals the deal. Remember, the lures are usually just the bait delivery system.

RIGGING UP

There are countless ways to rig for ice fishing. The most basic is simply tying on a jig, adding some sweetener and sending it down. But, depending on water depth, species targeted, type and size jig, etc. there are a lot of different ways to rig to improve success.

If you are fishing a 1/4 oz. or larger jig or spoon, you don't have to worry about adding any weight to help get your offering down. Even a 1/8 oz. jig usually has enough weight to get down and maintain "touch". But if you are fishing bitty bites of 1/32 oz. or lighter, you will likely need some help. It can take forever for super light jigs to reach the bottom in water deeper than 15 feet or so...and you can't feel them at any depth.

One way to add weight is to clamp on a split shot a foot or so above the small jig. Another way is to fish "dropshot" style...with a weight (or heavier jig) on the end of your line and the light jig tied in above it. The main idea is that you need enough weight not only to sink your tiny jig but to keep the line straight and without coils or kinks. If you don't have a direct connection to what's at the business end of your line you will miss seeing or feeling strikes...and will miss more hooksets.

A variation on the former theme is to fish a tandem rig...with two light jigs (with the same or different weights). This not only adds a bit of sinkability, but also may provide extra attraction to the fishies. The biggest downside to fishing a tandem rig beneath the ice is the potential for one of the hooks to snag on the ice while you are fighting a fish...and to either break the line or give slack to the fish and allow it to wiggle free.

An increasingly popular method of simultaneously adding weight and extra attraction is to use a "flasher" lure on the line ahead of the lighter jig. Brightly finished spoons such as Kastmasters, Swedish Pimples or others are popular as flashers. Most anglers prefer to remove the hooks and split rings from them before tying them on the end of their lines. Then they tie a leader of 8 – 14 inches below the flasher and knot on their choice of jigs.

Having a flashy attractor on your line above your baited jig can really help bring in more fish from a greater distance. These work especially well for trout...and even kokanee. But when perch or crappies get picky and only want small stuff, the attractors bring them in even though they usually tip down and sip in the smaller jig below.

PRESENTATION TECHNIQUES

The longer you fish through the ice, the more little tricks and techniques you are likely to develop. The good news is that on those days when you quickly find active fish...and they jump all over whatever you send down...it doesn't take a lot of finesse to put some fish on the ice. However, we all have days when we see a lot more "on TV" (sonar) than on our lines. That's when it pays to know a few optional tricks to get the fish to open their mouths for you.

One of the first things to employ is correctly positioning your offerings at the right depth. If the fish are right on the bottom, fish just above the bottom. If they are several feet off the bottom, keep your goodies either right in the "zone" or slightly above it. Most fish will rise up in the water column to hit an attractive baited jig...but few will move down to pick up something below them.

Perch are sometimes known to lay with their bellies in the mud...not even showing up on some sonars. But if they are there, you can sometimes tease them into biting. One of the first things to try is to "pound the bottom" with your jig when it first touches down...raising a little mud cloud. Then slowly "shiver lift" it up a few inches...watching your sonar screen. If your tactic is working, you will see fish marks detaching from the bottom and following your jig. Stop the lift and just wiggle it a bit. That is sometimes just enough to get bit. If not, keep raising the jig a few inches at a time...until the fish either chomp it...or drift back down to the bottom.

A lot of veteran perch jerkers have refined this "cat and mouse" approach to the extent that they can be selective in the size of the perch they catch. Those with more sophisticated electronics become skilled at recognizing fish size by the screen images. And they find that often the larger fish will move up higher in the water column to follow and munch a retreating morsel. So, on any given day...depending on what they are observing...they can increase the size of their average catch simply by how high they can bring the fish up off the bottom.

Ice anglers with quality underwater cameras sometimes have the best of it. When perch are slow and finicky...especially during late season when they are full of eggs and sluggish in the low oxygen and whacked out pH...it may be almost impossible to detect the subtle mouthings of your baited bitty jig. But, if you can watch your jig disappear into a fish's mouth...even though it does not register the slightest motion on your rod tip...you can set the hook before they spit it out. Even just a few such "finessed" fish is sometimes more satisfying than a pile of aggressive ones that smack your jigs.

What about trout? Depending on water, species and time of year they can be anywhere from the bottom to the top. And many times they come through somewhere in between. A lot of trout are hooked by perch jerkers working the bottom. Browns are one species more likely to hit near the bottom. But splake, macks and even cutts can hang near the bottom too. And tiger trout can show up at any level.

Rainbows are well known for cruising through at mid-depth while anglers are working the lower regions for perch. That's why it pays to watch your sonar for blips in the upper layers...and to either have a rod preset at that depth or to quickly reel up to intercept them as they come through.

One effective tactic is to have a rod rigged with a flasher and jig setup...dead-sticked at or above the depth you are seeing occasional trout. Then, when a fish shows on sonar you reach over and give that rig a wiggle or two to create some attention.

STRIKE DETECTION

Knowing when you have an “inquiry” is probably one of the biggest keys to success with ice fishing. Early in the season, when the fish are more active, the ice thinner and less snow covered and the fish have not been pressured as much, the bites are more frequent and easier to detect. But as the season wears on and conditions worsen for the fish...and fishermen...bites are fewer and harder to detect.

No matter whether you are relying strictly on sight or feel to detect strikes...or whether you have a spring bobber or float setup...constant vigilance and awareness is a key to success. Failure to fish with positive expectation and readiness to react in a split second can make a world of difference in your fish count at the end of the day.

We all love it when fish grab our jigs and haul the rod tip down. That makes it a lot easier to detect strikes and hook fish. Unfortunately, even on good days, some bites will not register anything more than a slight shift of the line in the hole...or a mere twitch or wiggle on the rod tip. And even with a delicate spring bobber you still have to remain alert for the slightest “change in the Force”.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for many ice anglers to detect is when a fish “strikes up”...instead of pulling the rod tip down. This happens. And it usually can be seen as only a slight bit of slack between the rod tip and the ice hole. That is, unless you are using a heavy enough jig that it pulls the rod tip slightly down while deadsticked. In that case, you can see the slight downward bend in the rod tip change to a straight attitude. The fish has taken your heavier lure and moved up enough to remove the downward pressure on the rod. Time to stick ‘em. And hooksets are free.

Then there is the “pop on the drop”. When you are lifting and dropping a jig, you need to know when a fish intercepts it. If it stops before it should, cross their eyes.

HOOK SETTING AND FISH CONTROL

In the previous discussion of fishing rods it was suggested that longer and stiffer rods could improve hooking ratios. The example was given that if you want to put a nail in a board you need to pound it in...not just push it in. No matter how sharp your hooks you will get better hook penetration with a quick decisive wrist snap hook set rather than a long slow lift with a wimpy rod. And once you have a fish on the end of your line, you need to be able to apply enough lift and pressure to bring the fish to the hole before it can arrange its own early release for bad behavior.

The longer you allow a fish to thrash against your tackle the more likely it will either tear out the hook...or wear a hole in its flesh big enough to allow the hook to slip out with the slightest bit of slack. Sure, we all enjoy a spirited battle of a hooked fish. But we don't enjoy seeing the big fish of the day swim away from the hole because we didn't bring it in quickly enough.

ICING FISH

Popping a perch or crappie up through a hole is no big deal. They are not that big and they can be reeled in fairly quickly. But a trout, walleye, bass or other larger and more active species may require some special handling.

If you are using good line and your jig has a hook big enough to get a good hold in the fishes' mouth, you can usually just patiently coax the fish to put its head up into the hole and then slide it out onto the ice...aided by the fish thrashing its tail. But if you hook a large fish on light line and small hooks your chance of getting it in are much lower.

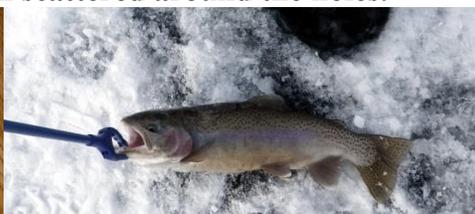
Many ice anglers are young and agile enough to be able to reach down into the hole and “assist” their larger fish out on to the ice with their hands. If they are lucky enough to have a helpful fishing buddy nearby, that person can kneel beside the hole and do the honors of scooping the fish. But that is also a good way of ending a friendship if said fishing buddy develops “ham hands” and blows it...losing your fish for you.

Most ice fishing waters do not allow the use of hooked gaffs. But they do allow you to use “fish grippers”. And if you have a set of these...and can get the fish to yawn for you...you can grab their lower jaw and hoist them out of the hole. It takes practice and experience but can save some large fish for you.



The pictures above show a simple one-hand operation lip gripper. These are plastic and they float. Plus they don't tend to injure fish as much as the metal grip models.

Another option is to modify a “reach tool”...to make a fish gripper. With the longer handles it is easier to reach down into the hole to grab a fish and help hoist it safely onto the ice. These things are also helpful for over-bundled or back-impaired ice anglers who need to pick things up off the ice...like a lot of perch scattered around the holes.



The pics above are of an inexpensive (cheap) 36 inch “reach tool” that I modified with a heat gun to make the tips point inward. They work well for “lipping” fish, but can also grab fish just behind the head and hold them firmly during extraction from the hole.



This is the gripper end of a stronger reach tool. It is wide enough to grab even larger fish. And by adding a couple of screws to the ends you increase holding power for lifting heavy fish by the head or body.

KEEPING FISH

Whether or not you keep the fish you catch on ice is up to you. No judgmental lectures here. However, if you do plan to keep some you may wish to keep them in an insulated container...or at least a protective bag...rather than leaving them to freeze solid and dry out on the ice. In the picture below there is an orange nylon bag from Home Depot that I use to keep my fish in as I catch them. It remains in my sled and up off the ice, so unless air temperatures are extremely low, the fish remain unfrozen. They are easier to fillet when you get home...rather than having to let them thaw for a couple of hours.



I hope that I have been able to provide a few new ideas that might help you find and catch more fish through the ice. I don't pretend to know it all, but I have had the benefit of fishing with many savvy ice anglers over the years, from which I have learned a whole lot more than I knew when I started.

If you are like I am, everything new that you learn will suggest even more new things for you to try. And if even a few of them work you will have that many more tricks in your arsenal. Hopefully you will pass them along to others...paying it forward.