

Ice Fishing Tips & Tricks

by Dan Potts. 2017

Staying Comfortable (warm or cool) On The Ice

Head, Hands, Feet and Neck - Forget the big heavy coats! Most of your body heat is lost either through your feet or head, so investing in the right foot and head gear will go far towards staying warm. Start with an inner layer of **thin underwear and socks** that will quickly “wick” moisture away from your skin. Cover that with **thin wool or fleece bottoms and shirt** that opens in front (no “pullover”!) Add a **light, hooded jacket** to help keep your upper body warm. Then cover that with either **coveralls or bibs** to completely “close” in your heat. A **windbreaker (shell)** will be your best protection against losing body heat in a breeze. Nothing beats a pair of pure (Merino) **wool socks** over the thin ones underneath, and always use **over-sized (one full size) insulated, waterproof boots** that allow room for at least two pair of socks and you can still easily move your toes. Always use a **warm hat (beanie)** that covers your ears. And for an insurance policy invest in a **neck gator** (turtle sweater without the sweater!), which can also be used to provide extra warmth over your ears. All of this stuff results in “layers” that are easily added or taken off to quickly accommodate changing weather and over-heating from doing inevitable work.

Hand and Toe Warmers - Finally, no I have not forgotten the hands. Leave the big heavy gloves at home - it is always a huge hassle to be putting on and taking off gloves! Many experienced ice fishermen never even use gloves, either because they keep them inside of their warm pockets or in a muff. The trick to warmer hands and/or feet is the use of **chemical hand and/or toe warmers** that can last from five to ten hours depending upon brand and exposure to moisture (getting them wet kills their heat!). Mushing one hand warmer inside of a **muff** will easily keep both hands warm, and one in each **mitten shell** will one or the other warm, while still being able to do many ice fishing activities, including working a fishing rod or cutting a hole with an auger. Note: Always apply the sticky side of the toe warmers to the inside top of your boot, not the bottom. Warm toes equals a warm body!

When - Fish the Bite (=Feeding Period)!

Active Fish(=bite) – Fish observed well above the bottom moving on-and-off sonar screen quickly as they hunt to feed. Fast fishing for fish willing to bite a wide variety of larger, brighter-colored lures moved aggressively with heavier, stiffer rods and heavier fishing line. There is often little or no need to use either scents or bait. Dead-sticks (=unmanned, second rods work better as fish often hook themselves, however, fishing can be hectic making the second rod more of a hassle. Fish are often inadvertently hooked during jigging motions.

Solunar (=sun/moon) and **Crepuscular (=low light)** bite times are the two types of feeding periods: Both bite times now easily determined from a wide variety of tables an internet sources. Low light bites (early morning and evening) are easy to predict and not as easily compromised by the effects of weather, however, morning bites are usually twice as long as evening ones. Sometimes these two bite times overlap to either improve the bite or extend it.

Inactive Fish(=off-bite) – Fish observed on or near the bottom moving on-and-off sonar screen much more slowly as they mostly rest to digest previously eaten food between feeding periods. Slow fishing requiring a slower more “match-the-hatch” (non-bright colors and smaller lures) approach using lighter, less stiff rods and lighter fishing line. The addition of scent and/or bait should greatly improve bites to require little or no motion, as fish likely spook more easily. Bites are often so subtle that one needs to be very close to rod(s), and to pay attention to sonar, as fish may not be high enough off of the bottom to sound any alarm. Baits that provide “odor” to the water to attract fish often work the best.

In between Fish – Fish somewhere between the two extremes above, therefore requiring equipment, lures, techniques and bait somewhere between those described above (=most of the time!)

Where – Location, location, location

Depth – Usually based on water temperatures, but more easily determined by the depth of feeding areas currently being used. Active fish (above) can be readily seen at all of the depths they are feeding at by using a sonar. Always fish at or just above the levels at which active fish are feeding. Inactive fish are more likely to be closer to the bottom and are usually less willing to move upwards to your hook. Bottom structure is often a great hint to finding fish – for example, the depth at which weeds in shallower water start to diminish (=weed line) is usually a great depth to start with regardless of fish activity level. Knowing these depths before ice forms can really give one an advantage.

Inside and/or Outside Bends – Changes in bottom contours (e.g. points and bays), especially if they are abrupt and/or combined are usually great places to fish. Examining maps, Google images, and looking around under the ice with a sonar can help to identify such spots (that can be as small as the face a single boulder!)

Transitions – Likewise, changes in bottom depth (e.g. drop-offs, toes, materials, etc.) can all have a very significant impact on where fish can be found. Fish are often found right at the edge of a drop off, along a toe to a significant rise into shallower water, and/or aggregate over certain types of bottom materials like mud, rock, sand, etc. Even transitions created by light penetrating through thicker to thinner ice, or through snow versus no snow can help to attract and/or hold fish. Some people have learned to shovel snow off of ice to increase the light below to attract fish. It is well known that a light in an ice fishing shack can also attract fish, especially at night. Larger fish can often be seen moving in and out of lighted areas to feed on the smaller organisms attracted by light.

Sun Protection

Polarized Sunglasses – A must, even on cloudy days!

Sun Screen – For everyone’s exposed skin, including lips!

A Hat Visor – I use a baseball hat, as it allows me to put hats and hoods over the top.

Technology

Cell Phone – Great in an emergency (if you can get coverage and/or the phone works when wet...)

FM Radios – better for communicating locally with others in your own party on a reserved channel.

Sonar (=Fish Finder) – the most useful tool for helping to locate and catch fish. Flashers are more sensitive, but LCDs show history which can be very valuable to figuring out what the fish are doing.

GPS – good for locating/relocating good fishing spots.

Other Gear

Augers – Lighter hand augers might be better for thinner ice, while power augers better for thick stuff.

Sleds and Plastic Buckets – A plastic bucket with a top often works well for short distances with little gear, while snow sleds may be required for greater distances and more gear. I usually use a kiddie sled.

Snowmobiles and ATVs – Can be a great asset to get around on larger lakes with good snow and ice, however, breakdowns or fall through the ice can be catastrophic, requiring extra care and preparation.

Shelters – Ice huts are great shelter from the sun, wind, and cold, however, they can be difficult to move if the fish are not there. My wife and I will be trying out a “Sport Brella” this year, as it only takes a couple of minutes to put up or take down, making us far more mobile.