

ICE FISHING GETS CIVILIZED

Electronic fish locators, portable ice houses, and other technological advances are making this once-brutal winter sport downright enjoyable. *BY TOM DICKSON*



GRUMPY OLD MEN In 1913, when this photograph of Georgetown Lake was taken, winter anglers had to use axes to chop holes and weights on strings to measure water depth. Little changed in ice fishing over the next 70 years until a slew of electronic gadgets and portable devices began appearing on the market and revolutionized the sport.

ICE ANGLER KEITH KITCHEL is catching some rays this sunny late-winter afternoon on Canyon Ferry Reservoir, but not much else. The six rods propped over holes scattered around him haven't twitched all day. "I don't know why," says the 82-year-old Belgrade resident. "Last week we had our limits by noon, but today I haven't caught a single thing."

Kitchel is fishing for rainbow trout using small lead-headed jigs tipped with maggots—standard ice-fishing fare. Except for a power auger, his unsophisticated gear is not much different from what ice anglers were using 30 years ago. For shelter from the wind he sits in an old pickup camper his son drives out onto the ice each season. To keep from slipping, Kitchel twisted sheetrock screws into the soles of old boots then cut off the heads, leaving sharp shafts. He checks water depth by clipping a 2-ounce lead weight to his line and lowering it down the hole. His rods are made from old castoffs he buys at garage sales. He attaches pieces of orange-painted cork to the line to indicate bites. So he doesn't have to bend over to pull fish up from the hole, Kitchel made a gaff by attaching two large hooks to a golf club shaft with black electrician's tape.

There aren't many ice fishermen like Kitchel anymore. Today's hard-water anglers are far more likely to use expensive electronic gadgets than garage workshop contraptions. Over the past two decades, ice fishing has transformed into a high-tech, gear-laden recreational enterprise, complete with specialized strategies, technological

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OLD SCHOOL Keith Kitchel of Belgrade waits for bites while ice fishing on Canyon Ferry Reservoir. Except for his power auger, the 82-year-old angler prefers fishing with homemade gear. "When the fish aren't biting, it doesn't seem to matter what you do, and when they are biting, it seems you can put about anything down the hole and they'll take it," he says.



NEW SCHOOL Portable fish houses have revolutionized ice fishing, allowing anglers to stay warm while moving around reservoirs like Pishkun (above left) until they find fish. Power ice augers are another innovation that let anglers drill dozens of holes in the time it once took someone with a hand auger or—even worse, a spud—to cut a single opening. Above right: Dave Genz, the godfather of modern ice fishing, revolutionized the sport with his "run-and-gun" approach, developed when he was a restless kid fishing with his dad.



innovations, tournament circuits, and even celebrities. Though the revolution may have taken some of the romance and adventure out of ice fishing, it has made the sport more comfortable, productive, and fun for more people. "It's not the brutal endurance test it was 20 years ago," says Jim Vashro, FWP northwestern region fisheries manager and an avid ice angler. "We're definitely seeing more people than ever out on lakes in winter, and a lot more kids and families."

The original ice anglers were actually fish spearers. Before European settlement, Indians in the Great Lakes region chipped holes in the ice. They waited under light-blocking shelters, often for days, until a fish swam up to a wooden decoy twirled enticingly beneath the ice surface.

Early 20th-century ice-fishing techniques and equipment were hardly more comfortable. A 1920 article on ice fishing in *Western Magazine* advocated using a "good axe" for chopping a hole and, for shelter, building a fish house "out of odds and ends of lumber, corrugated iron, sheet iron and tin, tarpaper, or manufactured paper substitutes." The author called this junk pile a "cozy . . . little shelter in which to indulge in winter fishing."

For much of ice-fishing history, equip-

ment was as spartan as the frozen lakes where it was used. Anglers made rods from a cut willow or a dowel and wrapped their line around two golf tees glued into holes in the side. The Beaver Dam Tip-up, developed in the 1930s, and the Lewandoski Rattle Reel, which made a commotion to wake napping anglers when a fish took the bait, were the extent of ice angler ingenuity. Like so many anglers, Michigan outdoors writer Steven Griffin jerry-rigged equipment in his garage. In *Ice Fishing: Methods and Magic*, he recommended "building a rod from the whippy post that holds bicycle safety flags." Acknowledging the sport's endless periods of inaction, Griffin devoted an entire chapter to staying amused when fish aren't biting. "Why not try counting the minnows in your minnow bucket?" he advised.

Traditional methods of ice fishing had

severe limitations. In summer, an angler can cover thousands of cubic feet of water per hour by repetitively casting a lure or fly in different spots. But with traditional ice fishing, an angler lowered a lure or bait down a hole and then waited while hoping a fish—often lethargic because cold temperatures slow metabolism—swam close enough to see and then take the offering.

As a result of the bleak, stationary nature of traditional ice fishing, few people took the activity seriously. It was jowly Walter Matthau, after all, not hunky Brad Pitt who was cast as ice fishing's archetype in *Grumpy Old Men*—a retired TV repairman sitting in a lawn chair with a six-pack cooling in the ice hole. Winter fishing was for playing pinochle in shanties, listening to sports on a staticky radio, or just escaping domesticity in mid-winter. Actually catching a fish was often

beside the point of what was essentially an exercise in fraternal bonding or existential pondering. But in today's ice-fishing world, catching fish is precisely the point.

Ice anglers these days take matters into their own hands. If they don't catch something after a few minutes, they race to another spot. This "run-and-gun" approach was mastered by Minnesota angler Dave Genz, known as "Mr. Ice Fishing" for popularizing many of the sport's new techniques and gear.

Genz, 62, grew up ice fishing with his dad. "I'd get bored sitting in one spot," he says, "so I'd drill a new hole, and if I didn't catch anything, I'd drill more holes until I started catching fish. Pretty soon I figured out that you could catch more fish by moving around."

In the 1980s, Genz and other innovators

developed the portable fish house. These durable pop-up tents, which seat from one to six anglers, feature a plastic or wood floor and aluminum or steel frames that support canvas or nylon material. Genz says it takes him less than a minute to set up his solo tent, which he pulls in a sled behind his snowmobile.

Also essential to modern ice angling is the power auger, a gigantic drill bit attached to a small engine. For decades the devices, invented in the early 1950s, were either too heavy or too expensive to be popular. Now many ice anglers own a lightweight electric or gas-powered model (some with quiet four-stroke motors), which can bore 8-inch-diameter holes through a foot of ice in seconds.

Making winter life even easier are garments of breathable, waterproof fabrics such as Gore-Tex as well as Thinsulate and other lightweight insulation that stays warm even when wet. A few years ago I met the legendary Genz in person as he was preparing to fish a qualifying tournament for the sport's Super Bowl: the North American Ice Fishing Championship. While I was shivering in below-zero temperatures wearing my ordinary winter jacket and hat, Genz appeared snug as a polar bear in his custom-designed weatherproof coveralls, which featured insulated kneepads and seat pad,

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PHOTOS: LEFT TO RIGHT: TOM DICKSON; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; TOM DICKSON



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BERT GILDART; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; WILDWESTPHOTOS.COM; ROBERT NH POOLE

FROZEN FUN

No matter how basic or sophisticated their gear, ice anglers seem to have a good time just being outdoors on frozen water. Clockwise from top left: yellow perch caught from a portable fish house; northern pike taken on a lead-headed jig; single perch on display; skimming slush; drilling holes.



UNDER-ICE EXPLORATION One of the great mysteries of ice fishing is: What's under there? Anglers now can deploy battery-powered sonar devices to monitor depth and bottom structure (above left, Lake Mary Ronan). Or they can use an underwater camera (Lake Frances, above right) to actually "see fish and work your lure down to them," says Matt Straw, editor of *In-Fisherman* magazine.

wind-impermeable hood, and oversized pockets for holding gear. "I call it a fish house you can wear," he said.

The biggest ice-fishing innovations have been electronic, particularly the portable depth finders that locate fish, determine depth, and even show if the lake bottom is soft or hard. Invented in the 1970s, the devices "changed everything," says Matt Straw, editor of *In-Fisherman* magazine and an ice-fishing expert. "Suddenly you were able to see suspended fish, when before you pretty much had to fish on the bottom." Powered by lightweight, rechargeable gel-cell batteries, these modern sonar "flashers" operate by bouncing sound waves off the lake bottom (or fish). The sound waves return and show up as displays on a screen, allowing anglers to see their bait,

line, and fish far beneath the ice.

Adding to the electronic arsenal are underwater cameras, which allow anglers to see how fish react to different presentations. When fish delicately ingest a bait, as they often do in cold water, the angler can see exactly when to set the hook. "That has definitely been the biggest revolution in recent years," says Straw. "Now you can actually look down and see fish hidden between rocks and work your lure right to them."

Another space-age marvel is the GPS (Global Positioning System) receiver, which finds and records precise locations on lakes. With a GPS unit programmed with precise waypoints, an angler can cross a barren expanse of ice and drill holes directly over points, bars, mudflats, and other previously

located fish-holding structures. Says Genz, "There are no secret spots anymore."

Manufacturers offer winter anglers a dazzling array of clothing, shelter, and equipment. Sensitive graphite rods detect even the most delicate nibble. Special undersized spinning reels are spooled with copolymer line that remains soft in temperatures down to minus 40° F or fluorocarbon lines nearly invisible to fish. Anglers can tie on teardrop lures, ice flies, jigging minnows, and blade baits that come in dozens of colors and sizes. Some lures dipped in phosphorescent paint actually glow in the dark water after being "ignited" with a special flashlight.

Such innovation has made ice fishing more productive and more comfortable, attracting anglers who never before would

have considered spending a day staring at a hole in the ice. "I think the new technology is especially attractive to kids," Vashro says. "They are more video oriented, and with flashers and underwater cameras you've got brightly colored lights and things moving on a screen. It gives a kid confidence that there actually is something down there."

Hard-water angling is particularly popular in lake-rich northwestern Montana. "Fish are especially firm and good tasting this time of year, and sometimes the catch rates through the ice are greater than in summer," says Vashro. "People without boats can get out over perch and kokanee—our two most popular species—which they can't do in summer." Vashro adds that the social aspect of ice fishing is part of the sport's appeal. "You'll have dozens of people in a small area with augers and snow machines buzzing, kids yelling and playing, and fishermen strolling around to see how the neighbors are doing," he says. "It's a great cure for cabin fever."

According to FWP records, up to half the annual fishing pressure on some northwestern lakes comes during winter. Vashro says that even with the string of warm winters throughout much of the last decade, annual ice-fishing pressure in his region increased 40 percent. "I get complaints from summer anglers about winter anglers and from winter anglers about summer anglers—that we should put additional limitations on one or the other—but I just manage our fishing lakes for use as a whole," he says.

Vashro, who first started ice fishing on Georgetown Lake in the mid-1970s, has lived through most of the sport's major technological changes. He says for years he wore mostly military surplus clothing and muscled a hole through thick ice with an old T-handled auger. "For a fish finder, I'd lay on the ice and look down the hole to see if anything was near my lure," he says. "Now I've got a half-dozen special ice-fishing outfits. I use neoprene gloves and other clothing specially designed for ice fishing. I use a flasher to zero in on fish and sometimes underwater lights to improve my catch rates. Instead of having to borrow a kid's sled like before, now I can haul all my junk across the ice in

a special sled with high sides and compartments made just for ice fishing."

Kitchel has seen all the high-tech, specialized ice-fishing equipment in sporting goods stores and catalogs. As he skims slush off a hole with a skimmer he has duct-taped to a cane so he doesn't have to kneel down, he tells me he's not interested in replacing any of his rustic gear. To his way of thinking, it wouldn't help one bit. "When the fish aren't biting, it doesn't seem to matter what you do," he says, "and when they are biting, it seems you can put about anything down the hole and they'll take it."

But even this old-school angler can't com-

pletely escape technological advances. As we're sitting on the bleak, frozen expanse of Canyon Ferry, the silence is broken by a musical ditty emanating from his overalls. Kitchel fishes out a cell phone and says, a tad embarrassed, "It's my wife. She makes me bring it with me whenever I'm out here on my own." 🐻

Late-season ice fishing can be productive as fish move up into shallows and downright comfortable as temperatures warm. But winter fishing also grows more dangerous as ice melts, thins, and weakens. See the websites on page 14 for advice on ice safety.



OLD RELIABLE Despite the technological advances in electronics, rods, and lines, no one has come up with a device more durable or reliable than the old-fashioned tip-up, which triggers a waving flag when a fish takes the bait.

Where to see and experience ice fishing

You can find frozen-water angling opportunities on most Montana lakes. Top ice-fishing waters west of the Continental Divide: Georgetown, frozen bays of Flathead (the whole lake rarely freezes completely), Mary Ronan, Upper Thompson, Murphy, McGregor, Salmon, Holland, Placid, Smith, Lower Stillwater, Little Bitterroot, and Clark Canyon. Top waters east of the divide: Canyon Ferry, Holter, Hauser, Fresno, Tiber, Nelson, and Fort Peck. Web pages containing basic ice-fishing instruction and safety tips:

- wintermt.com/other/icefishing.htm
- anglerguide.com/articles/517.html
- fwp.mt.gov/education/angler/goFishing/icePrimer.html

