

Trolls on Ice

How my son and some mythological creatures taught me the joys of fishing through frozen water. **BY BEN LONG**

If you're paying attention, parenthood will teach you something every day. Still, I didn't expect to get schooled by my seven-year-old son on any topic concerning Montana's Great Outdoors. I figured I was going to teach him.

I figured wrong.

One lesson I aimed to teach was this: If you want to live in Montana, you'd better learn to love winter. Our long nights and dark days have the power to plunge any perky little soul into a pit of despair.

For me, that annual psychological battle has meant skiing, ice-skating, playing pond hockey, and looking for wildlife tracks while snowshoeing. When the cold, leaden skies of northwestern Montana sink low, I like to keep moving.

Ice fishing was something different. I enjoy fishing when the August heat makes it a delight to wade a refreshing mountain stream. But when it came to ice fishing, I tended to agree with novelist and poet Jim Harrison, an avid outdoorsman, who once dubbed it the "moronic sport."

I was happy enough not ice fishing for 40 years or so. Then came my son, Aidan. He got turned on to ice fishing the most dangerous way—by a book. A relative from Norway sent him *The Trolls Go Fishing*, a cartoon book about how these mythological creatures catch fish in various ways, including through the ice.

The book triggered some recessive gene in Aidan's Nordic DNA. One winter afternoon when he was about five, I spied him sitting in our backyard, hunched over a hole he had dug in the snow, waving a stick over it. He stayed there for what seemed like an hour.

"What are you doing?" I finally asked.

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"Ice fishing. Shhhh. They're down there."

I can take a hint. Besides, I'll do anything to get my kid outdoors and wrest him away from TV's *SpongeBob SquarePants*. It was my fatherly duty to take him ice fishing—even if I had to start from scratch.

One day while we were ice-skating at Foys Lake, south of Kalispell, Aidan was drawn to a fellow in insulated Carhartts, hunched over a hole. A couple of dandy rainbows flip-flopped on the ice. Figuring this was my chance to learn, I skated over.

"Nice trout," I said. "Whatcha using?"

The fellow just grunted: "Bait."

"Uh, huh. Sure. So, how deep are you?"

"A ways."

Lesson learned: Ice anglers aren't necessarily out there to make friends and socialize.

On our next outing, Aidan and I were on our own. I put his Lightning McQueen fishing rod, a hatchet, and an old jar of salmon eggs in a bucket. I drove us up to Rogers Lake, remembering something about Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks occasionally stocking arctic grayling and cutthroat trout there.

I walked with Aidan onto the lake. After I chopped a hole into the ice with the hatchet, we lowered hooks baited with salmon eggs. The fish weren't interested.

I had brought along a tip-up purchased long before at a garage sale. Tip-ups are spring-loaded ice-fishing rigs that wave a flag when a fish takes the bait. The trolls in Aidan's book used one. I didn't bother tying a fishing line to it, but Aidan loved the gadget anyway. He played with it all afternoon, popping up the flag time after time while I stared at the hole in the ice, feeling incompetent.

My son came home that evening happy, but I was discontented. I consider myself a seasoned outdoorsman. Ice fishing was making me look the fool in front of my own flesh and blood.

Then I remembered something helpful an older friend had told me shortly after Aidan was born. "Kids think you're Superman. It doesn't take much to impress them. If you can get the ball near the basket, they think you're Michael Jordan. You can drive a car, so that makes you A.J. Foyt."

Still, I wanted to catch a fish. Any fish would do.

Over the next two winters, our ice-fishing outings followed a pattern: drive to a new lake, chop another hole, and drive home empty-handed. Amazingly, Aidan's enthusiasm never waned.

About the time he turned seven, I decided to get a bit more serious. We went to the local sporting goods store.

"We want to catch perch," I said casually to the salesman. "You know, just something to keep the kid happy." I didn't mention I'd never caught a single perch in my entire life or that I was desperate to show some return for my previous countless hours on the ice.

He sold me a stubby little ice-fishing rod, a batch of diminutive hooks, and a little can full of wriggling pink maggots. I was happy

escaping for under \$40. Aidan was especially delighted with the maggots.

Then I read in our local newspaper's outdoors column about an ice fishing derby at Murphy Lake the following weekend. "Aha!" I thought to myself. "Where there is a fishing derby, there must be fish!"

When Saturday came, I stuffed our bucket of gear, several armfuls of warm clothes, and Aidan into the car and drove to the derby site. It was quite a scene. On the surface of the 141-acre lake were about 200 anglers, some wandering around, others kneeling over holes, others buzzing about on ATVs and snow machines. There were little huts and people cooking on homemade barbecues made of half-barrels welded to pairs of old skis. Running about were scores of dogs, most of them somewhat resembling Labrador retrievers.

We were surrounded by experts, rugged veterans of the sport who would size us up as rookies in a glance. We ventured onto the ice, trying to look like we knew what we were doing. After all, we were there to catch a fish, even though both of us were bundled into so many clothes we could barely move.

What was ice-fishing etiquette? At first I was tempted to fish where others were fishing, because they appeared to have the knowledge I lacked. But I didn't want to infringe on their space, so we moved to the edge of the crowds.

Another problem: The ice was 2 feet thick, far beyond the chopping capability of my hatchet. I'd have as much luck trying to chop through the polar ice cap. I was gathering courage to borrow an auger from a fellow angler when Aidan found a recently abandoned hole. It was surrounded by frozen fish guts, which I took as a good sign. I skimmed off the thin film of ice in the hole.

One thing I've learned from elk and deer hunting is that skill isn't half as important as persistence. Put in your hours, and eventually luck will turn your way. We hooked a maggot and lowered it into the icy water. Then we waited.

As had been the case so many times that winter, nothing happened. I jiggled the rod up and down, as instructed by the salesman at the sporting goods store. I handed the rod to Aidan, who jigged for a while before returning to play with the tip-up rig. Bored, I reeled in the line.

Lo and behold, a miracle had occurred. There, somehow tethered to my line, was a bright and yellow creature, so small I did not feel a strike or resistance.

"Aidan! A fish! We caught a fish! It's a perch."

We flipped the little fish into our bucket. Aidan grabbed a scoop and began filling the bucket with water as the fish spluttered and flipped about. Our world had changed. We were ice fishermen.

Truth be told, I could end this story there. But more was to unfold. We kept on fishing.

Well, I fished. Aidan watched the little perch swim circles around the bottom of the bucket. He asked if we could take it home and keep it in the bathtub. Then my line went tight and the stubby little rod bent double.

My first thought, of course, was that I had snagged bottom. I tugged. The line tugged back. Fish on!

"Aidan! Get ready! We've got another fish. A big fish!"

I cranked and cranked. I loosened the drag on the reel to keep the line from snapping and kept the rod tip up. I figured any moment the knot would break.

I peered into the hole. Two bulging eyes stared back. Immediately I knew it was the biggest fish I had ever hooked in fresh water. Would it fit through the hole? Should I chop a bigger opening?

I heaved the fish up onto the frozen lake surface. I recognized it from the magazine covers: a largemouth bass. I quickly removed the hook and dropped the fish into our bucket. Aidan stood saucer-eyed. The fish gaped. So did I.

I ran over to a family who was fishing in a nearby hole.

"What's the rule on bass in this derby?" I asked.

"Biggest one wins. Did you catch a big one?"

"I think so. Come look."

The family's two boys raced back with me. They were, if anything, more excited than Aidan and I were. This was a fishing contest, after all. Our fish was a serious contender. They urged us to go get the fish weighed.

Aidan ran all the way across Murphy Lake to the wall tent where the event organizers were holding court. I followed, huffing and puffing, carrying the bucket. A buzz spread across the lake. Anglers put down their rods and came over to the tent to check out our catch. Aidan seemed to levitate with pride and excitement.

The tournament scale said 3.2 pounds, and the ruler showed the fish was nearly 18 inches long. That's not much of a bass in most of the United States, but here in cold, dark northwestern Montana, it's a wall hanger. When the bell rang, ending the

derby, our fish was the second-largest bass in the tournament, bested by a mere one-tenth of a pound. Aidan won a prize that would delight any seven-year-old boy: a propane torch.

I had to chuckle. The prize-winning bass was the first largemouth I had ever caught. It and the perch were the only fish I had ever pulled through the ice.

There's no luck like beginner's luck.

Aidan and I drove home changed men. We were ice fishermen. If Mr. Harrison wanted to call it the "moronic sport," then we were two of the happiest morons in all of Flathead County.

Come Christmas, I'm asking for an auger. 🐟



MONTANA MONSTER The author's son, Aidan, with their prize-winning largemouth bass.