

# Kids on Ice

FWP's "hard-water" clinics get kids outdoors and teach them to catch fish and understand underwater biology.

By Amber Steed



**HOOKED** Left: Showing off a rainbow trout at an FWP ice fishing event at Pine Grove Pond near Kalispell. Below: An instructor asks young anglers a question at East Fork Reservoir near Lewistown.

On a sunny Tuesday morning in mid-February, the crunch of snow under shuffling feet mixes with the boisterous chatter of students standing on frozen Echo Lake, three miles northeast of Bigfork. The air is charged with excitement. "Are you ready?" shouts instructor Clay Anderson, a Flathead Lake fishing charter captain and fishing clinic volunteer. "Yeah!" the kids yell back. "Are you ready?" Anderson shouts back, louder. "Yeah!" the students cry. And with that, he fires up his ice auger and begins drilling holes so the fun can begin.

Each winter Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks organizes more than 200 ice fishing events during January and February as part of its Hooked on Fishing Program. Across Montana, students in upper elementary and middle school classes venture out onto local waters—like Kremlin Town Pond, Bynum Reservoir northwest of Choteau, and Home Run Pond in Glasgow—to learn about fish and fishing while connecting with their local environment. Program officials hope the

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outings spark a passion for fishing and other outdoor recreation. "Through Hooked on Fishing, we help kids become lifelong outdoor enthusiasts in every season," says Marc Kloker, Regional FWP Information and Education Program manager in Glasgow. "The ice fishing clinics are a great way to get kids excited about fishing and their local environment in the middle of winter. Plus, it lets them get out of the house, run around, and have a blast. It's also a reward for all the work they do on fish and aquatic resources in class throughout the year."

It can be cold and potentially hazardous, but ice fishing (also known as "hard-water" fishing) has some advantages over fishing open ("soft") water when it comes to teaching kids. One is simply the ease of moving around out on the ice. "Engaging with kids is much easier when they're hard-water fishing," says Dave Hagengruber, FWP Angler Education Program coordinator. During open-water clinics, kids spread out along the banks of ponds, requiring instructors to race up and down to untangle lines and remove fish from hooks. On ice, kids and teachers are closer to each other and can interact more easily. It's also easier for kids to see who is catching fish and then learn

what techniques their friends are using.

Another major benefit of hard-water fishing: Fish are often easier to catch. Anglers casting from shore cover much less water than those on ice, who can move about freely. "If we drill a hole and it's not performing, we simply drill more until we find fish that are biting," Hagengruber says. In addition, fish finders and underwater cameras give students new perspectives on an otherwise dark and mysterious world beneath the ice surface.

Because of the inherent dangers of being on the ice, FWP's winter fishing clinics make safety the top priority. "Before we set foot on the ice, the kids know how to tell if it's safe to go out," says Hagengruber. Instructors teach the students never to walk on ice near open water, which is usually too thin to support a person. Kids should also look for adults, or fresh tracks of adults, already on

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the ice as indications of safe conditions. "Since the kids can't test ice thickness themselves, they have to rely on adults to make the right decision," says Hagengruber. "If few to no other people are on the ice, you shouldn't be either." Ice safety experts say that ice should be at least four inches thick before anyone walks on it.

Once they know the ice is safe, fishing instructors make the clinics as fun as possible. "I try not to make it competitive, because fishing is something kids can do where they don't need to compete," says Hagen-

gruber. "In fact, if a few kids are catching a lot of fish, we'll often ask them to share their skill and technique and help classmates who aren't catching any."

Kloker admits it's not a conventional approach, but he and many instructors actually encourage the students to kiss their catch as a way of connecting with the fish. "It takes surprisingly little encouragement to get a kids to kiss a fish," he says.

After they catch (and smooch) a fish, students usually release their catch. Sometimes they also have the option of taking the fish home to eat or to the classroom for dis-

section. With dissection, the students can tie their outdoor experience to an entire lesson about the biology of their fish and its habitat, broadening their connection with and understanding of the local environment.

Back on Echo Lake, the sun is out and the perch bite is on. Despite the cold, days like these motivate Anderson to continue volunteering. "I encourage the kids to have fun and be loud, because the fish will bite either way," he says. "And then, when they reel in that first fish, I know they're hooked." 🐟



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