

# The ice man laugheth

By Tom Dickson

In early January, Brian Clemen, an FWP recreation technician and ice-fishing whiz in Helena, caught a 33 ¾-inch, 15.5-pound walleye through the ice at Canyon Ferry. A few days later, he showed me the video of landing the massive fish and said it had received 10 million hits on social media.

That got me super excited to go out to the reservoir the following weekend. The action! The lunkers! The fame!

Then I came to and remembered what ice fishing is really like.

It's cold, for one thing. You stand or sit on a vast slab of ice, generating almost no body heat. What little you do produce gets sucked away by the relentless wind.

Unlike, say, the natural splendor of stream or river trout fishing in summer, there's not a lot to see on a frozen lake. After a few hours of staring at the ice hole, you might see a bird pass overhead, and that's big excitement. Hey, a crow!

For most of us, ice fishing is not especially productive, either. On open water, you can troll a crankbait behind a boat, or stand on shore and repeatedly cast and retrieve a spinner, eventually covering miles of water where fish could be lurking.

But with ice fishing, you drill a hole, lower your bait, and wait in the off chance that a fish is down there in that one cubic meter of cold water. It's like shooting your shotgun into the air and hoping a duck is flying by.

Innovators have devised ways to make the sport more comfortable and effective. Lightweight portable shelters block the wind. Power augers punch through thick ice in seconds, allowing anglers to drill a dozen holes in a day so they can move around and increase their odds of finding a hungry fish. Portable sonar units show if anything is swimming down there below your hole.

Keep in mind, though, that seeing fish does not convince them to bite. On a sonar screen,

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I've watched my bait-tipped jig wiggle amid a school of perch for 30 minutes before the fish collectively yawned and moved off.

Sure, I occasionally caught fish back when I used to partake. A few times I even went home with a limit of perch or trout. But the effort-to-results ratio over the course of a winter rarely added up. I eventually concluded that I just wasn't that good at it or didn't have the right temperament.

The most fun I ever had ice fishing was a few years ago when I helped with an FWP Hooked on Fishing class of grade-school kids out at the Helena Regulating Reservoir.

The instructor and I drilled a bunch of holes and got the kids set up with rods and micro jigs tipped with maggots. Then we waited. And waited. After an hour, not one kid had gotten a bite. Typical ice fishing.

The sun was dropping, and the temperature started going down with it. Just as the instructor was about to call it a day, we heard

a squeal and looked to see a girl with a fat 16-inch rainbow that she'd pulled up through the ice flopping at her feet. All the other kids dropped their rods and ran over, yelling, "A fish! A fish!" while I got out my camera and had her pose for a trophy shot. But as she lifted the trout, it leaped out of her hands into the air, hung there for a full second, then dropped head-first into the ice hole and was gone.

The kids went silent, and all of us turned to look at the girl. She was staring at the hole with a stunned expression on her face. Then she started giggling. Soon the other kids joined in and we were all laughing. The only trout our group caught had miraculously gotten away.

That's the thing about ice fishing. Yes, the auger, chair, rod, reel, jigs, and bait are definitely essential. But considering the cold, the wind, and the lack of bites, the single most important thing you need to bring out onto the ice is a healthy sense of humor. 🐼



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