



One Fish, Two Fish, Red fish..... ICE FISH

By Sally Petre and Mike Lopez

Are you dreading the winter because the lakes and rivers are frozen over and you there's no place to fish? Headed up to the White Mountains for some fun time in the snow, but still have that itch to fish? Well, don't be discouraged, you can still scratch that itch. There are plenty of places to get that thrill of fish hitting your line even with the "Godzilla" winter predicted due to El Nino.

Before I go any farther and dive into the wonders of ice fishing....yes, ice fishing in Arizona, let me mention that this is by no means Wisconsin or North Dakota where you will find villages out on the lake. Or for those of you movie fanatics, this is not like a scene from the classic Grumpy Old Men, although, I can't promise my friends that they won't find dead fish in their car... Now, if you're not into ice fishing and want an alternative place to go fish, well I challenge you to be adventurous this winter season (wasn't that a New Year's resolution anyway?) and try something new. Imagine snow all around, beautiful blue sky and sun shining down as you tromp out onto what was once open water. You drill yourself a hole in the ice until you break through to clear cold water and skim the ice off the top. You bait your hook like usual with a bright flashy lure or nightcrawlers, grab your seat and settle in to enjoy the day as you jig slowly up and down. This is where fishing stories, friendships, and memories are made.

Okay but isn't it freezing?!

Obviously, it's called ice fishing, however, in Arizona we have beautiful sunny days allowing daytime temperatures to rise above freezing. In fact, I would even wear sunscreen while ice fishing. Make sure to dress in layers and keep your feet dry. Waterproof pants, coveralls, or bibs (like those used for skiing) will also help keep you dry and therefore warm. You can always take off layers if you get too hot, but not if you get too cold. Make sure you wear plenty of socks and wear shoes that are rubber or waterproof so your feet don't get wet. Remember your feet will be on ice the entire time so keep them happy. Also, bring hot chocolate, tea, coffee or other preferred hot beverage to keep you warm! Moving keeps you warm, so enjoy gliding around the ice or a snow ball fight when you're watching your pole.

Ice safety

Before I get out on the lake, I always look for open water around the edges. Some people claim that just 3 inches of ice is safe to walk and fish on. In other parts of the country that may be true, however, ice cover on our lakes is weaker than elsewhere and 3 inches of ice is not safe. This is because our ice goes through extensive freeze-thaw cycles, with our bone chilling clear nights, and bright sunny days, which can get above freezing and thaw layers of the ice. The ice has a lot of air pockets in it and I have actually seen a layer of water between two layers of ice. **I will not go out on the lake until there is at least 6 inches of solid ice covering the lake without any open water (or thicker if the ice is crummy).** As I walk out to my fishing spot I will continually check the ice thickness by drilling holes. The first hole drilled should be about 3 feet from the bank. That way, if the ice gives, you're not in over your head.

Also, keep your bearing on the lake and know how to get to safety. Bring a GPS or compass to make sure you know where your vehicle is if a blizzard hits. Also, let someone know where you're going and always take a fishing buddy.

By all means, think safety first. No one will know how big of fish you caught if you fall through the ice after the fish. Hypothermia can set in fast after being in 33 F water.

Where to go?

Try Big Lake for some quality trout fishing. Big Lake usually has some of the thickest ice compared to other lakes. Large cutthroat, brook and rainbow trout can be caught here. Other places that usually have thick ice include Luna Lake just outside of Alpine, where you can catch cutthroat and rainbow trout, and the Greer Lakes. Of the Greer Lakes, I would fish River Reservoir, which was stocked late in the season with extra rainbow trout. This lake also has large brown trout and small yellow perch to catch! I would avoid Crescent Lake this winter, although in previous years this has been a productive lake, we were unable to stock this lake due to poor water quality and surveys found little to no trout surviving the summer.

Tips of the Trade

- 1) Try using small jigs. Jigs are what we call presentation lures, which are just lures that are meant to look like forage for fish or attract fish. Jigs usually consist of a lead sinker and hook, which is covered by a soft body, feathers, or bristles. Jigs are fished by moving the lure up and down in a jerky motion. Jigs work well ice fishing because you only have room to move up and down in the water column where you hole in the

ice is. When fishing, the thought that big fish eat big meals may be true, but not realistic under the ice. Remember fish are cold blooded and their metabolism slows down when it's cold. Large food items are hard to digest and less appetizing to large trout, or any trout. At any rate, I enjoy just catching fish, so I'm happy to use small jigs. This just means I can catch any size of fish!

- 2) Use a strike indicator or small diameter line. Fish are slower moving and not as aggressive as during the fall or spring when the water temperature is optimal for them, thus when they strike, you may not be able to feel it as well. Using a strike indicator such as a spring bobber or smaller diameter line increases the sensitivity, or ability to feel the fish strike.
- 3) Don't be afraid to try different things. Try worms or jigs, or tipping your jig with a piece of worm. Try bouncing them off the bottom or mid water column. And if the fish aren't biting, try moving, after you've checked the ice thickness of course.
- 4) The fish may be anywhere in the water column early in the winter because there is oxygen throughout the lake. But concentrate your bait or lure in the mid and upper portions of the water column as winter wears on, as the oxygen gets depleted at the bottom of the lake first.

Things to bring

Ice auger -tool for drilling a hole through the ice

Skimmer- or net to scoop slush and ice from your fishing hole.

Seat—camp chair or something to keep you warm and off your feet!

Fishing pole or jigging rod

Hooks

Jigs (lures)

Line

Still not convinced that ice fishing is a thrill? Try winter fishing at Silver Creek, just north east of Show Low. Silver Creek does not freeze over because it is fed by a spring, which keeps the water temperature more constant than others. Silver Creek is a catch and release trout fishery with single barbless hooks only October 1- March 31. Get out there this winter and enjoy the beautiful White Mountains! But please, think safety first and fish responsibly.

