



PHOTO BY RON SIMFELT

*Late is great
when it comes
to ice, walleyes
and pike.*

by Dennis Foster

First ice brings months of anticipation — better yet, anxiety — even long before the first leaf slowly tumbles down in early fall. But as good as early ice-fishing always is here in the Dakotas, I can honestly say that the urgency of what awaits us as we drift from the common doldrums of mid-winter into the late- to last-ice periods can easily override even the best days that we have enjoyed to date. Don't let the relatively slow periods lull you into a lack of enthusiasm for just a few more outings, as the best is yet to come.

Impressive catches are to be expected and, depending upon your latitude and the seasonal weather conditions, this can at times last well into April in parts of the Dakotas and northern Minnesota. By wisely choosing locations, we can extend the ice season as well. Small sheltered lakes will hold ice much longer than, say, large, windswept lakes and reservoirs with current.

Your willingness to get out and participate will be richly rewarded not only in the amount of fish caught and their surprising eagerness to cooperate but, even more notably, in the sheer size of the average specimen. Lots of fish is good, big fish are better and lots of big fish is ecstasy. This is most likely some of the finest fishing you will ever experience, not just through the ice but the best ever, period.

The interesting part of this is that, although many anglers may have a general concept of what the potential is, very few actually get out and take advantage of it. While the masses are taking in the latest and greatest at late Winter Sport Shows or perusing catalogs and preparing for the open water season, there is a small, die-hard

The Dakotas' **ICE-OUT WALLEYES** *And PIKE*

legion of us who have no problem waiting for nature to turn our firm playground into liquid and would much rather be outside catching fish than inside dreaming about fish. Downright comfortable weather and no competition just seals the deal for me and you had just as well join us or forever be relegated to the status of those who are missing out.

For this discussion, we will be focusing on walleye and pike, but rest assured if you put this system into place you can reasonably expect to make contact with some of the largest panfish any particular body has to offer, along with other top-of-the-line predators such as bass and even catfish. Here are the particulars on the when, where and how to accomplish this.

WHEN

This will depend on where you plan on fishing, but a general rule of thumb is that the last week of February in northern South Dakota (my home range) is time to begin making some serious forays. Farther south, say northern Nebraska, may dictate that the beginning of February would be prime time and further north on into northern North Dakota may dictate mid-March as the starting point. You can use this as a general guideline and easily apply it east and west as well.

The earlier outings should begin to show you some promise and you can fully expect each subsequent trip to be better than the last, right on up to the very last safe ice generally being the absolute best. This is a timing thing, so don't get discouraged if you don't hit a home run right off the bat because you eventually will. I would much rather take a few practice swings, having a trip or two, checking things out and catching a few decent fish in the process, as opposed to waiting too long and missing a golden opportunity and perhaps even the trip of a lifetime.

WHERE

This is pretty darn straightforward and the fish are actually easier to predict right now than at any other time of the year. Nature has them pre-programmed to do just one thing and that is to begin their annual migration towards their traditional spawning areas, and nothing will stop them in this quest. All we need to do is be there to intercept them as they make these inevitable movements. What we will typically see with nearly every species and particularly with walleyes and pike is that they will begin to vacate deeper main lake areas, such as the deeper tips of major points and deep humps and even mud flats, and begin heading towards the shallows.

If you are familiar with the lakes you plan on fishing, you should be well aware of the traditional spawning grounds. If not, just a bit of inquiry with knowledgeable locals, baitshops, and/or fisheries personnel should get you headed in the right direction. Some general rules of thumb are that southern-facing shorelines composed of sand or gravel, with up to medium-sized rock mixed in, are great for



Okay, they aren't as plentiful as perch nor as delicious as walleye, but there is a primal excitement anytime you catch a good-sized northern pike, and that sensation is heightened when ice-fishing. Seeing a toothy water-wolf coming up through that small, dark hole in the ice can really get the blood going on a cold day.

■ Photo by Ron Sinfelt.

walleyes. Further, locations such as these where there is a transition to substrates that support weed growth are even better. This vegetation serves as suitable spawning material for pike and panfish to broadcast their eggs upon. The presence of flowing water in the form of small feeder creeks or an influx from adjoining waters just sweetens the deal.

An important note is that in the case of walleyes, it is not imperative that the aforementioned “classic” gravel shorelines be there in order for them to spawn. On the contrary, they will use whatever is available to them and it is actually common for them to use bottom compositions that are downright soft and mucky. We see this quite often in the Dakotas as walleyes literally spawn right alongside pike and perch in farm fields in the flood plains of rivers and the back ends of mud-bottom bays and sloughs on a routine basis. And, I should note, with explosive success rates.

The great fishing we experienced a decade ago in the Dakotas was a direct result of the very high water levels we experienced and the above facts are why the fish responded with the documented population booms. We are in another of these extremely wet cycles with lakes and sloughs interconnecting and expanding beyond the previous cycle’s historic highs. Knowing this, it would be safe to predict that we are going to see fishing be even better than the last go around and we are already beginning to witness some phenomenal catches, with nothing but improvement in sight for the next several years.

HOW

The first thing we need to do is pick our location. Based on the fact that we know that all the fish are beginning to move shallow, our first attempts should be at mid-depth spots leading directly into shallow areas. The narrowing mouths of bays or travel routes along major points leading into shore are a great starting point. As the season progresses, we simply follow the fish right on back into the bays and suitable main lake shorelines.

We can take an active two-tiered approach to this and stay on top of scattered fish throughout the daylight

hours and capitalize on concentrated evening runs by having ourselves set up well in advance of their clocklike movements. This is not a run-and-gun scenario, but rather what I would term a pick-and-poke situation. By that I mean we have our spots picked out and simply poke a few holes just outside the first break to pick off lounging walleyes and pike during the day, and then quickly move up and concentrate on our shallower staked-out locations in late afternoon in anticipation of the inevitable run. While we are not doing the much-touted hundred-hole day deal, we are still punching a fair number of holes and a modern power auger, such as StrikeMaster’s Lazer Pro (www.strikemaster.com), makes this a breeze. Due to the ease with which we can now slice through the ice, I choose to go with the 10-inch model to allow for much easier icing of the larger walleyes and pike you will encounter. If you have ever struggled with (or lost) a good fish in an 8-inch hole, you can appreciate this.

During midday, I like to set up a “base camp” and then slightly branch out from this by grabbing my Vexilar and going on jigging forays into the nearby deeper water while I let tip-ups patrol the base of the break and on up into the shallowest water available.



Old marble eyes is the object of many ice-anglers’ desire. Big, tasty and catchable, this giant of the perch family has it all, and the Dakotas have plenty of them. ■ Photo by Ron Sinfelt.



While the Dakotas have an abundance of pike and walleye, it would foolish to neglect to mention the region’s yellow perch fishery. They have saved the day of more than one angler seeking larger species, and are the primary target of many anglers who like catching lots and lots of fish. ■ Photo by Dennis Foster.

As long as ice conditions allow, a wheeled house such as a Lodge Four Season Trailer (www.ice-shack.com) works great for this. Just because we are ice-anglers does not mean we do not deserve some comfort and luxury in our lives. As the ice thins and we move closer to shore, leave the Lodge on shore and roll your ATV out the back to pull a portable shelter packed with all your gear along with providing seating, heat and lighting after dark.

Not only are we taking a two-tiered approach to our locational set up, this also applies to the actual techniques we’ll be employing. The real heart of the system is the lowly and vastly overlooked tip-up. I know many of you feel you have advanced beyond using “Grandpa’s” methods, but I am here to tell you to take a step back and mind your elders.

First of all, tip-ups have come a long way in the last few decades and can now be considered sophisticated mechanisms rather than just simply something to hold line beneath the ice. Actually, they’re refined tools when used properly, and many of the unsavory issues with tangling, etc. have

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HOT TIPS

Ice-fishing success can largely be a factor of using the hottest techniques and having the latest information in order to judge the pulse of the bite and stay one step ahead of emerging trends. Due to the nature of ice-fishing, it can be darn tough to stay on the fish and give them what they want — particularly as they are making large seasonal movements during this period. Therefore, it is imperative to have a good network of fishermen to work with, as well as making some good local contacts with guides and bait shops.

For some great tips and the latest techniques from the pros — including instructional videos — you can visit www.htent.com.

For the latest detailed local information, as well as the best bait, tackle, and equipment to give your trip every

chance of success, the following are your best bets in South and North Dakota, respectively.

The Sportsman's Cove in Webster, S.D., is in the heart of the famed Glacial Lakes region. Call (605) 345-2468 for updated reports on which of the dozens of nearby lakes are hot, or ask for Doug to speak to the man in charge.

Ed's Bait, on the ever-expanding mecca of ice-fishing that is Devil's Lake, N.D., can be reached at (701) 662-8321 to keep you abreast of the action and areas of interest on this huge body of water.

It may even be a wise investment to hire a guide for at least for a day to get you headed in the right direction; www.eyetimepromotions.com can help you get hooked up with a reputable and experienced local guide.

now been solved. Set properly, you can put each one down in a minute's time and roll them up at the end of the night in even less.

You can also leave all of your notions of finesse on shore. Dainty and subtle just isn't going to cut it here. Bigger is definitely better as we are looking to pick on the largest fish around. I am referring to using big chubs here. Creek or redbails in the 6- to 8-inch-plus range are perfect if you can get them. Wild river shiners (not the mushy little silver ones) are also a great option. Suckers are most commonly found and do work well, but tire easily and therefore you should replace them often. If chubs absolutely cannot be found, then two or even three of the largest minnows you can obtain used on a single hook can and does work in a pinch.

By using big baits we are not only selectively targeting large fish, we are also deterring the small ones from constantly pestering our sets. This leaves us more time to concentrate on the second part of the equation, jigging, which also needs to be bold and brash.

The first order of business is to get our trapline of tip-ups set and the actual tip-ups we use are key. There are several models on the market, ranging

from very basic (cheap) to functional on up to downright gimmicky. I would recommend you avoid either end of the spectrum and choose a model that is both reliable and functional. HT Enterprises has long been known as the leader in the tip-up market and they have an extensive line up to choose from. I have used them all and for many years have come to depend on their Magnetic Pop Up. They are foolproof in every regard, from ease of setting and storing (meaning zero tangles) to being infinitely adjustable depending upon bait size and, most importantly, they will work in any weather conditions.

We now need to know how to properly rig our chosen tip-up and I will give you my basic walleye configuration that is easily adaptable to dual-duty use for pike as well. Line is an important consideration and I begin by using a mono backing directly on the spool to prevent slipping, and connected to this is a heavy braid, such as 50-pound Gorilla Braid. This provides us with an easy-handling and durable mainline that will resist any nicks or cuts from rough use while on top of the ice. To this we tie a snap swivel that facilitates attaching quickly replaceable mono or fluorocarbon leaders.

Leaders are typically 4-feet long and the business end has a premium size 1 bait hook that is lightly nicked alongside the dorsal fin with the point facing towards the head. Rigged in this manner treble hooks are never needed and only tend to complicate things (sorry Grandpa). Split-shot appropriate to bait size and a very small bobber to maintain your depth setting tops things off. Use of attractors, such as a small .08 Mack's Lure Smile Blade placed directly above the hook, can also prove to be a nice addition. For line, 10- or 12-pound mono works well for walleye, and 20-pound-plus fluorocarbon will serve double-duty for pike as you gain considerable strength and abrasion resistance for our slimy, tooth-filled friends while not proving overly heavy for more discerning walleyes.

Now while our tip-ups soak between flags, we can hop around and jig our pre-cut holes. This is an active approach and, unless bit, give each hole only a couple of minutes before moving on to the next. If they are there they will let you know in short order. Large rattling spoons, blade baits such as ReefRunner's Cicada, and aggressive swimming lures like Salmo's Chubby Darter are proven winners. Remember, we are looking to aggravate more than entice, so exaggerated sweeping, jigging motions are in order. Let the lure settle and rip it up again. No long pauses needed at late ice. If they want a good look at it, then they will just have to eat it.

This is getting back to the fundamentals at their best and can easily be mastered by even novice anglers. The hardest thing most people find is resisting the urge to put away their ice gear and to start gawking at new boats. If you can manage to do this, great things await you. □



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