

# Ice Fishing Equipment Revolution

As you are reading this, the hard water fishing season is fast approaching. There is no better time to reflect back on just how far we have come in just the last few years. The changes we have witnessed have been nothing short of phenomenal. Of all of the outdoor sports: The Ice Fishing Industry has made unparalleled advances in terms of equipment, leading to more comfortable and successful outings. The end result is a more enjoyable experience...which is of course, the ultimate goal. It is readily apparent how good we have it by observing the sheer number of people flocking to the activity.

If you haven't kept up with the latest innovations, I think you'll be truly amazed. Going fishing in the Winter no longer involves a cold test of endurance, resulting in meager results. The images of a lone figure perched on a five gallon pail, silhouetted against an eerily frozen background are long gone.

Now there is a vast array of tools at our disposal. Such as: light, dependable power augers that quickly cut holes. Clothing that is insubstantial in weight but incredibly warm, and most of all lets us move around with ease. Sonar helps us to find fish and cameras allow us to view them and their reactions. Couple this with handheld GPS units complete with background structure maps to get us to our spots and guide us back when fog, snow and dark sets in.

Now that we have the fish's location and feeding depths pinpointed we can settle in and try our hand at catching them. To aid in this pursuit we can choose from a number of sensitive graphite rods with smooth little reels and supple dependable line rigged with lures that glow, to entice and land our quarry. If this isn't enough, you don't even have to bring live bait. There are numerous artificial offerings that resemble and taste like most anything a fish could want. Best of all... they often work as good as and sometimes better than the real thing.

The real beauty of all of this is we can use portable shacks equipped with safe, nifty little heaters that deploy with a flick of the wrist to serve as our boat on the ice. All of our gear is stored neatly inside, ready to be deployed at a moments notice. Hook the shack behind an ATV and you have supreme mobility.

Another option is the newest generation of "Permanent Ice Houses". Permanent being a bit of a misnomer as the most recent designs allow for movement nearly as quick as the portables. This is truly the ultimate in coziness, as you can literally have any luxury you could imagine built in. For the less hardcore crowd, this facilitates serious card playing, football watching, etc., all while enjoying your favorite beverage.

I will provide a wider discussion of what's available for Ice Shelters in a future article. For now, I will break down the latest equipment options into the following categories: Rods and Reels, Line, Lures, Electronics, Augers, and Accessories. What you'll see listed is far from every product available, these choices are all made from personal experience as to what actually works the best. Believe me, I have used everything made and some of it isn't worth the nearest garbage can you can throw it into to. Hopefully this will help you to wade through some of the clutter.

## Rods

Until recently the Industry has largely neglected us hard water enthusiasts. We would have to transition from using highly sensitive graphite rods in open water to being forced to using stiff unruly rods, which although nearly indestructible, were simply not up to the task at hand. We either accepted this or we became creative and recycled broken tip sections of longer rods into the handles for an improvement, but still not ideal. The only viable option was to have rods custom made at a relatively high expense.

Those days are past us now and the major players have finally stood up and took notice that there is a large market for premium ice rods. The selection we now have is quite satisfactory and improving every year. Of particular note, is the increase in selection of species specific models and dedicated spring bobber rods.

A lesser known company that has been producing top end rods for years is St. Croix. They have long

applied their expertise to the ice scene and have several exceptionally good models to choose from, and are worth a serious look. They have three different series, Legend, Avid and Premier, in a variety of actions and all with solid carbon blanks. The Legend being unique, as it has an ultra-sensitive spring indicator system built right into the rod tip. It's constructed of high tension stainless steel plated with 24K gold. This gives us the advantage in seeing the lightest of bites long before we could possibly feel it. The indicators are interchangeable, with each rod able to use two different weight springs. Thus, you can accommodate a large selection of lure weights and styles. These rods are destined to help even the most ham-handed angler to ice respectable numbers of fish.

Another long time player is HT Enterprises. You'll recognize the name as they make the original Polar Tip Up. They also have a large stable of rods. New for this year is the Cysco Pro ice rod system. They are a well balanced lightweight composite rod combo which features a top quality 4 Bearing Tundra Reel. They also feature freeze resistant "big eye" guides. Of particular note, each combo includes a two pack of HT's Slab Master Spring Bobbers. They are available in Micro, Ultra-Light, and Medium Light so you can best match sensitivity to the situation.

Newer to the rod scene and best known for their Aqua View underwater cameras is Nature Vision. They entered the picture with the Buzz Stix and Auto Buzz Stix. These are the rods with that vigorously shake your lure/bait. More recently they have begun offering rods designed and tweaked by Ice Fishing Legend and Visionary Dave Genz. The Genz Series Combos are a great help to those who become overloaded with all of models available and have trouble choosing what will work best for their personal needs. There are 13 different variations with each one being species and action specific from Bluegill, Crappie, Perch, and Walleye. Simply pick out the fish you are after and the action you desire and you have a fine tuned combo ready to go to work for you. Rod and reel combos start at less than \$30 and offer a great bargain.

## Reels

Reels have made great strides as well, but we still need to do our homework and choose wisely. We are looking for very small reels approximately half the size you would use on your typical Walleye live bait rod. I have never even come close to being "spooled" and the most common mistake made is overloading the rod with a reel that is much too heavy. Absolutely unbalances the outfit and destroys any benefits the rod may have provided. This translates into a 500 series size from most manufacturers.

Now that we have narrowed our search down to "small": We need to examine the quality. The first requirement is a true instant anti-reverse. When we are presenting tiny baits the last thing we want is the reel to do is constantly roll back and forth as we jig. Also improves hook-sets as it is immediate and doesn't require the spool to center into a locked position. I cannot stress enough not to skimp on this detail. A smooth drag is the next consideration and most top end models are reliable. Avoid the temptation to buy "a cheap little reel" as that is exactly what you'll get.

There are numerous good makers with Tica, Abu Garcia, Mitchell and Shimano, to name just a few. I've used them all and have settled on an extremely fine model from Tica. It's the Cetus SS 500. It offers all of the qualities previously mentioned and is extremely smooth and dependable under adverse conditions. This is the real test of quality. Any deficiencies will become readily apparent in extreme cold.

## Line

Line is very similar to rods in that the manufacturers are now designing properties into the product expressly for cold weather. Specifically: more supple, lower stretch, and with less memory. Berkley is heads and above the leader and has been for some time. It's hard to go wrong with their Trilene Micro Ice, if you prefer monofilament.

I personally, have been a big fan of Fireline for some time. It is extremely limber and most importantly has zero stretch and extremely fine diameter. This lets us work baits much smaller than we could on the same size monofilament. It also allows for instant hook-sets, as we don't need to remove the stretch before the hook finds a home. All of this is packaged in an extremely tough line that can take a lot of abuse. Now Berkley has gone and improved it with the introduction of Fireline Crystal.

Fireline Crystal Micro Ice is probably the most exciting thing to come out in some time. It possesses all of the qualities of original Fireline in a clear color that will prove to be less offensive to the fish. They have reduced the test weights and it is now available down to 1lb. In the 1lb rating, the diameter is equivalent to one quarter pound mono. This stuff is super strong and you won't encounter the same problems you do when working with equivalent mono lines.

A quick tip for first time Fireline users: make sure you have a mono backing on your reel. This line is slick and will slip around the spool if you don't. Also lets you load up some spool space as due to the small diameter it seldom fills a spool. Knots are not a concern as long as you use a Palomar or double the amount of wraps when using and an Improved Clinch.

The following are a couple of lines intended for Tip Up use. The first is Berkley's Gorilla Braid. It's a super braid that is abrasion resistant, reducing worries of damage when freeing the line from ice chips, etc. The other is from HT. It is also a braid that is unique in that it comes in high visibility yellow. This will aid in keeping track of and retrieving line while it's on the ice.

## Lures

It's absolutely mind boggling to consider the vast array of lures out there today. It seems as though everyone with a pulse, a lead mold and some paint is producing, or in a lot of cases, imitating something. There hasn't been a great deal new to report as far as totally new designs as all lures fall into three basic categories. Flash/Spoons, Swimming/Minnow Immitators, and Jigs. Although there have been some improvements.

It's hard to go wrong and less confusing when using effective, time honored lures made by the major players such as: JB Lures, Lindy, Acme, Nils Master and Rapala.

One area in which all lures have seen a dramatic enhancement is the addition of glow paint. It gives us a distinct advantage as we are always fishing in lowlight conditions through the ice. This is regardless of how bright the day is, as the ice and snow cover serve as a filter and little direct light reaches bottom. I have not seen one instance where a glowing lure proved to be negative. Zap em with a charging light every few minutes to maintain their intensity.

The most innovative lure as of late is the Holie Angel from JB Lures. It's actually an astute improvement upon their proven Angel Lure which falls into the Flash category. They enhanced it by introducing a vent in the center of the spoon. By using a swift lifting routine when jigging this lure, causes it to spin as water is forced through the vent opening. The major attraction is from the disturbance in water pressure and subsequent vapor trail created. This provides an additional trigger through the fish's lateral line. Now that we have their attention, they'll rush in and smack it while fluttering down in a wounded/dying minnow fashion.

The Holie Angels are available in the aforementioned glow colors and each has an attractive bubble eye and sticky sharp red treble hook. I had the opportunity to field test these late last season and can personally attest to their effectiveness.

A subcategory to lures is plastic and artificial baits. If you haven't been experimenting with these, you're missing the boat...and a lot of fish. I've been in situations where their use has accounted for more fish than live bait. This can be explained for a couple of reasons. One is that when we encounter a hot bite, the artificial baits are simply more efficient. Less time spent re-baiting means more time fishing and of course catching. The other factor is that when worked properly, they actually look (and may even smell) better than live bait impaled on our lure. It all comes down to a matter of perception. If the fish thinks its food, he'll most likely eat it.

Lindy has some good products with their Techni Glow Tails and Berkley has been doing a first-rate job with their Powerbait and Gulp offerings and has numerous realistic shapes to choose from. An exciting development is that Berkley has now incorporated Glow capabilities into their Maggots and Tip Bits. This provides another triggering cue to an excellent bait.

More accurately described as attractors than lures, I'll offer a couple of tips to improve your success while using Tip Ups for Walleyes. The first is to use a 4 to 6 foot mono leader in 10 or 12lb test. Attach this to your main line via a snap swivel. This allows easy replacement without having to change your depth setting when pesky Northerns move in and cut you off or damage your line. On the hook end use a premium hook such as Gamakatsu's Walleye Wide Bend. If you would like some attraction, a great option is to go with Mack's Lure Wide Bend Glo Hook. It's a Kahle style hook with hard glowing plastic molded onto the shank. If you'd like to get a touch kinkier, I would suggest using a small Mack's Lure Smile Blade directly above this. When using big chubs, the lightweight mylar blade will flutter and help to entice aggressive strikes.

## Electronics

This is actually a very broad category and can be sub-grouped into three categories: Locational/Sonar, Navigational/GPS, Visual/Cameras.

**Sonar:** First of all let's settle any debate on whether to use a Flasher or LCD on the ice. Hands down, the flasher is the only way to go. Any attempts to convince you otherwise are just an LCD manufacturer trying to cross market their units. Ask any top flight ice angler and you'll get the same answer. Vexilar started the revolution with their three color FL-8 years ago and continues to lead the way. The latest generation is the FL-12 and FL-20.

The FL-12 brings the largest flasher display ever developed and features another Vexilar exclusive, a flat face design. This prevents snow and ice from being trapped and increases your viewing angle by more than 50%. This is a welcome change as multiple anglers can now see the action and the annoying build up at the bottom of the dial is a thing of the past. The unit and its controls operate similar to previous units, but internally, enhanced interference rejection has been added. The FL-12 also includes a new 20 foot Low Power setting. This facilitates fishing in very shallow water and still being able to get a clean reading, even in weeds.

The FL-20 comes with all the standard features of the FL-12 and goes a couple of steps further with the following distinctive enhancements. Its super-bright LED Dial can be easily seen in daylight, but after dark, the FL-20 offers a night mode so you can turn down the intensity for more comfortable night viewing. Thus, reducing eye strain and eradicating what I term "Vexilar Eyes". An improvement over its predecessor the FL-18, is the addition of another Zoom Range. This allows you to display the bottom 6 or 12 feet of the water column. When using the Zoom Mode, the incredible sensitivity is capable of showing Target I.D. of less than half of an inch. You can select the FL-20 with a standard 12 degree Cone Angle or a Dual Beam 9/19 degree Angle. Plus, a low battery warning light and a two year warranty.

You can have your Vexilar setup to your personal preferences by opting for one of several Carrying Cases or Soft Packs. The Carrying Cases are also designed to accommodate handy accessories such as Beverage Holders and Flex Lights.

**Navigational:** Of course, what we are dealing with here are GPS Units. This is another area in which we have advanced by leaps and bounds. While the positional accuracy and reliability was good in the past, it is now phenomenal. Add in the capability of having background structure maps installed and we've got an invaluable device that will fit into your shirt pocket.

There are several good manufacturers offering numerous models. With the option of having a detailed Navionics lake structure map loaded into the unit, I would personally stick to those with this capability. Raymarine and Lowrance are currently offering models designed just for this function. One Navionics card will cover all but the tiniest of lakes, with the larger ones covered in fine detail. This helps to narrow your search for prime structure when fishing unfamiliar lakes as well pointing out some interesting features on lakes that you previously thought you knew well.

One way in which I put my Raymarine RC 400 handheld GPS to good use is by downloading waypoints from my boat mounted Raymarine E-120, directly into the unit via a flash card. This gives us the advantage of doing some of our homework during the summer months when we can easily move around define a particular piece of structure. By doing so, you eliminate a lot of work as you don't have to make numerous soundings with your Vexilar or drill a bunch of holes to figure out each potential fishing location.

Many of you may be intimidated by anything electronic and feel that these tools are best left to those of a younger generation or are computer savvy. Nothing could be further from the truth. You don't need to be a Techno Geek to become proficient with these units. They come equipped with a Simulator mode and with a little practice from the comfort of your living room...you'll be good to go. As with most things electronic: price has come down to an affordable level, and to provide even greater value, can serve double duty mounted on your boat in the Summer or used for Hunting excursions.

**Visual:** Underwater Cameras have literally opened our eyes to the world lurking just below the surface. They have become a staple and have proven to be an invaluable educational device. We now have the ability to not only confirm fish are present but to judge their reactions to our offerings and jigging motions. Allowing us to adjust accordingly and ice more fish. With astute observation, they can help us to become more proficient fisherman. Thus, underwater cameras have moved from the realm of novelty into the serious tool department. More importantly, it's just plain fun to watch fish below us.

Underwater cameras have been around for nearly a decade and their growing popularity has led many companies into the marketplace. Aqua-Vu jumped to the forefront of the revolution in 97' and continues to lead the way today. The Aqua-Vu name is as synonymous to underwater viewing as Dardevle is to red and white spoons. Clearly the concept is the same, but the real difference lies in the quality. This is a company that is firmly rooted in the Fishing Industry and stands behind their products.

Having experience and untold models sold gives them the edge in the development category. Each series that comes out is more compact, sturdier, and easier to stow and deploy. Because of their large lineup of cameras, any angler can easily find one to suit their needs and personal preferences.

## Augers

If you're still a die hard and aren't using a power auger you owe it to yourself to obtain one for this season. It's not a matter of laziness to own one. It comes down the fact that you can quickly and effortlessly bore numerous holes. Thus, allowing you to cover a larger area and contact more fish. If punching a number of holes by hand becomes a chore, you simply won't do it and will consequently miss out on a lot of the action.

Today's augers are better than ever and are a vast improvement over simply having a gas engine to turn the drill. A lot of thought and engineering has been put into making them ergonomically. Weight has been reduced and the cutting surfaces have been modified. They now cut quicker and with less vibration. Many models will even allow you to open old holes. In the past this would have a recipe for disaster.

With all of these improvements, it is no longer necessary to have a 3 horsepower on all but a 10 inch auger. The 2 horsepower units will easily run all augers up to 9 inches. This lets us get by with much less weight and the end result is more holes bored at days end. I personally use StrikeMaster's Lazer Mag Express. It weighs in at a dainty 25lbs and whips through the ice in seconds. It actually makes opening holes fun.

If you would like to get into something truly revolutionary, you should consider Strikemaster's new StrikeLite model. It's the worlds first Four-Stroke gas powered synthetic auger. No more mess and hassle of mixing gas, as needed for the conventional Two-Cycles. Just fill er up and go. If you want a light auger, this is it. At just 20 pounds, you have no more excuses for not perforating each likely area thoroughly.

## Accessories

This is an area that encompasses a lot of products. While not able to cover everything available, I will outline some of what I feel to be the most useful. We always have to keep in mind that while on the ice, we need to have a select arsenal of tools at our ready disposal. With so many out there, the real job is to narrow down what we truly need to assist us in our efforts to catch fish. Carting around a lot of rarely used excess equipment actually becomes a burden and slows us down. Goes back to the old adage of, "Improving something to the point where it no longer works".

**Smokeless Oil:** This is an idea that has been a long time coming. As anyone who has drilled holes inside

a fish house can attest to. I was a little skeptical at first, but was pleasantly surprised that it works exactly as advertised...no smoke. You should be able to find it at most bait shops and it comes in a practical little jug pre-measured to mix one gallon of gas.

**Lights:** I'll include three light sources here and all have proven to be an invaluable aid. For those of us wise enough to take advantage of the great bite that begins just as you see the parade of taillights leaving the lake: reliable and easy to use lighting is a must. Let's us concentrate on the job at hand...catching fish.

Cats Eyes are a wonderful three LED light that clips to the visor of your hat. The nice thing about them is that the light is directed exactly where you are looking at all times, no fumbling around trying to adjust. The LED's provide plenty of light to tie knots, re-bait, and hopefully, remove hooks from fish. I have found them to be invaluable when tending to tip ups in the dark. They allow me to fight the fish in and look directly into the hole, helping to line up large fish.

Clam's LED Shelter Lighting System is a real breakthrough in convenience to illuminate portable fish houses. No more struggling with Lanterns: carrying extra fuel, mantles, etc. Only to discover that when the fish begin to get active...the globe and mantels are broken, it's out of fuel, and once all these problems are solved, it refuses to light. Typically once you get to this point, the best part of the bite is over and all you are left with is frustration.

Problem solved: The Shelter Lighting System has 30 LED bulbs encased in three feet of flexible marine grade rope and can be easily mounted any where needed, such as on a support pole. Power is supplied from any 12 volt source, typically your Vexilar or Aqua-Vu battery and will last as long as you do.

Vexilar's Flexlight is an improvement on previous lighting systems designed to be attached to your Vexilar flasher. This model sports three LED's and is of all metal construction. It mounts directly to a hole provided in the Ultra and Pro Packs in seconds. Attach the alligator clips when needed, twist into position and you're all set. I leave it on and like to have it off centered and pointed towards the hole I'm jigging out of...aids in landing big fish and quickly checking the condition of your jig and bait.

**Heaters:** In my book, only one way to go here--Mr. Heater. You're all probably familiar with the "Sunflower" style heater heads that Mr. Heater made famous. Well, they now offer models that are vastly improved. While they still supply ready and reliable heat they are much safer and user friendly. Any one who has ice fished much can give you first hand accounts of burn incidents. These range from minor- singed hair on your hands, to the more serious-incinerated clothing and portable shacks. Or even worse, personal injury.

With the introduction of the Buddy Heater and more recently the Big Buddy this is no longer a concern. Safety features include: self-ignition, thermo-coupler, protective grill to prevent contact burns, and low oxygen and tip over shutoff switches. I have used these models for the past several seasons and you would need to maintain contact with the safety grill for some time, before any damage or injury could occur.

These units are built with portability in mind. They can be operated from one pound propane bottles or off larger cylinders via a hose attachment. There is plenty of heating capacity at up to 18,000 BTU per Hour, for even the largest of portable houses. Many even use them to heat their permanent houses and Mr. Heater offers a Wall Mount specifically for this purpose.

**Safety Items:** This is an area in which nearly all of us are severely lacking. It only takes one incident to not only end our fishing careers, but our existence...period. No matter how well you feel you know the ice and its condition, accidents can and do happen. Just read the paper every winter if you want confirmation of this. I have personally ended up on the wrong side of the ice and without a buddy along, I wouldn't be here today: Drives home the point of not venturing onto the ice alone. There are a few safety items we should all carry, particularly at first and last ice.

Ice picks come to mind immediately. You can find them in most bait shops and the ones that are attached to your wrists are the most functional. A short section of throw rope is another simple but critical piece of gear. Personal Flotation Devices or PFD's are your best defense, but are rarely used on the ice. The main reason being the bulk and discomfort added over the top of heavy clothing.

Sospenders has a solution to this in their Manual Belt Pack PFD. Sospenders is best known for creating the inflatable suspender type of PFD. While a great option for open water they are not perfectly suited for ice fishing. The Manual Belt Pack fits this scenario. It is a belt with a pouch containing a CO2 inflated PFD designed to be worn over your clothing. The whole article is no larger than a small fanny pack and is not in the least bit cumbersome. Should you go through, simply pull the lanyard and the PFD deploys. Stay calm; pull yourself back to safety and live to fish another day.

**Weeds:** That's right, Weeds. LaDredge Outdoors has come up with the most revolutionary product to hit the ice scene since the advent of the underwater camera. The product originally came about to mask the cable of cameras by making it appear to be an aquatic plant. The end result was a very enticing piece of structure that attracts all species of fish.

They now have an expanded line up marketed under the Reel Weeds moniker. The Camera Cable Structure is four feet of artificial weed structure that quickly and easily attaches to your cable via simple clips. The advantage lies in not only reducing spooking, but actually draws fish in.

Once it became apparent how effective this setup was, they then embarked on producing more usable pieces of the same structure. If some is good, more is better. What they came up with is, Structure on a String. It's a depth-adjustable system that includes four feet of weighted Reel Weeds structure, forty feet of cord, an adjustable ice-free float, and a handy, hassle-free storage unit. You can buy them in two or five packs.

Now that you've had a brief description, I'm sure there is a lot of questions and skepticism popping into your heads. I've had some of the same reservations, but now that I've seen the product, I can easily dispel them.

The first is-can this really work? The answer is an unequivocal yes! It's a well known fact that fish are drawn to weeds. All we're doing is providing our own structure when most of it has died down over the winter. The beauty of this is we can place it exactly where we want it. It gives Panfish a reason to congregate in numbers where they would normally be widely dispersed and your catches will improve dramatically.

Second-is it practical? The material has been tested over four years and has proven itself to be extremely durable. It presents an exceptionally realistic appearance and is not some haphazardly thrown together aquarium decoration.

Third-how big a pain is it to use? The Structure on a String comes wrapped on a nifty foam storage unit. This allows us to easily un-wrap it to our desired depth (typically on or near bottom). The whole structure is supported by an adjustable freeze resistant float that keeps the artificial weed vertical. When you're done, simply wrap it back up into its original compact package. This will store and travel with a minimum of space and tangles.

Fourth-how is it best used? I would recommend using several as you can "create your own habitat". Drill several holes with the structure surrounding your intended fishing holes (Fish House). The fish will show up and naturally funnel into the opening you have fashioned. A major advantage in using this system is while fishing featureless basins for Perch. They roam incessantly and the artificial structure will cause them to stop, thus giving you the opportunity to present your baits. Without this, more often than not they just scoot on by, unaffected by your presentation.

If you're still not convinced I would encourage you to visit the website [www.reelweeds.com](http://www.reelweeds.com). There is some really cool underwater footage of fish reacting to the structure that will make a believer out of you. I'm incredibly excited about the whole concept and predict their unique offering will have a huge impact on how we approach ice fishing.

Well, there you have it. Armed with the aforementioned information, I hope I have shed some light on some of the latest innovations to help you become a more efficient and successful ice angler.

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