

Ice fishing for Panfish in January

So the ice is safe on most area lakes and you are looking to make your time as productive as you can in your quest for some Panfish action. Too often anglers make the mistake of being overly anxious to get the lines down and start fishing. You spent a lot of time and energy getting to the lake with your gear and then hauling it out to your spot; let's take the time to do it right. You've spooled your ice rods with 1-4lb test ice lines and have your array of ice jigs ready for action

We need to start by getting above fish. Get to the general area you want to fish; pre-determined by knowledge of the lake or having studied a lake contour map and checking with a local bait shop. Now scout the area for fish by drilling a series of holes and dropping your locator (I am fond of the Vexilar flashers but there are other quality options as well) to search for fish. Give it minute or two to allow the fish to overcome the noise your auger just generated. Even if you find fish drill a couple more holes in the area to allow you to move quietly when the time comes. Next take a couple minutes to talk with other anglers working the same area and find out how the bite has been, we are fishing these other anglers for not only what is working but also what is not working for them. The non producing anglers can help us to eliminate unproductive combinations and presentations.

Cannot stress enough the importance of taking time to fish any anglers in the area for information on how the bite is going. Be polite and don't come off as an expert, many people shut down to this, ask and listen...this type of fishing is an art too. Ask specifics about depth of water, depth of fish, presence of cover...are the fish in the weeds or above them or adjacent to them. Are the other anglers using spikes or wax worms? Mousies or plastics? Minnows or Gulp? Too frequently we head to the lake knowing what we are going to use and where we are going to use it. Being a know it all will shut down any flow of information that can save you time figuring the bite pattern out. If they have been there for a couple of hours use their feedback even if it is negative it may help you to determine what not to try first.

As a general rule, if you are marking fish they can be caught...technique to do so is now the issue. Go small, generally if others seem to be doing well or the "bite" is on from other reports I will start with jigs as large as 1/16th oz. to help get the bait down quickly. When the fish are active, colors may not matter too much, but when the fish are not responding the way we want, it is time to switch colors and then start going smaller. There are times when the fish will only take the smallest of lures with only the slightest movement, or no movement at all. Give each hole time to produce and determine what is triggering them to take the bait; remember we are only fishing holes where we mark fish so they are there.

Fish are generally lighter biters through the ice but there are times when they are so finicky that they make it hard to get them to do little more than eyeball your bait. We've all seen it; drop an ice jig to the bottom and watch the mark follow it up as you raise it a foot or so and then nothing. We jiggle it and the mark is gone, we drop it back down and the mark may follow it down and then back up again but they just won't take it. Of course we prefer to target and fish above active fish so we pack up and move to another hole again and again trying to find a pod of "active" fish. The reality is there are days that we never find these "active" fish. The next time that this seems to be the case remember to go smaller and go slower. Sometimes these fish will take the bait if it hangs

motionless for a couple seconds or more. I have caught countless fish through the ice with the rod hanging still in the rod holder for a minute or more. I generally will move it back to the bottom after 3 or 4 minutes; or back through the depth of marking for suspended fish and I certainly never stay in a spot without marking fish (or seeing them if you have a camera). If 15 or 20 min go by and I've tried several colors/bait combinations using still presentation and moving presentations THEN I move. Be patient if you've worked an area over and still no "active" fish, too often patience will save the day and put a couple fish in the basket on a day we may have otherwise given up on.