

GREAT LAKES VETERAN ICE FISHERMEN

SHARE TIPS ON THE SPORT

Experts Offer Focus on Fish Health Advice

Whether it's for the simplicity, the solitude, or simply the good sport, Al Stevens, Dan Bishop and Ron Kinnunen head out every winter for hard water fishing. Experts in the field of environmental conservation in their home states of Minnesota, New York and Michigan, the men are happy to share some safety tips for sportsmen – and some advice on protecting the fish they love to catch.

They all agree that the first rule of safety for ice fishing is to be sure the ice is safe. The ice should be at least 3 inches thick to bear the weight of a human, and 5 to 6 inches thick for equipment. And check for ice quality, too, says Kinnunen, a Michigan State University and University of Michigan Extension Sea Grant Agent. “Make sure that the ice is not ‘honey combed. It should be solid all through.”

“Certain lakes get good reputations for being safe, and that's fine,” says Stevens, a Lake and Stream Survey Coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. “But don't push it too early in the season. And, currents under the ice are unpredictable so you can't assume that the ice is consistently thick all over the lake.”

“It's best just to check if anyone else is out there fishing first,” says Bishop, a regional supervisor for the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), with a smile. “Set up nearby and don't move.”

The anglers, who have all been ice fishing since they were very young, mostly in the Great Lakes region, catch walleye, perch, and pike among other fish. They agree that ice fishing is a great way to enjoy the outdoors on a crisp winter day and get some exercise too.

“It's a fun pastime during an otherwise dull time of the year,” says Bishop. “And, it doesn't require a huge financial investment to enjoy.”

They suggest dressing in layers for warmth and recommend a portable shelter for protection from the wind. “Be sure you have the proper heating equipment, lanterns and bottled gas,” adds Kinnunen.

They also all agree that you should be sure to let someone know where you’re going and when you might be back when you head out on the ice. “And be prepared with a float coat, rope and picks in case you have to help someone else out,” says Stevens.

The men all work to address environmental and ecosystem issues in the Great Lakes as part of their jobs. Among other things, while they enjoy their water sports, they also help educate fishermen in their states on ways to stop the spread of fish diseases like Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS). The officials note that VHS, a disease that causes internal bleeding and death in a number of fish species, has been detected in all of the Great Lakes. “You need to take the same precautions in the winter as you do in the summer,” says Kinnunen. “Preventing the spread of VHS is a year round challenge.”

Some of the issues that are problems in the summer season, like spreading the disease on boats and in bilge water, are not as troubling in the winter, Stevens says, but VHS thrives in cold weather so there should be no let up in caution. “Bait is a major concern. VHS can be transferred in live bait. So bait should not be moved from one body of water to another. Live bait like cisco and rainbow smelt are very susceptible to the disease,” he noted.

All the Great Lakes states have regulations requiring that bait be certified disease-free and purchased from a dealer with a permit to process in the area. “You will need to be able to show your receipt to a conservation officer if asked,” Bishop says.

They urge fishermen to clean and inspect their gear after fishing; clean and rinse mud off of rods, reels and boots, and to drain all water from equipment.

For more information on how to prevent the spread of VHS, visit www.FocusOnFishHealth.org.

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