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Rod squad



Taking a team approach to ice fishing can increase your exercise, your enjoyment and your chances of finding fish.

Noel Vick

A single angler can catch a few fish, but a group fishing strategy can be even more successful.

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The stereotypes of ice anglers are out there – a lone fisher on a bucket in a shallow bay, a casual ice angler glancing out the frosted window of a permanent shelter just to verify that a tip-up deployed yesterday remains unstrung, two buddies in the cab of a pickup wiping condensation off the passenger window scanning the ice for tripped flags, or guys dealing poker inside a toasty cabin, forgetting about their field of tip-ups.

That's ice fishing to some and I occasionally enjoy those kinds of experiences, but these days, I get more excited as the prospects for catching fish improve. For me, ice fishing success is predicated on finding fish in the fastest way possible. As someone who has been writing about ice fishing for several years and closely followed developments in ice fishing equipment and strategies, trust me; these days teamwork plays a vital role in ice fishing.

Hardwater fishing's Age of Mobility involves using streamlined portable shelters, efficient and lightweight augers, high-tech sonar equipment, and a "mobile-mindset." The modern ice fishing tools are even more effective when used by a group of anglers.

"A group of fishermen, working together, can locate specific structure and active fish a whole lot faster than an individual," says Chip Leer, co-founder of a Minnesota firm that field-tests ice fishing gear, sponsors seminars and encourages anglers to take a more scientific approach to their ice fishing. "It's amazing what a couple of anglers and a couple of augers can do. When we go out, we follow a strategy and drill holes until we think there are enough to go around, then we pop in a few more!"

A bunch of anglers running helter-skelter across the ice isn't the answer either. Organization is a crucial ingredient in covering and dissecting a piece of water. The most productive ice fishing trips are those that are planned.

Plan your attack

A good strategy begins with a group meeting and a hydrologic lake map that shows depths and structure. Gather your crew where it's warm, talk over strategies and map out a plan before hitting the ice. Highlight humps, circle sandbars and reference rock piles. Ideally, everyone in the fishing party should carry a map. Before the meeting adjourns, agree on which strategy each member will follow.

Finding fish is much faster if your team spreads out, yet remains organized. Instead of wasting valuable time "group fishing" each spot, split up, and hit several areas simultaneously. Over the years, we've developed four techniques for tag teaming.

Leapfrogging involves two or three anglers who quickly cover holes by drilling in a wide circle or horseshoe pattern that envelop an area you want to fish. It might be a sloping point, a rock bar or some weedbeds that drop down quickly. Space your holes 15 to 20 feet apart over gradual tapers and shorten that distance to only 5 or 10 feet on a breakline.

Line up, put the first guy on the first hole the second guy on the second hole, and so on. If a couple of minutes pass without bites for angler number one, he or she leapfrogs past the other members to the next available hole. It takes a bit of discipline and courage to keep moving as most anglers tend to keep fishing the same hole for a long time hoping for a bite. Well, hopes don't make it happen. Just keep hiping and hopping and before long, your team will either land fish or effectively scratch off an area.

You have to eliminate bad holes to find good ones. We find this technique performs well on big structures, wide-open water, and complex sections of the lake floor. And another thing about augers: The days of one auger per fishing party are over, if you're serious about mobility. To make quick work of drilling and searching, every angler needs to carry an auger.

Meet in the Middle is another way to briskly cover breaklines, shoreline tapers and weedlines. Begin by choosing a straight-line path across the entire structure you want to explore. With augers in hand, you and a partner walk to the outer points of that path and start drilling holes toward each other every 20 feet or so until you meet. At the rendezvous, lay down your drills, arm yourselves with jig poles, walk back to the outer holes and begin jigging. Continue moving toward each other changing holes every 15 minutes or so until you either engage fish or decide to try a different structure.

The Sweep follows a piece of structure like a wide push broom cleaning up the garage floor. Augers in hand, line up with 10 to 20 yard spacing between anglers, bore a hole, take about ten paces and plug another one. Continue this process until each member crosses the entire structure. We use The Sweep to explore breaklines, large flats, and BIG structures.

A squeeze of the trigger leaves wide patterned holes on a paper target and, in **The Shotgun** anglers simultaneously attack a variety of likely structures and depths: Someone explores shallow shoreline flats; another hits a mid-lake hump; angler three might probe a deep flat; a fourth may work some underwater brush. The key with covering a lot of territory when shotgunning is communication. You want to inform your buddies without telling the world where you've hit fish. Some use two-way radios, cell phones or flashing headlights to alert party members to a hot bite. Low-tech approaches like hand signals or just taking a walk will work too if the area is small enough.

Each of these search techniques is intended to expose active fish. A useful by-product of jigging and marking so many holes is the overall knowledge gained. Your hard work will be rewarded as you discover fish-holding irregularities, such as openings in a dense weed edge, bottom content transitions, rock piles in the middle of nowhere, extra sharp breaks, and other features that often do not appear on maps. Take special note of these areas because they can turn out to be lifetime treasures.

A quick read of the bottom

You may be wondering how we quickly assess when we've found structures we want to try fishing. In the old days, you had to drill a hole and drop a lead-weighted line to estimate your depth, then move a few feet and do it again. No wonder anglers drilled a few holes and stayed put!



A hand-held depth finder shoots right through the ice. © Bill Linder

Today ice anglers can buy inexpensive depth finders that are the size, weight and look of a flashlight. Many of these units will shoot a depth right through the ice. Others require a little water on the surface of the ice to get good contact. In either case, anglers can get quick accurate reads to locate changing depths.

Correlate these with your map, and you are in business. For instance, such depth finders can quickly locate the shallow top of a reef or rock bar without drilling a hole. Then travel perpendicular to the top, take readings and mark where the bottom starts to drop off towards deeper cover.

Fancier units include GPS technology. Once you've found the place you want to fish, take a GPS reading and you will be able to come back to the same spot within a few feet on every visit.

Don't overlook the shallows

Winter's natural progression yields two prime times for chasing game fish like walleye in shallow water. During early ice, when oxygen and baitfish abound, walleyes spend considerable time up high near the surface. The same goes for late ice, when shallow lakebeds re-oxygenate by way of melting snow, and extended daylight hours with heightened angle of sunlight foster new weed growth. In late winter, these fish are fattening up to spawn. It's during the in-between periods that shallow water raids are fewer and further between. In mid-winter, think deeper and offshore for walleyes.

The walleye's light sensitive eyes are certainly not designed for effectiveness in bright and clear shallows. So, if you decide to target walleyes, the best times of day to probe the shallows are dawn, dusk, and overnight, when a walleye's vision yields an advantage. Notoriously dark lakes with tannin-stained waters are exceptions to the rule. Here, midday forays are common and nighttime bites rarely occur.

Think of shallows where fish feed as "food shelves." In general, they're hard-bottomed stretches – the bigger the better – in less than ten feet of water, with access to deeper water. These spots aren't always related to the shoreline, but sizable shoreline points are some of the finest shallow water formations. Look for a point that features an expansive bar stretching far and wide before tilting deeper. Points that break quickly and deeply from shore aren't what you're searching for; they're better suited for mid-winter, mid-summer, and late fall.

Shallow sand or gravel flats featuring broadleaf greenery (cabbage) are exceptional – beds of bushier coontail and milfoil can also host walleyes. On natural lakes, where weeds flourish, it's usual to encounter distinct inside and outside weed edges. Shallow feeding fish scour such edges for baitfish. On murky waters the outside weedline edge might appear in less than eight feet of water; conversely, vegetation will grow down to 15 and 20 feet of water on clearer waters.

Pockets and clear lanes inside a dense weed mat also provide shallow water habitat. The surrounding and protective weed canopy makes these openings usable during daylight hours.

Weed patches carry a premium on lakes and reservoirs where barren sand, gravel and rock dominate the shallow waterscape. Even scraggly weed plots will hold crayfish and baitfish in areas otherwise devoid of vegetation.

One last vegetated situation to look for is a stand of emergent reeds or bulrushes over clean (hard) bottom. Points, reef tops and shoreline flats frequently sport emergent weeds in five to ten feet of water – these can be deadly zones during low light periods. Lake Winnebago is renowned for producing walleyes in standing weeds.

A trough is another shallow feature worth seeking out. Subtle two, three, and four-foot depressions over otherwise flat expanses are typical on larger waters dominated by sand and gravel. Organic material settles

inside troughs and subsequently encourages weed growth darkens to the water. Take note of troughs when you find them, because you'll want to return there year after year.

Finding is one thing, catching is another

In the piscine world, shallows mean active feeding, but shallows can also be dangerous because fish lack the breadth of protective structure and deepwater sanctuary. So when fish venture shallow, rest assured they're alert, spooky and looking to score a meal.

Spooking fish is a major concern. Shallow water, clear ice, minimal snow cover, and a fish's keen sense of sound combine to form a serious hardwater challenge.

You must first be cunning and quiet. Walk around as little as possible and avoid dropping the ice scoop or minnow bucket. Hold lantern light to a minimum – it's unnatural and causes shadows.

Scout an area long before dusk. By day, particularly early in the season, favorable habitat such as rocks and weeds are visible through the ice. Even drill holes ahead of time. And if possible, cut your holes over patches of snow or darker ice, which conceal shadows and movement.

Enjoy experimenting

There's plenty more to discuss – when to jig, when to try tip-ups, what to rig and why, but we can't cover it all in one story. As I said, for me the exciting part of ice fishing is making a plan with friends and seeing if we can carry it out to find fish. For me, the days of drilling one spot and sitting on a bucket all day are long gone. Taking a mobile approach to ice fishing brings better results. The tag team search makes finding fish more fun and much faster.

Noel Vick writes about ice fishing for On Ice Tour, a Minnesota firm promoting the sport to children and adults.