

Ice fishing cures the winter doldrums



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THE NATURAL WORLD

Thirty minutes on the ice and my rod tip has not twitched once. I have jigged every which way I know how and never once felt tension. I dropped my offering until line went slack, reeled up two cranks, and pretended I did not care. Two lure swaps have also not led to action. I haven't given up though. A school of hungry yellow perch should be close by.

A short toss of a corn-hole bag away, Scott sits in a canvas chair and stares at a tiny Thill slip bobber as if doing so will provide answers to the meaning of life. Three fat perch flop beside his gear bag, indicating a patient approach can pay off.

Scott wasted little time putting a 1/8-ounce Triple Teaser in the strike zone, that magic "within one foot of the bottom" layer where yellow perch are said to reside. They reside there because water has a unique property of being most dense at approximately 38 degrees Fahrenheit, a feature that results in conditions being warmest at the bottom of iced-over lakes.

With area streams closed to steelhead fishing, seasonal affective disorder hit me hard this year. Hoping to bust out of my funk, I checked in with a flycaster friend a week prior. Conversation went something like this:

Me: "I'm tired of looking out the window and waiting for snow to melt. Are you up for an ice fishing adventure?"

Ken: "As much as I'd like an outing, I'm not much of a fan. Is the ice even stable?"

Me: "Mullie and Doober were on the ice two days ago. They caught a dozen



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Scott Abernethy demonstrates how a two-hook rig under a slip bobber can lead to a double.

perch each."

Ken: "Yeah, but they're Midwesterners that don't know any better. Bobber fishing when it's nice out is bad enough. Standing on ice and freezing your butt waiting for a bobber to sink is not that intriguing."

Rejection often leads to introspection. In this case I decided someone having a Great Lakes heritage would more likely embrace the idea of ice fishing than someone who favored dragging Woolly Buggers behind his float tube on a warm spring day. As if to affirm my supposition, a friend from Michigan shared a hot tip. "A source reported catching 100 perch a day at Red Rock Lake," he said. "I have good info on where

to fish and what they were using."

Thus began the typical slow dance that often occurs between two busy retirees. What day? When and where to meet? The five-day weather report showed warming to 36 degrees F and no wind at mid-week. A 9 a.m. start time would ensure roads were free of ice and not lead to circadian misalignment.

Scott rolled into the driveway while I laced up my 1,200-gram insulated Blizzard Stalkers. Gear checked and loaded, we skirted the perimeter of the Hanford Reservation under leaden skies, crossed the mighty Columbia River and continued north through wide-open

farm country. Our route took us past orchard workers trimming apple trees, covered haystacks, circle irrigation pivots and steel-sided warehouses the size of a football field. A quick review of Google Maps led to a county road south of Royal City and basalt outcrops flanked with big sage and rabbitbrush. Flocks of geese honked noisily as they circled over a series of cattail-lined ponds. Crossing over railroad tracks onto an ice-glazed gravel road, we reached 171-acre Red Rock Lake before noon.

The quarter-mile trek from the parking area involved frozen chunks of slush over 8 inches of clear ice. Two folding chairs, gear bags and a hand-power ice



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Extra gear can easily be strapped onto a vintage sled. Unless it's subfreezing and the wind howls from the north. In which case you might wish for a larger sled to carry a tent and propane heater.

auger strapped to a circa 1950 Flexible Flyer steel runner sled scraped along. Shouts of glee from anglers sheltered inside a blue nylon tent provided incentive to set up station next to a flock of freshly augered holes.

Ice fishing gear is scaled down in size. I paid \$25 for a 42-inch-long, light-action "Ugly Stick" spinning rod and open-face reel loaded with 50 yards of monofilament line. For comparison, a friend from Minnesota dropped a C-note on a 36-inch ice rod and free-fall inline reel. His purchase seemed extravagant, but then again, I own a 5-weight Winston boron fly rod with serial numbers etched in cursive above each ferrule. Each to their own it seems.

Unlike most other fish that frequent western waterways, perch are active feeders all year long. However, patience is required to hook these soft biters. Downsizing my terminal lure to a Swedish Pimple and attaching a worm-baited dropper hook up the line quickly led to a dozen perch

flopping at my feet. Watching one rod instead of hopping back and forth between two also improved hookset percentage. The majority of a newly populated tackle box remained in place though, suggesting that ice fishing — along with most forms of angling — leads to purchasing way too much gear.

I've since heard reports of hand-size crappie and bluegill pulled through area ice. A friend from Minnesota tells of taking walleye, holdover rainbows, and a largemouth bass. Assuming subfreezing temperatures remain in effect, I plan to give ice fishing another try. Freezing your butt off waiting for a bobber to sink sure beats looking out the dining room window and grousing about lost opportunity for steelhead.

Dennis Dauble is the author of "Bury Me with My Fly Rod" and the recently released, "Chasing Ghost Trout." Contact him via his website at DennisDauble-Books.com.

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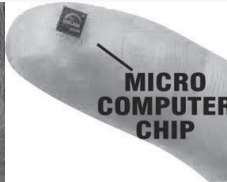
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