

WALKING



ON WATER

Ice fishing is great fun – and good exercise, too!

Ice is pure magic. Really.

Ice lets mere mortals walk on water. How cool is that?

More magic: Ice lets us fish almost wherever we want on a lake or pond — without a boat!

Still don't believe ice is magic? How else could it appear so suddenly? It sneaks up on you silently, usually in the dark of night. You go to bed one night and water's just water. The next morning, all the swamps and shallow ponds are covered with a shining coat of new ice, and you start planning an ice-fishing expedition — a perfect excuse to get out and play.

If there's a secret to happiness in this world, I believe it's this: never lose track of the simple wonder and joy you experienced as a child. It's easy to get so caught up in the daily grind of earning a living, doing chores and taking care of the people in your life that you forget simple joy. For recapturing a taste of that childhood wonder, nothing beats a day out on the ice, fishing for whatever bites. Even better — bring along your family and friends, preferably with kids in tow to share the experience.

Kids can see that new, clear ice is special magic. When the ice is as clear as window glass, it's fun to peer through that window into the world of water below (throw a blanket or jacket over your head to block the light and create better viewing). I've seen snapping turtles moving along the bottom with glacial slowness

under new ice, and schools of fish drift by just inches below my nose.

Aerobic Ice Fishing

Most large bodies of water in New Hampshire that are open to ice fishing sprout shanty towns throughout the winter, mini-communities where like-minded souls can gather to wait for the fish to bite. Kind of like mining boom towns, these grow and fade away at the whims of fortune.

Still, waiting inside a shanty, insulated from the outdoors can get pretty sedentary. Some folks set up TVs and sound systems to combat this. I've got a better solution — get moving!

1) Pick a pond with lots of perch (white or yellow, it doesn't matter), sunfish, crappies and, perhaps, a smattering of pickerel and bass. What you want is fast action and the makings of a fish fry. (There's no better eating than yellow perch taken from cold water.) Before you head out, check the *2006 Freshwater Fishing Digest*, available at www.wildlife.state.nh.us or from license agents statewide, to find out how many fishing devices you can use on your favorite pond. For those who prefer catching trout, there are more than 90 bodies of water that are open for trout fishing year round; these are listed on the Fish and Game website.

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4) A frozen pond without snow on it is an invitation to skate across the surface – with actual skates or without – so if there’s no snow, put on your ice skates when you go ice fishing. That way, you can practice your hockey moves between bites. And a lake covered with snow is the perfect place to cross-country ski or snowshoe without having to contend with all those pesky hills. Snowshoes or cross-country skis are great for packing down the snow around your holes in the ice to make it easier to work on your tackle, and they add to the exercise.

5) Use a chisel or a hand auger to cut your holes in the ice — great upper body workout and a

great way to warm up, too!

6) Here’s the real tip: Instead of clustering your tip-ups in a small area, spread them out to increase your chances of success. Then, sit on a bucket in the middle of the spread, jig with a hand-held rod and wait like a spider in a web. When one of the flags flies (usually the farthest one away) you go racing like a mad person, preferably with a small child giggling and riding piggyback, to pull up the fish. Then you trudge back to wherever you set the minnow bucket, trudge back to the hole, re-set, then go back to your jiggin’ hole in the middle of the spread — if another flag at the other end of the set hasn’t already flown by then.

7) If one hole seems to be producing more than others, move your sitting bucket and jigging rod there and re-set the tip up in the center hole you just vacated. Play it right and you can get in a half-mile or more of jogging every time a flag flies. Who says ice fishing is boring?

Bobhouses or ice-shanties (above) provide an added degree of comfort and are great for warming up — but so is a mad dash for a tip-up flag (below)!

2) Take kids along. If you don’t have any of your own, borrow some. Bring their parents, too. The more the merrier.

3) Don’t drive your vehicle out onto the ice, even if it looks safe. Instead of taking the snowmobile, try putting your gear in a sled or backpack and walking to your fishing spot. Better yet, walk to the other side of the pond from where you park before you start fishing. If it’s a small pond, walk across twice.



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8) If the wind isn't blowing too hard, and the sun is shining, carry along a fillet knife and cutting board, a little white corn meal, salt and pepper, a non-stick frying pan, olive oil and a small camp stove. You'll never eat a better meal than perch or sunfish fillets lightly coated in corn meal and quickly fried. If the weather's lousy, save the fish fry for later. In any case, you'll have to replace all those calories you burned running across that magic ice.

Don't Get Yourself on Thin Ice

Take a minute to think before you venture out onto any ice. What looks safe from shore can be a trap to send you plunging into icy water, which will ruin your whole day – not to mention risking your life. So proceed with caution. Don't venture out on the ice until you know it's safe. Before you boldly go where none have gone before, remember the old saying: "Thick and blue, tried and true. Thin or crispy, way too risky."

Start safely on dry land and use something long and heavy to whack the ice. If it breaks or cracks,

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HOT PONDS FOR COOL FISHING

New Hampshire has hundreds of wonderful warmwater ponds with fishable populations of perch, sunfish and pickerel. Here's a tiny sampling:

Pemigewasset Lake, New Hampton/Meredith — A warmwater gem that hides in plain sight right off a major highway. You never know when a big smallmouth bass will strike!

- Access: Easy access off Route 104
- Predominant fish: yellow perch, black crappie, pickerel, smallmouth bass

Turtletown Pond (aka Turtle Pond), Concord — With a little luck, you'll be able to compare (and savor) the flavor differences of fresh perch and crappie fillets.

- Access: Off Oak Hill Road, East Concord
- Predominant fish: yellow perch, black crappie, pickerel, largemouth bass

Gorham Pond, Dunbarton — When the yellow perch are biting, expect fast action.

- Access: Hidden away off Gorham Pond Road
- Predominant fish: yellow perch, pickerel

Thorndike Pond, Jaffrey — Great fishing and a beautiful view of Mount Monadnock.

- Access: Off Upper Jaffrey Road
- Predominant fish: yellow perch, pickerel, smallmouth bass

Bellamy Reservoir, Madbury — Long and narrow, the perfect place to run between flying flags.

- Access: Route 9
- Predominant fish: black crappie, yellow perch, pickerel, largemouth bass

Highland Lake, Andover — Popular fishery with the added bonus of hooking a few smelt for a meal.

- Access: From town launch or beach off Rte 11
- Predominant trout species: rainbows, browns

White Lake, Tamworth — A favorite spot for brookies through the ice.

- Access: Through the state park off of Depot Road
- Predominant trout species: brook trout

Mirror Lake, Woodstock — Located in the scenic White Mountain Region.

- Access: Off of Hubbard Brook Road
- Predominant trout species: rainbows, browns

GET THE LEAD OUT

When you're putting together your tackle box for your next outing on the ice, remember that state law prohibits the use of certain lead sinkers and jigs in all fresh water in New Hampshire, including lakes, ponds, rivers and streams. The ban prohibits the use of lead sinkers weighing 1 ounce or less and lead jigs less than 1 inch long along their longest axis — just the ones you'd use for jigging up a mess of perch or sunfish through the ice.

Starting January 1, 2006: The law prohibits the sale in New Hampshire of lead sinkers weighing 1 ounce or less and lead jigs less than 1 inch long along their longest axis.

If you've got old lead sinkers, split shot and jigs in your tackle box, recycle them — and replace them with non-toxic alternatives. For more information on non-lead tackle alternatives and where to recycle old lead sinkers, visit www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Fishing/get_the_lead_out.htm.




don't take that first step. The only way to tell for sure how thick ice is, of course, is to cut a hole in it with a chisel or auger. Start near shore in very shallow water (a beach is perfect). Take a step or two out, cut a hole. Make several test cuts as you go out. Remember that ice thickness isn't consistent: water currents (particularly around narrow spots, bridges, inlets and outlets, and docks and rocks that hold the sun's heat) can drastically affect the thickness and safety of the ice. Stay off river ice — it can be several feet thick in one place and eggshell thin only a few feet away.

Based on information from the Cold Regions Research Laboratory in Hanover, the rule of thumb is that you need a minimum of 4 to 6 inches of new, clear ice to support a few well-dispersed people; 6 to 7 inches to hold a small group on foot; and 8 to 10 inches for snowmobile activities. Always consider ice potentially dangerous.

Snow cover complicates things. It insulates and inhibits ice formation and keeps you from spotting inconsistencies. Be doubly careful before venturing out onto snow-covered ice. Some say that you can venture out onto thinner ice if you distribute your weight over a wider area with skis or snowshoes, or by lying down, but don't take the chance.

On really cold days, you'll often hear the ice rumbling and ping. Sometimes you'll even see long cracks develop. That makes people nervous. But if the ice is thick enough to begin with to hold you safely, don't panic. Those rumblings are the sound of pressure being relieved as more ice forms beneath the surface. The ice may actually be getting safer.

Remember — a frozen pond or lake is a magical part of New Hampshire in winter. Enjoy it, but enjoy it safely. 

Syndicated columnist Tim Jones, of Henniker, has written about outdoor sports and travel for more than 30 years. He has been ice fishing since about 1955.

