

# TAMING THE

# Mighty

LOOKING FOR LAKE TROUT?

A WINTER JIG IS JUST THE TICKET

Smooth crystalline seas beckon...the thunderous booms of expanding ice echo over thousands of acres, through hills draped with veils of white, morning's first breath of crisp winter air fills the lungs and invigorates the soul. My fall dreams have become reality once again, as the first ice encases New Hampshire's glacial lakes. The spell is now cast, the magic complete: We can walk on water.

Spiked creepers underfoot chink into the seemingly black yet crystal clear supportive base. The newly formed ice pack already bears scars of expansion, as myriad cracks wander and reunite, resembling roadmaps run amuck. Closer inspection reveals countless miniature air bubbles lying trapped in suspended animation. Chisels sharpened to perfection weeks ago in anticipation of this very moment unlock the first windows to the underwater world. My cousin, aka "Togue Tamer," has already read through the ice with a portable sonar unit, discovering bottom depths in the 8-15 foot range, with a sharp drop to 40-foot depths just steps away. Our buddy "Clifford" scoops slush and ice chips from the first openings, as sunlight peeking above the horizon casts his shadow, signaling dawn's arrival.

## JUMPING JIGS AND ELECTRONIC EYEBALLS

Given first ice and low-light conditions, togue (the northern New England moniker for lake trout) will prowls this huge "flat" adjacent to a sharp dropoff. This shallow shelf provides a variety of food options, which in New Hampshire lakes may include rainbow smelt, yellow and white perch, smallmouth bass, cusk, suckers and, well, just about anything a ravenous togue can track down. Locked into deep basins over the summer months because of their preference for the coldest of water, togue are now unleashed on a veritable all-depths feeding frenzy, which can take them into as little as several feet of water.

A smelt, shiner or other baitfish suspended under the time-honored stationary tip-up ice fishing device will, in certain situations, ice togue. These days, some well-equipped ice

anglers combine an active jigging presentation with the use of a portable electronic sonar unit (i.e. "fish finder," locator, graph/LCD, flasher) and maybe even an underwater camera. The gear and techniques are so effective and efficient that many modern ice anglers no longer even bother with tip-ups!

In the first hole, Clifford has already "marked" fish, that is, visually observed them on the sonar screen. Two probable togue are following his soft plastic jig, also visible on the screen, but seem reluctant to bite. A number of commercially produced plastic baits mimicking baitfish are effective, such as tubes and swim-tail grubs fished on a variety of jigheads. The real trick is realizing fish are present and adjusting your presentation to the fish's "attitude." Since the fish were interested but did not bite, different actions — such as reeling away with variable cadence, bouncing bottom, deadsticking on the bottom (quivering while remaining in place), hovering or dropping the jig in freefall — will be offered in order to provoke a strike.

Clifford has observed many togue over the years and is painfully patient, a combination that is not good news for even the most cautious specimen. Sure enough, moments later his medium-action ice rod is strained into a frowning U, as a hooked *namaycush* or "Dweller of the Deep," true to its Native American name, powerfully pulses its deeply forked caudal (tail) fin to bulldog into the depths. Two more drag-screaming surges and the Togue Tickler scurries over to assist in icing the fish, which can now clearly be seen spinning and darting in the gin-clear water, although still several feet below the hole — a sight that makes heart pound and knees knock, no matter how many times it is repeated! Grudgingly, a robust 21-inch, 3-pound togue is in hand. This strikingly colored specimen has a very dark background color with magnificent contrast to its light foreground and fins, somewhat atypical for this waterbody, although lake trout display a wide variety of color variations, depending on genetics and waterbody characteristics.

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BY JOHN A. VIAR

# Toque



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## EXPERIMENTATION = DIVIDENDS

The Togue Tamer has also marked several togue and is now trying a smaller jig, since several followers would not strike, despite a variety of jigging actions. Not five minutes later they return, or perhaps a different pod has entered the area; lake trout often forage in “feeding pods” of two or more fish. The cry “Fish on!” soon shatters the stillness. Apparently it was not the action but size of the presentation; his willingness to experiment with another jig has rewarded the Tamer with a plump 23-incher well over four pounds. In what seems like the distant past we have fished similar areas with live bait under tip-ups, which have little to no attracting power. Staring at the tip-ups with our chins resting in our hands, you would have sworn there was not a togue in the lake!

In a couple hours, our party of three has caught a number of average-sized togue in the 17-23 inch range, and “marked” several others – typical for a high-percentage spot in this lake at the prime time of day under present conditions. We each decide to harvest a togue above the 18-inch minimum

for a fish fry. No monsters yet, but given that togue from 10-20+ pounds are taken annually in New Hampshire, primarily by ice anglers, a true test of tackle is always one bite away – the Togue Tamer knows this well, given a 13-pound togue to his credit. If few or no fish were marked in about 20 minutes, with a series of holes on top of the flat and on the dropoff, we simply would have moved to a second high-percentage spot – no sense being where the fish are not! No one would ever stay in the same tiny circle all day during the open-water season! Today’s high-tech ice fishing equipment allows you to fish fast and effectively, just as you would in open water.

The consistent early-morning action comes to an abrupt end. Not coincidentally, the bright sun has risen high on this bluebird day, and with its warming influence, we remove a layer of clothing. With the host of technologically advanced winter clothing now available, from polypropylene undergarments to breathable yet wind-proof shells, cold is a word rarely uttered in the modern ice-fishing world.

The combination of time of day and weather, along with fewer fish being marked, suggests a move to deeper water. After an early morning feeding blitz in the shallows, togue sometimes move to slightly deeper water, on the first dropoff in 30-50 feet of water. This location is also a good starting point, depending on the individual waterbody, predominant forage, weather conditions, time of day and exact seasonal period. Here we will employ methods that may be primary options during the mid-ice period.

## AS “OLD MAN WINTER” GROWS MORE STUBBORN...

Plinking chisels will soon be replaced by roaring power ice augers, making quick work of even the thickest mid-winter ice. Given suitable ice conditions, we may opt to start fishing offshore reefs with the aid of snow machines and ATVs with portable shelters in tow, although some very productive reefs are certainly accessible by foot. These reefs, or underwater “islands,” typically top out at 20-50 feet but are surrounded by much deeper water, 60-100+ feet. The same artificial presentations will be worked through the entire water column, since lake trout don’t exclusively feed on bottom — they will suspend especially when pelagic (open water) baitfish such as smelt are available.

However, if togue keep following and won’t bite, or don’t show any interest at all, the time-honored technique of cut bait fished on the bottom can be just the ticket. This method, on average, also takes some of the larger specimens each winter. Cut bait simply means a strip of fish flesh, typically from a common white sucker (readily available at bait shops), tipped on a wide variety of

## JOIN THE ICE FISHING REVOLUTION

The move to mobility, which encompasses the portable sonar/underwater camera/jigging approach, along with snow machine/ATV transportation and portable ice fishing shelters, what many call their “bass boats on ice,” has revolutionized ice fishing. As little as a decade ago, although standard practice in the Midwest, little of this methodology and technology could be seen on New Hampshire ice. It has finally made its way eastward and throngs of ice anglers throughout New Hampshire and the entire Northeast are realizing just how fun – many admit addictive – this type of ice fishing can be, not only for the mighty togue but a wide variety of species, from stocked trout to chain pickerel to the various panfish (e.g. yellow perch). Ice fishing, for many species, can also be extremely productive – even more so than open water!

No matter the winter weather, ice period (first, mid, or late) or time of day, embracing modern ice fishing technology and techniques, along with a willingness to experiment, will help you tame more mighty togue – and other species – than you ever thought possible. Given the tremendous success enjoyed by thousands in this modern ice fishing revolution, with more and more joining the ranks each hard-water season, you may just find yourself wishing “Old Man Winter” would stick around a bit longer!

*“Fish finders” have been around since the 1970s. Only recently has the ice-angler put them to work. The proof of their effectiveness is on the ice.*



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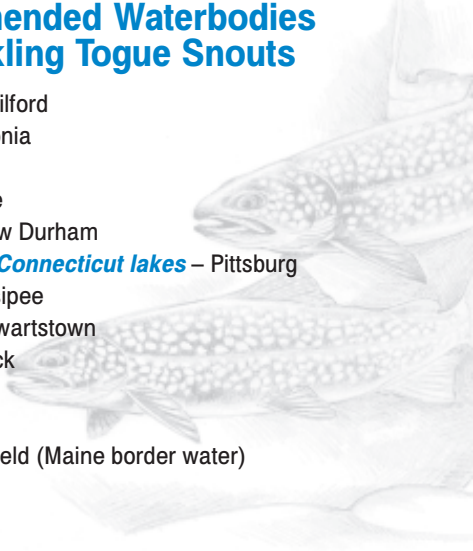
jigs, including the timeless favorite—the bucktail. Chumming small pieces of sucker or other left-over bait in the area also helps call togue into your immediate fishing area and keeps them there longer. But don't sprinkle too much chum, or they won't be hungry for your offering!

**RED WINGS: FIRST SIGNS OF SPRING**

As the first seemingly over enthusiastic male red-winged blackbirds return to New Hampshire, togue-savvy ice sages have a gleam in their eye. While others look ahead towards the open-water fishing soon to come, they know late ice prior to the close of lake trout ice fishing season on March 31, if ice conditions allow, is a key time for mammoth togue – Fish and Game Trophy Fish Program entries corroborate this fact. As pre-spawn smelt stage near tributary mouths and shoal areas, togue line up to pick from the heavily stocked grocery shelves — including, in the case of monster togue, other larger fish preying upon smelt. Although togue can be caught shallow or deep all winter long, if smelt are present in the

**Recommended Waterbodies  
for Tickling Togue Snouts**

- Lake Winnepesaukee* – Gilford
- Lake Winnisquam* – Laconia
- Newfound Lake* – Bristol
- Lake Sunapee* – Sunapee
- Merrymeeting Lake* – New Durham
- First, Second and Third Connecticut lakes* – Pittsburg
- Big Dan Hole Pond* – Ossipee
- Big Diamond Pond* – Stewartstown
- Nubanusit Lake* – Hancock
- Silver Lake* – Madison
- Silver Lake* – Harrisville
- Great East Lake* – Wakefield (Maine border water)
- South Pond* – Stark
- Tarleton Lake* – Piermont
- Stinson Lake* – Rumney



water body, heading back to relatively shallow waters at late ice can pay off.

Sight fishing at late ice or any time the togue are shallow can be a real learning experience — your eyes become the ultimate sonar! Note how smelt or other baitfish move and react to disturbances, jig movements that best attract togue, and those that ultimately entice them to bite – and recall these when fishing deeper water. Remember, togue are aggressive, opportunistic predators attracted by movement. Like most predatory fish, they will greedily snap up an apparently wounded and distressed baitfish with zeal – thus less energy expended for the same number of calories. Be the hunted; make your jig an offer they can't resist!



*John A. Viar, a Fisheries Biologist for Fish and Game, is known as "Ice Man" for his persistent pursuit of lake trout and other species through the ice.*

*The Togue Tamer proudly displays the 13-pounder he jigged up on one of New Hampshire's big lakes.*



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