

ICING UP SOME BROOKIES

BY MARK BEAUCHESNE

When you mention trout to ice anglers, their first thought is typically of lake trout, with rainbow trout a close second. But what about brook trout? Why do these fish seem so mysterious? Could it be that the tactics needed to fish for them successfully are closely guarded secrets?



A young angler proudly displays a good-size brookie.

Now, I've caught my fair share of brookies; heck, I even saw some under the ice while crossing a beaver dam last fall. So there can't be that much to catching them through a hole in the ice – or can there? With so many questions out there, I decided to consult with some local experts on the topic of ice fishing for brook trout.

GO SHALLOW

My first call was to my friend and co-worker Ben Nugent, who is on his way to becoming somewhat of a legend here at Fish and Game. If it swims, he can catch it through the ice. He does have the advantage of being a fisheries biologist. Is this an unfair advantage? Well, the fish don't know he was a student of ichthyology!

As many successful anglers know, if you find the food, you'll find the fish you're after.

I ask Nugent if he would share some of his insights on ice fishing for brook trout. The first thing out of his mouth is: "Go shallow; then go even shallower."

This is not what I expected. Nugent explains in scientific lingo, what I like to call "bio-speak," describing what's going on in the trout's world. Luckily for me, I've been around the Fish and Game Department long enough to be able to translate.

"The entire littoral zone is available for the brookies to hunt," says Nugent. Translation: You're likely to find them close to shore. "They don't have any thermal restrictions," he adds. Translation: The water is cold all through the lake, so the brookies can freely hunt the entire water column.

I ask Nugent if he could narrow this down a bit for me. He suggests trying the mouths of any incoming streams or brooks, concentrating on the sandy

or gravel flats nearby. These areas typically hold an abundance of natural foods for the brook trout. A surprising number of aquatic insects, small baitfish and eggs from fall-spawning fish that may have been washed into the lake are all available for brook trout to feed on. As many successful anglers know, if you find the food, you'll find the fish you're after.

SALMON EGGS AND SHINERS

Enough with the science and on with the tactics. For several years now, my friend and fishing guide Shawn Upton has been bugging me to go ice fishing for brook trout with him. His invites always include a report on the previous weekend's fishing. Upton's voice would be shaking with excitement, "You gotta come out with us; Joey caught a pile of 'm all on his own."



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(Clockwise from top left) Braving it out in the cold; Choosing comfort in a portable "fort"; Using a tip-up or by jigging, catching brook trout is a winter's treat; Brook trout hunt the shallows in winter.



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Upton's son Joey has become adept at hooking and catching brook trout. I figure if Joey, at age 4, could catch and release 22 trout on his own, then I just might be able to learn a thing or two from this father-and-son team.

Their secret fishing spot is a cove where there is an inlet from a small brook, on one of the many lakes where you can use 6 ice-fishing devices. (Before you head out, be sure to check the *N.H. Freshwater Fishing Digest* for any restrictions on the particular body of water you intend to fish.)

Upton figures that all the set-up and gear tending would keep his son busy while waiting for flags. He explains how he sets up: "I start by drilling a pile of holes," says Upton. "This spot was hot last year, so we decided to put our small bobhouse there again." Upton's young fishing partner loves the idea of eating SpaghettiOs® right out of the pan while in their "fort."

"I focus on depths from 8 feet to 8 inches," Upton continues. "My son cleans out the holes and drops a salmon egg or two down the hole. We focus our fishing on the holes that have missing eggs."

Basic gear Upton uses includes jig sticks and super smooth-running tip-ups with 4-pound fluorocarbon line. "Most of your traditional baits like worms, shiners and salmon eggs will work," says Upton. "But for my money it's salmon eggs all the way."

Upton places one or two salmon eggs on a number 10 hook. Baited hooks are sent to the bottom with no weight other than the hook and eggs. "It's all about having very little resistance on the line," says Upton. "Brookies will drop your bait as soon as they feel anything unnatural."

Where there's any sign of weeds, Upton prefers using tip-ups baited with very small shiners. This works because "the bigger trout hang out in the weeds ready to ambush the shiners," he explains.

In very shallow water, you'll need to "block up" your tip-up. If there's only about 8 inches of water, for example, Upton places blocks under the frame of the tip-up to keep the spool from "bottoming out."

SIGHT FISHING

Jigging is another very effective tool for putting some brookies on the ice. Traditional jig sticks and modern jig rods are rigged with 4-pound fluorocarbon.

The term jigging might suggest that you need to move the bait in some way. Not while using salmon eggs! Jigging in water less than two feet is actually sight fishing.

Upton's son Joey has demonstrated a natural talent for this unique style for jigging trout.

IT'S HERE!

Check the 2011 N.H. Freshwater Fishing Digest for ice-fishing regulations on the waterbody you are fishing. Available at www.fishnh.com or from any license agent.



"He lays on his belly and looks down the hole while he's jigging," says Upton. Then I hear him yell, "Dad I can see them eat the eggs!"

With amazing hand-eye coordination, Joey manages to catch and release trout all on his own using his "lay down" method. As soon as he feels the weight of the fish, Joey sets the hook. The timing has to be just right. "If you set the hook when the egg disappears, you'll miss the fish," says Upton.

This was one of those days these two anglers dream about. With flags popping everywhere, and Joey sticking trout with the jig stick, it was just nonstop action. As you might expect, both anglers had a difficult time taking time out from fishing to enjoy the SpaghettiOs® bubbling in the pan.

Mark Beauchesne is an avid year-round angler and N.H. Fish and Game's Advertising and Promotions Coordinator.

Joey Upton (right) has become adept at hooking and catching brook trout.



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