

Transition to Ice Perch



These happy fishermen caught these perch while fishing in weeds about 15 feet deep.

by John Andrew

As hard water is fast approaching, the perch are waiting. They're waiting for those ice fishermen who are "in the know" of their location. These tasty table-fare fish are easy to catch in winter with a few pointers.

First and foremost, we always like to fish the areas we were catching the perch right before ice-up, and at least a few weeks before the water became hard. We can expect a few good eaters in those locations, and using tiny 3/4-inch-long crappie minnows, waxworms and even a piece of nightcrawler on a 32-ounce ice jig in conjunction with 2-pound-test monofilament works well for producing our perch.

Depending on where you are fishing throughout the Midwest from Devils Lake across Minnesota, Wisconsin and into Illinois, the wintertime location will vary from lake to lake. It would be nice to catch them in 13, 22, or 31 feet on a particular lake—and that we can do that on any lake—but that's just not going to happen.

Each individual lake has its own unique water environment and characteristics. We must first learn an understanding of those characteristics before we can predict location in conjunction with seasonality. And for now, it is winter ice-up.

Yes, we can simply go where the rest of the ice houses are all piled up on a bay in the lake, discovering your own paradise of fishing is a grand, if not even a regal experience, and a family life-long event (if kept secret) during winter for all the children and relatives to enjoy.

When on the ice I follow some guidelines from the open-water season. These GPS locations always bring us onto the perch during the ice season. Remember, learning easily takes place during open-water season when we can easily GPS at a moment's notice.

During the open-water season—and we need to do this before ice season—I start by focusing on the depth of the lake, the rock bars, where the weeds are located, the flat areas of the lake that are connected to these and finally the current areas that most lakes have. If the lake has an average depth of 10 to 20 feet, that lake will experience current all open-water season long. Due to the shallow depth, wind will create current down several feet into the water—most people do not realize this phenomenon and fish location is greatly affected by this event (in shallow lakes). (This can happen on a windy day over a frozen shallow lake—the ice will slightly lift and drop and the fish are affected, moving to very predictable locations.) On certain shallow lakes during winter freeze-up, the water will become murky after two or three days of high winds.

I spend days guiding for perch in the boat, investigating, learning, understanding and exploring the habitat that we are producing the perch from. That way during ice fishing, we can capitalize on this knowledge.

While we are locating the perch and have found them, we now utilize an underwater camera to study them. My clients are amazed by the behavior of this fish under the ice. Perch may circle around and around the bait until slowly moving up ever so gently to inhale the bait, and then instantly

expel the bait without the spring tip on their ice rod even moving—not even 1 centimeter.

If you do not have an underwater camera, go buy one. You will learn more in one week of ice fishing than you have learned in the past 10 years. Ask anyone who owns one, especially a newer model of the last few years—they'll say, "the clarity is truly a breakthrough."



The bounty of deep woodpiles caught on a clear, deep lake while fishing with guide John Andrew.



Jumbo perch, taken while fishing with very small minnows.

When locating a school of perch we simply move the ice shelter above them and proceed to work the school. A very important note to open ice following the perch is put as many tip-downs as legal around your ice shelter. Do not put them too close to the shelter, as the fish may move, and as the tip-downs go off, you will discover the direction the school is moving.

Fishing the drop-offs of any rock bars works well and fish all weedlines and drop-offs. But, we work the largest weedline drop-offs in the lake, and not the "small bays" with a weedline drop-off. You may very well catch perch off a small weedline,

but again, we target the largest weedline drop-off.

As we move on to the deep, clear lakes we focus on very deep woodpiles—they are mostly man-made. These hot spots can be as shallow as 12 feet or as deep as 50 feet; they will produce perch depending on the time of year during the freeze-up. Discovering these locations will provide you with a winter-long bonanza.

Please remember C.P.R.—Catch, photo and release. Keeping a few for the frying pan is good. But let those giants go back, as we need that gene pool for the future.

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