

Catching – and eating – Late-ice Bluegills Now!



This father and son enjoyed catching ice bluegills with guide John Andrew on a recent outing and then enjoyed a fantastic ice fishing shore lunch.

by John Andrew

Winter fishing for bluegills is always a fun time; there are a lot of fish, the kids enjoy catching them, the small fish go back in to grow bigger and a few big ones are kept for a fish fry. This winter is milder than last year and well received. Hopefully you have enough ice to get in a few more days of ice fishing for this hard fighting and tasty table fare.

This article is geared towards what I have taught my clients over the years and also how this information will work for you, along with the underwater locations we look for during this time of year.

On the small lakes (30 to 150 acres) we have found that as the winter season progresses and the weed growth has died back to a minimum, the oxygen levels also drop off (unless there is moving water). This is one reason that causes the bluegills as well as other fish to suspend in the water column; at times they can be several hundred feet off shore, depending on the depth.

Using more subtle colors for our ice jig has proven to be better accepted this time of year on the clear or foggy colored water systems we fish. Two or three subtle colors together on the same ice jig also

can be very productive compared to loud and flashy colors. A good example—a maroon color, not bright red or a dull blue color not sky blue or a beige color instead of white and the list goes on and on.

The very dark water impoundments we still use a glow jig but also prefer a blue glow rather than a red or green glow, this is very important and you will need to experiment for the best color. I receive a lot of questions regarding color and how important it truly is to your success. I also speak at several seminars regarding the color of our lures for fishing and the fish behavior towards certain color, this is done at several of the sport shows I attend each winter. There are several glow colors that are now on the market.

How important is color to the specific water system you are fishing? Ask any walleye, crappie or bass pro on the circuit and you better take a seat because he or she is going to be talking for a long time.

Color is very, very important. Here is a trade secret I was taught 37 years ago by my mentor Jules Novak. He guided back in the day with Ray Kennedy, Porter Dean and several other old time famous guides in northern Wisconsin. When the pan fish get tired of seeing your white wax worm and are actually nipping at your jig head instead, you can safely say you are using

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the right color. However, to get the fish to hit your bait, try a colored wax worm, (which are and have been available). If this does not work, do what I was taught and use food coloring on your wax worms to match the color of your ice jig. That's right; food coloring. The kind that people use on hard boiled eggs during Easter. Also, scent is a major triggering factor and should also be experimented with as it also works very well, especially during the cold water periods of the year. But that's a topic of another conversation.

When fishing clear or foggy water, we have learned that the weed line is our very first place to start looking for bluegills. We may find them right inside the weeds at four to eight feet deep or we may find them at the sloping edge of the weeds or even at the bottom of the weed line 12 to 19 feet deep. Then there are times of the year like now that we find them suspended in the water column away from the weeds and in deeper water, close to where they will be in the spring and adjacent to their shallow spawning areas.

Wow, so now what you are thinking well, it's going to take time for you to find them. The key is the spawning area and the deeper water close to that area. Do you know an area like this, I'll bet you do and now is the time to start looking for this type of area. This can also be done in the spring spawning time, simply look for the deeper water close to where they are spawning and you have located a holding area before they spawn. They are usually there under the late ice, now.

Bluegills are easily caught and are a target for many ice fishermen, over harvest is very easy and has occurred on several water impoundments. Keeping a few when you go out is fine, but thinking you have to keep a limit every time we go out is not being conservative. I work with 300 to 400 clients every 12 months from open water thru ice fishing catching eight species of fish during this time frame and selective harvest is very important and crucial. We all should practice more catch and release. Be careful and do not take chances on the ice, be safe and let's all enjoy. **MWO**



Mouthwatering shore lunch on the ice, yum!



Wax worms and tiny ice jigs are a tried-and-true combination for catching bluegills (above and below).



John Andrew, owner/operator of theanglerschoiceguideservice.com is a two-time World Record holder, a two-time Outstanding Angler Achievement Award winner and a full-time, year 'round tour guide for fishing and hunting for the state of Wisconsin. Andrew is a full time resident of Wisconsin and a current and active member of four local Chambers of Commerce, specializing in Vilas, Oneida and Iron counties. He may be reached at 715- 892-3020 or 715-686-2012. johnandrew@centurytel.net theanglerschoiceguideservice.com.

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