Dad, can we go ice fishing?

By Doug Stang

Photos by Kelly Stang

As we drove around the frozen lake, we noticed a lot of people out on the ice. From the back seat, my four-year-old asked, *"Dad, what are those people doing out on the lake?"*

"Most of them are ice fishing," I replied.

"Can we go ice fishing?" he followed.

"Sure," I said.

"When?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," I replied.

And so it went for the rest of the ride home. "Are we going to take our boat? Can I bring my bear? Can you pull me on the sled? What do fish eat? Can we take Drake (our dog)? Will I catch a big fish? I like perch. Is the whole family going, or just you and me? Does Drake have boots? Will his feet get cold? Can we have lunch on the ice? What are those little houses doing out on the ice? Do I have to wear my hat and mittens?"

As four-year-olds are wont to do, questions upon questions are continually, and often repeatedly asked, so I prepared myself for a fun, question-filled day. Experience has taught me to listen to the cacophony of rapid-fire questions and try to selectively answer those that I can answer, or at least venture a guess at, and those that are most pertinent to the task at hand.

We loaded the equipment and the entire family (sans Drake) into the truck and headed out. Our first stop was a bait shop where we purchased minnows and "mousies." The bait store owner presented me with the receipt for the minnows and reminded me to keep it with me.

"Do they have more stuff in this store than you do? Why do you have to keep that piece of paper? Are those baby mice? Are you getting worms? Is it time for lunch yet? Why is the man in the store laughing?"

Mousies are not baby mice. They are small insect larvae that you use for bait. I need to keep the piece of paper to show proof that the bait fish I bought were tested for and found to be free of certain diseases. We want to follow the rules and take care of our resources (see sidebar: *Don't Spread Fish Diseases*).

Ice fishing can be a great winter outdoor activity for the whole family.

We arrived at the lake and headed out onto the ice amid many other families who were taking advantage of a relatively warm, sunny January day. Through the years, I have noticed increased interest and participation in ice fishing and other "on ice" activities such as cross-country skiing and snowmobiling.

Heading to a spot to set up, the questions continued. "How big [thick] is the ice? Are you sure we won't fall through? Where does ice come from? What makes it slippery? What are those things on your feet?"

I thought this was a good time to tell him the first rule of ice fishing—make sure the ice is safe to walk on. I never go out on less than five inches of clear, hard ice. And, as my son pointed out, since ice can be very slippery, particularly if there is no snow on it, many ice anglers wear "creepers" or other devices on their boots to provide traction while walking.

I decided to try the same areas we fished last summer as we are familiar with the water depths and underwater features of this part of the lake. We fish around the edges of weedbeds and areas that go from shallow to deep water fairly quickly. If you are unfamiliar with a particular lake, but want to try it, look to where the concentrations of others are fishing. Talk with others on the ice, and ask for advice at local bait and tackle shops. I've found that people who are ice fishing are much more forthcoming with information on fishing techniques and places to try than are open-water anglers.

The questions continued to pour from my son as we reached our "favorite spot" on the lake, set up our tent and unpacked our ice fishing equipment: "What is that big drill? Why are the fishing poles so small? What are those things with the flags on them?"

I explained that the big drill is an ice auger, and is used to cut holes in the ice. Depending on the model, ice augers cut holes from 4 to 10 inches in diameter. In general, six- to eight-inch holes are sufficient to bring fish, even large fish, up through the ice. Most augers are hand-powered; however, gas-engine powered augers are gaining in popularity as new, lighter-weight and more "environmentally friendly" models are increasingly available.

Toys help keep young ice anglers happy and engaged. My son had his trucks guard one ice-fishing hole, in case the tip-up was triggered.

The small fishing poles are jigging rods. They are lightweight to enable you to feel the subtle bites of panfish (yellow perch, bluegills, crappie, sunfish). The rod's short length (approximately 2-2½ feet long) lets you stand close to the hole, making them much more maneuverable if you are fishing in a shanty or tent or "ice house." I showed my son how to use the jigging rod, raising and lowering the tip with a short stroke or "jigging" action. He wanted to examine each of the lures and baits that I brought—small flashy lures, ice flies, dots, and jigs that are usually baited with a grub, "mousie," or "spike" (fly larvae).

As he turned his attention to the "things with the flags," I told him they were called tip-ups. Though tip-ups come in a

Bringing along a picnic lunch keeps everyone happy.

Safety First

Ice Safety

Always make sure the ice is safe before heading out. You can use the following table as a guide.

American Pulpwood Association Ice Thickness Table

Ice Thickness	*Permissible Load*
2 inches	one person on foot
3 inches	group in single file
7.5 inches	one car (2 tons)
8 inches	light truck (2.5 tons)
10 inches	truck (3.5 tons)
12 inches	heavy truck (7-8 tons)
15 inches	10 tons
20 inches	25 tons

This guide is based on clear, blue, hard ice on non-running waters. Slush ice is about 50% weaker, and clear, blue ice over running water is about 20% weaker. Many ice anglers do not like to fish on less than five inches of ice, and do not like to drive a pick-up truck on less than 15 inches of ice.

Don't Spread Fish Diseases

To minimize the risk of possibly spreading fish diseases, anglers who collect their own bait fish can only use the bait fish on the water they collected it from. Bait stores must sell bait fish that are certified disease free (tested and found free of diseases of concern). Bait stores located on the shore of a body of water can sell untested bait fish only for use in that same body of water from which they were collected. No overland transport of uncertified bait fish is currently permitted in New York. Anglers who purchase certified bait fish must retain the receipt that indicates the number and type of bait fish purchased. Receipts are good for 10 days, and the fish must be properly disposed of after 10 days.

Patiently waiting for a fish to bite.

variety of shapes and sizes, all are basically two sticks of wood or plastic that form an X over the hole, with a third upright stick that is perpendicular to the X. The upright stick has a reel or spool of line and a trigger device on the end that is suspended into the hole. There's a flag attached to a spring on the top end of the stick. When the tip-up is "set," the flag is down. Once a fish bites, the trigger is released and the flag springs into the air to signal a strike. Of course we had to "practice" setting and releasing the tip-ups a bunch of times so my son could see the flags go up, before I could convince him we should put them in the water. He watched as I baited them with either minnows or worms, and then set the line so the bait was within a foot of the lake bottom, or suspended over the top of the weeds.

I told my son that when you see a flag pop up into the air, it is tradition to yell "TIP-UP" and go over to the hole and pull the fish up through the hole. A courtesy among others who are ice fishing, a.k.a. the "frostbite fraternity," is to let others know if one of their flags has been tripped in case they did not see it. Throughout the day, I became accustomed to hearing "TIP-UP" yelled, whether or not a flag was actually tripped, and each time, right on cue, I snapped my head around to check to see if there was a flag in the air, because you just never know. More times than not, my head snapping was followed by high-pitched laughter—at least it was done in good fun by the newest "fraternity" member.

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The day was filled with playing Frisbee, cooking and eating lunch, visiting with other members of the fraternity, attending to tip-ups, changing wet clothes for dry ones, and jigging and actually catching some yellow perch and pickerel. All-in-all, it was a fine day afield with my family.

As we walked off the ice, loaded the truck, and headed home, the inquisition continued at a fevered pitch: "Are we going to eat these fish for dinner? I'm gonna catch a really big fish next time. Can we go tomorrow? Can we bring Drake? Can I use the auger next time? Do I have to wear my..." That is, until a silence fell over the cab of the truck as my four-year-old son fell sound asleep.

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