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 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).
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 cue, I snapped my head around to see y high-pitched laughter—at least it was “TIP-UP” yelled, whether or not a flag was actually tripped.

Throughout the day, I became accustomed to hearing “TIP-UP” yelled, whether or not a flag was actually tripped...