



Fishing bluegills and panfish through the ice

“Hard water” fishing for panfish is fun and easy and may result in a fine dinner when the winds blow cold. Here are some basic tips and considerations to improve chances of success.

Where to fish

Know the locations where bluegills will be. Often time, winter fishing is a return to the familiar haunts of summer. Bluegills associate with weeds, finding green, standing vegetation is often key to finding fish. Don't overlook woody debris either: tree crowns and fish cribs attract panfish. Also, small nuances in depth such as drop-offs, breaks, and bars are fish holders.

Use all the tools. Some anglers use fish locators to hone in on fish or to put their bait in the fish holding areas. Others consult local on-line forums for location, time and bait details from other successful anglers. On the ice, cell phones between fishing pals has helped to turn a so-so day into a memorable trip.

Bait use

Make it tasty. Baits vary as much as fishermen but mousies, wax worms, and spikes (all larva of insects) typically grace the business end of ice fishing jigs. Don't be shy about using a small plastic “wedge” or teaser to attract attention or trigger a strike. Have a selection of colors available to work with changing water clarities. And check your knot ! There are methods of tying on jigs and baits that create “bounce’ or wiggle that entice hesitant fish into biting.

Line and hook tips

Keep it light. Bluegills are dainty sight feeders. Keep your line light (2- to 4-pound test monofilament) and the terminal tackle small : rat finkys, marmooskas, tear drops and ice jigs need to be kept to scale with a bluegills mouth , such as # 12. The same goes for floats or spring bobbers...keeping them sensitive and offering minimal resistance means more bites. But if the bite isn't happening, don't be afraid to switch it up and offer up a big meal....sometimes big aggressive fish will take a large flashy lure.

More tips

Be quiet. More often than not, it's the quiet focused anglers that fill their pails. Fish spook and avoid vibration and noise. A stealthy approach pays its own dividends. To keep disturbance to a minimum drill extra holes when you first arrive so when the bite gets hot you can maximize the potential of the area you are fishing.

Move ! If fish aren't biting, take a walk and see if others are enjoying any success. Hole -hopping , even small distances, can produce fish. A hole that isn't fishy isn't going to put dinner on the table. Also, fish the entire VERTICAL water column. Often 'gills and crappie may “hold” in a narrow band within the depth range. Cover the depth by slowly and completely jigging from top to bottom through the entire profile.

And last but not least, GO ! Stop wishin' and go fishin' !

*- Kurt Welke, longtime fisheries biologist for Dane County
(including the Madison lakes)*