

ICE FISHING

BLUEGILL BL

Even for a veteran angler, bluegills are worthy winter quarry

If any fish will bring you back to Never-never Land, it's bluegills. Some folks are critical of fishing for "kibbies." I've heard all the insults, from trash fish to "kids" fish. We mock what we don't understand. Well, I had the opportunity to change one of these critics' minds. A new panfish angler's response to his first bluegill through the ice was priceless. His eyes were now wide open to what our fellow anglers in the Midwest already know: these fish are flat-out fun. He was right about bluegills being a "kid's fish," though, because he was giggling like a 12-year-old boy.

The winter pursuit of panfish is nothing new. Midwesterners have been ice-fishing for bluegills, crappies and yellow perch for generations. Only more recently has targeting panfish come into vogue for ice-anglers in New Hampshire.

I've been taking panfish through the ice for the better part of 15 years – mostly black crappies, yellow perch, white perch and the occasional bluegill. I find bluegills to be the most challenging, so for this article, I'll focus on tactics for bluegills. These same strategies work for the other panfish species, as well.

THE MAGIC TIME

We're all familiar with fishing for what most of us call "sunnies" (most panfish are sunfish family members). They are very user-friendly at certain times of the year, because they respond to simple tackle and good ol' mud worms. This is not necessarily the case during the winter. Panfish will frustrate the very best ice-anglers one day, and the next day jump all over your offering.

The first key to successful ice fishing for panfish is mobility. This starts with a good sturdy sled, one with tall sides and just enough room for the gear you are hauling. With too big a sled, I will always load up too much stuff. What's essential? My basic gear list includes a sled, creepers (spikes or studs that attach to your boots to prevent slipping), an ice chisel or "spud" for testing the ice, auger for drilling the hole, electronic fish finder, food and water, first-aid kit, jigging rods, fish-catching jigs, live bait or artificial lures and a scoop or skimmer. In the "nice to have" category: snowmobile, tip-ups and folding chair.

Bluegill locations change with the onset of winter and continue to change until ice out. The amount of the available daylight also plays

an important part. Considering all these variables, being mobile allows me to hunt, locate and catch bluegills. These fish will move to different locations in our ponds throughout the day, depending on the light conditions. On nice sunny days, bluegills will challenge your fish-locating abilities.

Low-light conditions, like first thing in the morning, then again towards evening, are the magic time. On cloudy days, low-light conditions can persist all day. These are the days we dream about.

Why are panfish so active when natural light is low? The answer is plankton. During low-light conditions, zooplankton actively feed on phytoplankton (plants); aquatic insects feed on the zooplankton; and fish of all sizes feed on the insects drawn to this high concentration of plankton.

Zooplankton are less active in the daylight and tend to settle to the bottom of the pond. Aquatic insects also become less active, resulting in what we call the mid-day blues. You can still catch panfish at noon, though, because not all the plankton are inactive.

First ice through last ice brings many changes in panfish locations. There are many variables here, also – color of the water, density of aquatic plants, and depth of ice and snow. Deep snow, for example, can create optimal low-light conditions under the ice.

Consider pond depths and contours when you decide where to set up for both jigging and tip-ups. Whenever possible, I look for transition areas – points, humps, coves and drop-offs. Areas that have rapid changes from shallow to deeper are where you're likely to get results. In my pond, there are transitions from 6 feet to 10 feet in depth in a distance of less than 20 feet. This is a fairly significant slope. Check a depth map and keep these areas in mind when you set up, regardless of the stage of the winter season.

BY MARK BEAUCHESNE



©JOHN WARE PHOTO

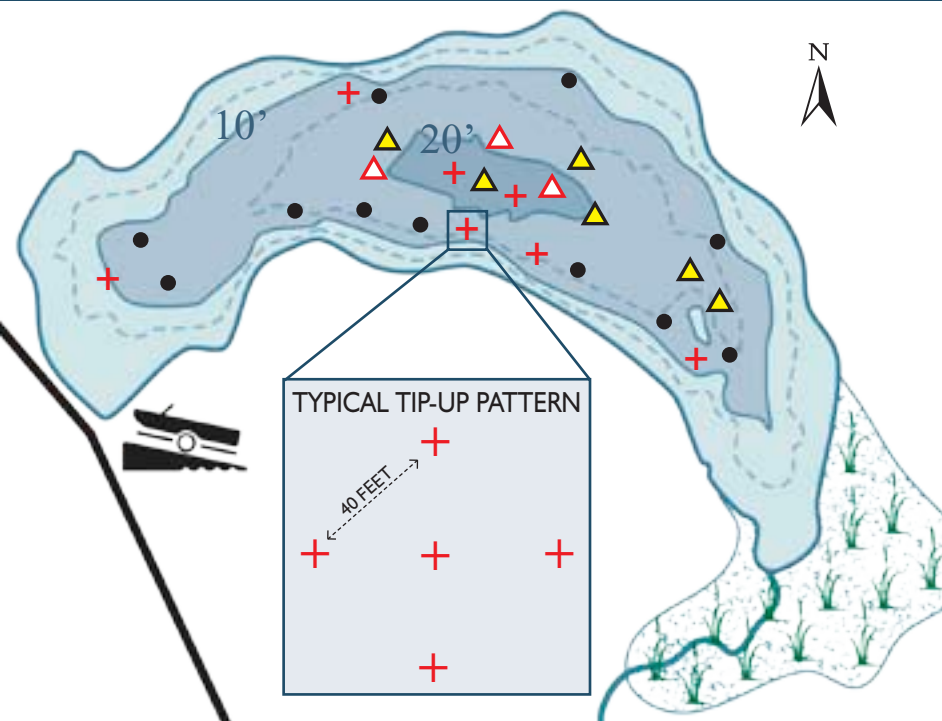
iTZ



Mark Beauchesne, right, shows off a quality New Hampshire bluegill to Minnesota's "Mr. Ice Fishing," Dave Genz – proof of how successful you can be pulling bluegills through the ice.

©ERIC ENGRETSON PHOTO

WINTER PANFISH LOCATIONS



Panfish seek different locations as winter progresses. During first-ice, target areas with green plants and rapid depth changes. Mid-to late-ice, try areas with higher oxygen concentrations, typically deeper parts of the pond or where hillside runoff or natural springs stir the water up. Tip-ups cover a wider area to intercept fish. Jigs are paired with electronic devices to pinpoint fish locations.

- KEY**
- + First ice tip-up locations
 - First ice jig locations
 - △ Mid-to-late ice tip-up locations
 - △ Mid-to-late ice jig locations

First ice, I focus on areas that still have green plants. This offers a place for panfish to hide and feed. Decaying brown vegetation is no good; it uses up oxygen. Focus on areas as shallow as 5 feet to depths of 15 feet. The key is green plants, because they provide an oxygen boost.

Panfish tend to be very aggressive during the early ice period, so selecting eye-catching baits and jigs is the way to go. Use small shiners. Jigs, I go with a medium-sized Swedish pimple, maybe tipped with a

shiner tail or small soft plastic bait. Set tip-ups along the vegetated edge. I like to set my shiners fairly high in the water column. Be sure to spend time jigging in the hole where you missed a fish on your tip-up. Many times, aggressive bluegills will hit the shiner hard enough to trip the flag, but they can't get hold of the shiner. As the season progresses, I adjust my jig sizes to the fish's attitude, typically downsizing.

MY SECRET TO SUCCESS

Jigging is pretty much all I do now. I start out by drilling six holes, spaced about twenty steps apart. These days, I almost always decide where to jig by using an electronic fish-finder. Whatever style of fish-finder you have can be used on the ice for determining water depths and finding fish, vegetation and rocks. This fish-finding tool is what makes me successful! By using the finder, I can determine whether or not there are fish below me. More importantly, it will tell me how active they are. Example: When I locate a fish on the finder, I can tell as soon as my jig starts to fall through the water column just how active this fish is. If the fish is aggressive, it will literally charge up to crush the jig. Non-aggressive fish will slowly sink back to the bottom. Fish that appear neutral will just hold in place. No matter what the attitude of the fish, if I can see them on the finder, I can catch them.

Jigging techniques can seem complicated, but are really fairly simple. To entice the bite, you need to move the jig. Too much or too little will result in a refusal from the fish. The aid of electronics will help you find the ideal motion for the jig. For the most part, I find less is more. That is, the less motion I put on the jig, the more strikes I get.

Here's the only real secret I'm giving away: when you are jigging for panfish, imagine you are drawing a ¼-inch circle with the tip of your jig rod. This will barely shake the jig, giving it life, and because you are moving the rod, you will be able to detect almost any strike.



©JOHN WARR PHOTO

MR. ICE FISHING

Last winter, Minnesota's Dave Genz, AKA "Mr. Ice Fishing," visited New Hampshire. Dave is known as the father of the modern ice fishing system. I met Dave in the fall and invited him to come fish for bluegills in the Granite State. His first question to me was, "Do you have bluegills over 10½ inches?" I assured him that New Hampshire has big bluegills.

The day Dave fished with us was challenging, but with two fisheries biologists, Mr. Ice Fishing and myself on hand, the fish had no chance. Each of us managed to catch several quality bluegills, including one over

10½ inches long. Dave commended us on New Hampshire's outstanding fishery. That was a big deal, coming from a guy from Minnesota with his angling experience. You see, panfish are king in the Midwest. People out there go nuts over any bluegill more than 9 inches or crappies over 11 inches. Fish we take for granted in New Hampshire are prized catches in the "Land of 10,000 Lakes." Dave's compliments made me very proud. For more information about ice angling for panfish, visit www.davegenz.com or www.FishNH.com. ~ M.B.



Bluegill



Black crappie



Yellow perch



Pumpkinseed

©ERIC ENGELBREITSON PHOTOS



The ice-angler has a dizzying array of jig choices for targeting panfish:

Vertical jigs (upper left) are great for presenting above the fish. This is ideal because most panfishes' eyes are located forward and toward the top of their heads, so they eat in an angled-up posture. Tip them with natural or artificial baits.

Horizontal jigs (right column) are better suited for presenting at eye level – in their face, you might say. Horizontal jigs tend to be smaller, making them a good choice for selective bluegills. Tip them with a single maggot or wax worm for rod-bending results.

Artificial baits or **soft plastic** are available in many sizes, shapes, colors and flavors. Size is the most important feature. Try to match the natural food size as much as possible. If necessary, cut down a plastic bait to make it smaller to entice a strike.



©JOHN VIVAR PHOTO

The most important advancement in ice fishing is the electronic fish locator. Two basic types take the guesswork out of where fish are and whether they can be caught – the user-friendly LCD type shown above and the “flasher” type.

My jig rods are specialty items. I use ultra-light rods, 24 to 28 inches long, paired with spinning reels with good drags. The drag is important, because you never know when a big fish will take advantage of the easy meal you are offering. This is an angling fact – when you match your tackle to your quarry, you are in for a tackle-testing fight. For line, I choose a high-tech braided line like Berkley Fire-Line. I use 2-pound test line, which has the diameter of ½-pound test line, so I find no need for a mono leader. Braided line does not stretch, making it ideal for jigging.

The fine braid allows me to downsize my non-lead jigs. Often, I will use bead head flies, like the ones we would use for trout fishing. After all, they are imitations of aquatic insects. Most of the jigs we use need some sort of additional attractant. This could be motion, scent or flavor. You have two choices to accomplish these – natural bait or artificial lure. The natural bait that works the best for me is maggots.

ICE SAFETY


- Never trust the ice. Check the ice every time by using a spud or chisel. This tool allows you to check the ice without stepping onto it.
- Look for a minimum of five inches of ice.
- The best ice is clear or almost black in appearance. Weaker ice formed by snow frozen into the water will be whitish. Snow ice, as it's called, requires extra caution.
- I like to say that no ice is ever safe. A pair of creepers will keep you upright on glare ice.
- Be prepared for any situation with a first-aid kit and extra dry clothes in your vehicle; tell someone at home your plans in case you don't make it back on time.
- For more practical tips, visit www.FishNH.com/icefishing.

~ M.B.

They also go by “mousies,” but that doesn't make them any less repulsive to look at. Because they are small, I will often tip the jig with three or more. There are times that the fish will only respond to a single maggot, though.

Maggots are definitely deadly effective on panfish. The downside is that you need to keep them cool. Often that means inside your coat when you are fishing and inside the refrigerator between trips. I caution you about storing bait in the refrigerator. Be sure the lid is on securely and the container is well marked. You can fill in your worst-case scenario here.

Then we have the alternative to live bait – artificial or soft plastic scented lures. There are too many choices! What works best for me is the Power Bait Honey Worm in the red color. I will shorten this bait by two segments, then thread the worm on, leaving a 1/8-inch tail exposed. Artificial bait needs no special storage and lasts through several fish. Many of the major artificial bait manufacturers offer smaller-sized baits for ice fishing. Just remember, with artificial baits, it's up to the angler to bring the bait to life.

Panfish are by far my favorite winter fish. They are accessible to most of us, challenging and very good to eat. Yes, I eat bluegills. The name panfish is not just for their shape you know. Keep only the fish you plan to fry up and eat and please release the rest for the next time. Take a friend along and share the fun of a great New Hampshire winter tradition. 

When he is not fishing or hunting, Mark Beauchesne is the Promotions Coordinator at the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.



©GABRIEL GRIES PHOTO