

Steady Eddy calls them "the folks who fish the hardwater." They wear thermal underwear, drill holes in the ice until it looks like a prairie dog colony, and are unashamed to admit they use maggots for bait.

They're in their element right now, contemplating the Buddha at the Bottom-of-the-Lake and doing their thing on the rocks.

"You don't have to be crazy to go ice fishing," Steady Eddy preaches down at the bait shop, "but it doesn't hurt."

It could even help a little.

What normal person is going to trudge out onto the ice in freezing temperatures, drill a hole, and then sit there contemplating it for hours on end, day after day, month after month?

"No normal person," Steady Eddy concedes. "Just us."

I always figured that The Old Man's rationale was good as any I ever heard.

"With our big noses," he used to say of his tribe, "we are natural-born ice fishermen."

The Old Man held the theory that broad noses and economy-sized nostrils preheated the North Country air so that it entered your lungs like a warm soup.

That, of course, assumed that you were breathing through your nose and keeping your mouth shut. If you were dumb enough to walk around with your mouth open after Christmas, the winter air would sear your lungs like a snort of paint thinner and you deserved to die outside like the idiot you were.

The Old Man would be pleased to learn that even respected scientists accept this native wisdom and suggest that little-nosed people are courting disaster if they live north of Birmingham, Alabama.

A Nose For ICE FISHING

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crazy to go ice fishing,"
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down at the bait shop,
"but it doesn't hurt."*

By GEORGE VUKELICH

It is because of The Old Man's Vision that I now spend so much of the North Country Winter out on the ice. "I don't know why we do it," Steady repeats in amazement. "We are probably following in a great tradition."

The Old Man bequeathed to me not only his nose, but other essential gear as well: tip-ups, ice skimmer, a gaff, jigging sticks, and poles.

I treasure them as I would the relics of a saint, primitive artifacts from a past that never knew the comfort and ease to be found in toasty Sorel boots from Canada, ice augers from Sweden, and snowmobile suits that keep you as warm as an igloo.

I fish almost every day of the winter now, and I think that I love the ice as much as I love the open water. I also think this is what The Old Man must have felt for the North Country in those growing-up years when I thought he wasn't as smart as he turned out to be.

There are great lessons to be learned on the ice, even as there are great lessons to be learned

on open water, and I know now what The Old Man was waiting for me to learn up in the Chain of Lakes country. He was waiting for me to be aware.

Not just the awareness that the bluegills are schooled at six feet and hitting the green ice fly or that the light tap on the gold Rapala was a bass and not a perch.

It's the awareness that you're sitting out there all alone on the windswept ice like an old Eskimo, removed from the family and waiting for the polar bear to find you.

The awareness that you're sitting out there like a live coal removed from the ring of live coals. Apart. Solitary. Vulnerable. In the mouth of the prowling wind.

Sustained by no others.

Sustained by what, then?

Far out on the ice there are crows settling down on the blinding surface and walking stiffly around the bodies of abandoned dead fish.

One comes eventually to an awareness of the scavengers among us, and one eventually goes beyond the initial revulsion and respects them for what they do in this world.

They go about their work with a ritualistic dignity. They are professional, correct, estimating the logistics of disposing of the dead thing before them. Then they proceed to pick out its eyes.

On the way off the ice this day, I answer the crows and detour a quarter-mile to pick up an empty red Coleman fuel can with which the crows cannot cope.

I call down The Old Man's wrath on the slob who littered. Unless awareness finds him soon, he will be bedridden until spring. ❧

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