

A Rugged Breed

The Hard



ge Koshollek, Jr.

Fishing in Wisconsin is usually associated with sky-blue days and whispery, still nights. People, particularly summer people, remember their fishing as Mayfly hatches rising in clouds from the upper Brule. They remember bass bugs plunking into the darkened sloughs of Big Stone Lake. They remember a hooked walleye, tightening the monofilament like a band saw through the algae-scummed surface of Little Arbor Vitae. They remember, in short, open water and soft west winds.

When Labor Day comes, these folks hang up the rods, turn up the thermostat and confine their fishing to the Orvis catalog until the following spring.

But there's another genus of Wisconsin fisherman who only comes into his own when the ice is a foot

thick on the lakes and the north wind cuts through the thermal underwear like a deer-skinning knife. This is the Ice Fisherman, an enthusiast whose sanity is questioned by all except those who share his passion for this coldest of all possible pastimes.

An ice fisherman is a man who enjoys holding a scalding hot cup of coffee. (We share in this with deer, duck, and goose hunters.) Clutching said cup is the best way to thaw out the ungloved hand after baiting a hook in twenty-below-zero weather. Hand warmers and cigarette lighters are good too, but they don't have the comforting spillage that you get from coffee.

An ice fisherman is a man who enjoys solitude. I don't mean to imply that he is a people hater, but most assuredly he is a motorboat hater. And as most motor-

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Water Fishermen



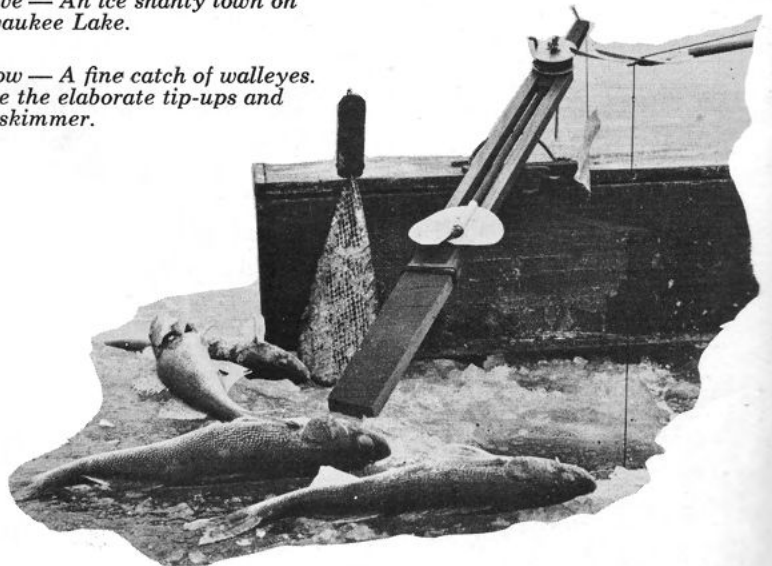
Above — An ice shanty town on Pewaukee Lake.

boats come with people, probably he is a motorboat-people hater by definition. I do remember, however, one harsh January day on Devil's Lake, with the temperature at minus 22 degrees. I forgot myself and prayed for a motorboat to come by. But the ice measured 30 inches and because we weren't chiseling holes all over the place, I probably gave in to ennui. It's a little like the farm wife who hopes the mailman will stop, if only with a feed bill from the co-op.

What To Wear

To pursue this madness, a man must be properly equipped. For the really fundamental gear, my preference is for the two-piece thermal suit so favored by skiers. I reason that if this get up keeps those nuts warm when they whiz downhill at 60 miles per hour,

Below — A fine catch of walleyes. Note the elaborate tip-ups and the skimmer.





Ice fishing is probably the coldest of all possible pastimes.

Wisconsin Conservation Dept.



Rigging tip-ups is a cold, cold business.

Wisconsin Conservation Dept.



In Lake Winnebago the armor-plated, prehistoric sturgeon grows as big as a man.

Nancy Mead



Cooking a hot lunch at a "fisheree" near La Crosse.

it should keep me warmer as I hardly ever fish downhill. Over the suit, I always wear a hand-knit wool turtleneck sweater, a memento of my merchant marine days. The high collar is comforting indeed when the icy wind encircles your throat like a cold loop of piano wire.

I wear two pair of socks, one of heavy wool, and rubber shoe pacs that would permit yet another pair of heavy socks. Dry, warm feet are essential in this business. If your feet get wet, you might as well be standing there in shorts.

On my head, I like a woolen Navy watchcap, worn helmet style to protect the ears. However, on the colder days, I have gone to the skier's woolen face mask — the eye-slitted hood that admittedly cuts down the wind burn, but always leaves me with the feeling that I have jammed too much face into too little mask. But, let me admit that I have a larger nose than is normal among the brethren.

For the hands, I like heavy mitts rather than finger gloves, large enough to palm a hand warmer *inside* on occasion. Normally, two hand warmers in outer pockets of an insulated jacket suffice, but I am a thin-blooded type who could sit on a stove in utter contentment.

These then are basics. Warm feet, warm hands, warm neck and ears. Each man must go and find for himself refinements and improvements.

On Wisconsin's windswept ice fields, you will encounter old professionals togged out in sheepskin-lined flight gear and boots from the Flying Fortress days. You will see pea jackets and chest-high suspender foul-weather pants. And if ever the electrically heated astronauts' space suits wind up in the army surplus

store, you can bet your ice chisel that an ice fisherman will be the first customer.

Refinements? I carry sun glasses for those blindingly bright days when the glare is strong enough to put out your eyes. And I know one Old Pro who wears a bulging money belt stuffed with hand warmers to keep the chill off his ancient flanks. He claims that it's more reassuring than a full wallet. You must go and find out for yourself. When you find a way to stay warm, or to put it more accurately, when you find a way to keep from freezing, believe me, you have this thing half licked.

What To Take

To chop your hole through the ice, you need an ice chisel, or "spud." Don't embark upon a hole four feet across. You're not launching a boat. A hole four to six inches across is plenty wide enough for most fishing. You're going to be pulling your fish out straight up, not broadside.

The newer auger-type hole cutter enables you to literally "drill" out your hole. It's more expensive than the "spud," but it's faster and easier.

In the more heavily winter areas, Lake Winnebago and the Mississippi River, to mention two spots, commercial outfitters are available to drill out your hole for a reasonable fee.

Also in the most heavily fished areas, many holes never refreeze to any extent, and for reopening these old holes, even an axe or hatchet will suffice.

A "skimmer" — a sort of perforated metal ladle — is also a "must" tool to remove drifting snow or "skim" ice from your hole.



It's just as cold as it looks.



Jumbo perch fishing on Madison's windswept Lake Mendota.

If you're fishing panfish, small short rods of wood or glass with crude reels or line holders will do the job. You hold this rod, "jiggling" the bait and setting the hook when the fish hits.

If you're fishing bigger fish, northerns or walleyes, "tip-ups" are in order. There are dozens of variations, but basically a "tip-up" is merely a line holder placed crosswise over the hole so that it can't be pulled through. It works on the principle of the mousetrap. The line leading from the bait below is strung through a release mechanism attached to a "flag." When a fish strikes, the line trips the release mechanism, the "flag" flies up, and the fisherman comes running over with new hope in his heart and new warmth in his veins. The "tip-up" is designed for use with "live bait," where the action of the hooked minnow does not require "jiggling." There are wind "tip-ups," too, though, which use air currents to jiggle the bait for you. The "tip-up" will enable you to sit in your car, sipping your coffee and pondering the wisdom of the fish below your snow tires. You'll see a lot of wet-reel "tip-ups" in these parts. They hold the spool of surplus line underwater, where it's less likely to freeze up.

I am a "tip-up" man from way back. The technique enables you to catch up on your reading, keep up with the radio newscasts, and talk to your fishing buddy over the quiet hum of the car heater.

Refinements in the area of equipment are many, too. On the lakes where cars are prohibited, a little runnered box sled is ideal for hauling gear out on to the ice. A portable windbreak of canvas or plastic, fastened to a few poles, provides a livable little environment. And a portable stool or chair from which to "jig" is comfort

indeed. "Seater heaters" are sophisticated furniture pieces that make you cozy as a nesting hen on a clutch of eggs. I am also a "heater" man from way back. Having a cold seat is as bad as having wet feet. As a matter of fact, it's worse.

Where To Go

Undoubtedly, one of the best winter fishing spots in all the midwest is Wisconsin's famed Lake Winnebago. This sprawling shallow lake freezes tight as a drum and supports a "shanty" community, complete with plowed "roads" and bridges that span the expansion cracks in the ice. Line fishermen on Winnebago may use three lines—elsewhere throughout the state—the limit is two lines and they take panfish, jumbo perch, walleyes, and northern pike throughout the season.

The Wisconsin Conservation Department, as a result of a survey conducted on Winnebago two years ago, concluded that "jiggling," either with or without a minnow, was the most successful way of catching the lake's walleyes. However, conditions vary from year to year. When minnows and troutperch, the favorite food of Winnebago's sauger and walleyes, are in short supply, the game fish fall back on Winnebago's ever-abundant lake fly larvae.

The Conservation Department does state that, as a general rule, *it's a safe bet to classify the emerald lake shiner as the best winter bait to catch walleyes and saugers in Lake Winnebago.*

It's always another safe bet to check with the local fishermen and bait stations in an ice-fishing area. I even look up the local warden, on the theory that he

gets paid to know what the heck is going on in his bailiwick. And he knows the neighborhood like the back of his hand. It's like asking directions of a traffic cop in the city.

Lake Winnebago also provides one of the more dramatic aspects of ice fishing: sturgeon spearing. The Winnebago area, including Lakes Butte des Morts, Poygan, and Winneconne, is the last strong hold of the armor-plated prehistoric sturgeon that grow big as a man.

The technique is to cut a door-sized opening in the ice — forget your chisel and find a man with a chain saw for this — and move a shanty in over the hole. A multiple-tined spear with flying barbs is suspended by a rope from a shanty rafter. Then you wait for a sturgeon to appear. It's like keeping a vigil on a deer stand, waiting for that big buck to break into your sights. You can even do it in style, with rugs around the hole and coffee on the Coleman.

When a sturgeon swims into view, the first thing you do is gauge his length. If he's at least 40 inches long, you gauge his depth, grip the spear, and hurl the shaft downward with all the might you can muster. If you hit, you grab the rope and hang on for fair, and try to pull him out while he's trying to pull you in. It's more

Indian wrestling than fishing, and the adrenalin will shoot through your body like a spring thaw.

A sturgeon must be at least 40 inches long to be legal, and this you must ascertain before you ever throw the spear. Otherwise, my friend the local warden, who gets paid to know what's going on, will arrest you for violating the law.

Sturgeon spearing is really a public affair. Despite the fact that the spearing is done from a darkened shanty, the struggle of an impaled fish will often bring a crowd from the surrounding shanties to watch. And Wisconsin law requires that within twenty-four hours after a sturgeon has been speared, it must be registered at one of the lakeside registration stations.

Lake Winnebago sturgeon average between 50 and 55 pounds. The record is held by Elroy Schroeder of Appleton, who in 1953 speared a monster 180-pounder, the largest ever taken in Wisconsin.

If you'd like to get into the sturgeon business painlessly, I recommend that you check the lake's eastern shore communities of Pipe, Brothertown, or Stockbridge, where shanties and spears can be rented and a spearing license purchased. The roads across the ice fields are plowed. The holes are cut. All you have to do is watch and wait.

The Mississippi River along Wisconsin's Grant and Crawford counties offers some of the best fishing and facilities around for the Hard Water Brotherhood.

Guides in this area use airboats to scoot you to and from the "hot spots" safely and sanely. For an additional fee, some of the boys will even cut out your holes with gas-powered augers. When the ice is going on three feet thick, this little service is not to be sniffed at. Some will even rent you rods, tip-ups, and the whole ball of wax.

The big river contains a mixed bag — panfish, perch, bluegills, crappies, bass, and northern pike. In the early season, that is to say, December, redworms work as well as anything. As the winter settles in and the fish become less active, the Old Pros switch to salmon eggs, wax worms, goldenrod grubs, pine grubs, and various larvae. Artificial jigs, nymphs, and spiders always seem to work well, particularly on crappies.

Live minnows are the old reliables for bass and northern pike.

The nice thing about the Mississippi for the meat fisherman is that on the Wisconsin side of the river, our laws permit a fisherman to use *five* tip-ups or poles and lines. Should you zip over to a "hot spot" on the Iowa side, remember that, while Iowa honors the Wisconsin license under a reciprocal arrangement, Iowa law permits only *two* tip-ups or poles.

Back on the Wisconsin side of the river, there are always good fishing spots out of Bagley, Cassville, Glen Haven, and Wyalusing in Grant County. And out of Prairie du Chien, Lynxville, Ferryville, and De Soto in Crawford County.

Again, it's a good bet to get the lay of the river simply by stopping in at a bait station and asking a couple of straight questions. You'll get honest straight answers, and nobody will try to sell you a packet of Royal Coachman or fifty yards of floating flyline.

They want you to use the right stuff, catch a carload of fish, and come back again. If you ask enough questions of the Old Pros, fish alongside them every chance you get, and *do* what they do, you'll view the spring break-up with mixed emotions.

Not everybody makes it out on the windswept Wisconsin ice fields. That's why the rods get hung up, and the Orvis catalog gets read. But as the Brotherhood has discovered, once you make it out there, the rest of the year is a breeze. A warm one.

Warm cars for cold fisherman on the Big Eau Plaine near Stratford.



Wisconsin Conservation Dept.