

Icefishing Secrets Revealed!

Insider spills beans on polypropylene skivvies, and more.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

It was one of those memorable December morns a few years back, when Steady Eddy was presiding over the world's best and funkier baitshop down on Blair Street and playing cards with the likes of the Indian, Guacamole and Keats Colura.

The windows were all steamed and dripping, the bait tanks gurgled like tea kettles. Outside the winter howled like wolves. You hoped no one would open the front door until April.

But someone did—two pilgrims wearing the ten-gallon hats that were all the craze back then (which should have told us that the country was ready for a man on a white horse). They turned out to be up from the Chicago 'burbs, and they said they had come to find out what "this crazy icefishing" was all about. They had read in the Trib about the fabulous perch and walleyes in the fabulous Lake Mendota. They had driven all the way up here—"to Siberia," they said—to try it. They had never icefished and they had "none gear."

Steady looked them up and down. In their designer sheepskin jackets and tooled cowboy boots, they looked like Marlboro men, which was also the craze back then.

"Icefishing?" Steady said. "Nothin' to it. You drill a hole in the ice, walk back about 20 yards and then cast your bait to the hole."

Nobody blinked an eye or cracked a smile, although the Indian confessed later that the pressure on his gut almost brought back his hernia.

"Oh," one of the aliens said, "like golf."

"Hardwater golf," the other alien laughed. We all laughed with him.

If you've never tried icefishing, but always have been intrigued by those crazy monks out there in their frozen zandos, try it. It will clear your sinuses. It's simplicity itself. How else, Steady asks, could simple folk do it?

The most important thing about icefishing is not your fishing gear, not your fishing techniques, not even the fish themselves. The most important thing about icefishing is the clothing you wear.

Now, you're not going to be jogging in that clothing or cross-country skiing. You're going to be doing one of the most sedentary sports this side of the gulags. So you're going to be bulkier than the stick-like cross-country skiers flashing over the snows like Sepp Candinas.



Icefishers: Some are 'tailgaters' and some are 'loners.'

BRENT NICASTRO

Think of cross-country skiers as Arctic rabbits. You're a polar bear.

If you know any icefisherfolk, ask them what they wear out there on the barren wastes. The good ones will tell you the secret to keeping your body heat from seeping away in the tundra: Remember the critical areas—head, kidneys and feet. When you lose heat in those areas, you might as well be fishing in your shorts.

If you know any icefisherfolk real well, ask them if you could watch them dress and layer themselves from the skin out to the snowmobile suit. It's like watching a hockey player dress—without the pads—and it's the next-best thing to a hands-on experience. They should make a video on how to dress for icefishing. It would outsell Jane Fonda.

They could do it with Roseanne Barr.

If you're asking me, I'll tell you I wear two-piece thermal underwear, of the polypropylene persuasion. It's as good as winter underwear gets these days. It's light, keeps you warm as a muffin and wicks off your body moisture so you don't get clammy and chilled.

I used to icefish in surplus World War II bomber crew sheepskins and boots. That was before mountain climbing and cross-country skiing spawned the new technology in clothing. You can still find some sentimentalists out there who wear one-piece wool longjohns—a lot of them belong to Gordon MacQuarrie's Old Duck Hunters Association. I know another artistic individualist who insists on his silk underwear both "at home and away."

Believe me, the very best way to learn about icefishing is to walk out on the water yourself and check out the folks who are doing it. Do not—repeat, do not—buy any gear at this point. Well, maybe you could pick up a pair of Sorel boots with the felt liners. They'll come

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in handy at sometime or other during the Wisconsin winter.

Trudge right on out there to the fisherfolk, be they congregated or solitary—just follow the bootprints—and talk to them like it's the most normal thing in the world to be out here freezing your buns when you could be back home toasting your bagels.

"How they bitin'?" or "How's it goin'?" are darn good icebreakers even if you can usually see the catches, stiff and frozen, around the hole. I say "usually" because there are some secretive folks out there who put their fish in the plastic pails they're sitting on. They don't want to draw a crowd for whatever reason.

These folks, I've discovered over the glacial years, often are meditators who like to pretend they're in the high Himalayas. Or they could be trout fishermen so habituated to deceit and deception they won't tell you what color icefly the bluegills are taking today.

As a matter of fact, I know trout fishermen who never admit that the bluegill they catch are a lot wilder than the trout they catch, and better eating, to boot. Their deceit runs deeper than the cricks they fish.

You'll notice right away the two milieu in which folks do their icefishing. There's "social fishing," where folks sit or stand around and pop a few tops between fish. These people I call "tailgaters," and the Madison lakes have their share. They're sort of like Packer fans who don't need a game to party. Every now and then, one will tell you: "It don't get no better than this!" They have mother wit and streets smarts, so when they tell you what they know about fishing, pay attention. It'll fill your freezer.

The other milieu is that of the loner. He or she doesn't go out here to be social. The loner treasures the privacy, the silence, the space, as much as he or she treasures the fish. The fish are always a bonus, a dividend from Ma just for going to school.

The air, cold as trout water, is another bonus. Breathe through your nose and warm it a little. If you have a big nose, that's another bonus. As Steady says, you never saw an Eskimo with a button nose.

Wrinkle your face. Wait for the windburn. And just tell the icefishers you'd like to find out about icefishing.

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Ask them about their jigging sticks, their tip-ups, the Swedish auger that screws the holes in the ice and the ice skimmer that keeps the holes from freezing over.

You'll see folks out there with gasoline-powered augers—Steady, purist that he is, says, "God! That's like starting up your chainsaw in church!" You'll see portable windbreaks, portable ice shanties, permanent ice shanties, sleds and mini-toboggans to haul the gear, hand warmers, lanterns—everything but porta-potties. (If you're wondering, "Where do you go when you have to go?"—don't ask.)

Should, God forbid, you get turned on to this madness, a good next step is to get the 20-page booklet "Ice Fishing," by Warren Downs, from the UW Sea Grant Institute. It contains the distilled—or maybe frozen—wisdom of experts from the DNR, the UW and the Sea Grant Institute, plus a bibliography of a dozen related books, bulletins and articles.

"Ice Fishing" costs 50 cents and is available from the Sea Grant Communications Office, 1800 University Ave., Madison 53705.

Loren Eiseley wrote in *The Star Thrower* that it was common of all religious thought, even the most primitive, that the man seeking vision and insight must go apart from his fellows and live in the wilderness.

Icefishing can be like that. But icefishing is not for everybody. If it's for you, you are blessed indeed. ■