



by Brian M. Wiprud

No, it's not jigging with an ice fly.

It's fly fishing — with ice!

I know what you're thinking: *Drilling a hole in the ice and then dunking a fly? How desperate for opening day is this poor guy?*

Most of us who fly fish the lakes and ponds of Massachusetts must endure the water's surface becoming solid during the winter months. We tie flies, browse through sporting catalogs, mend equipment; anything to make our weather-enforced moratorium pass more quickly. We anxiously await the return of a liquid surface our flies can penetrate — ice out!

But the ice often doesn't go out all at once (and this winter it didn't even go on all at once). Holes and cracks gradually widen, shoreline gaps broaden, and the sun, wind and water soon start to eat up the ice in earnest. For a time there are enticing expanses of open water framed by receding, translucent borders of ice. These conditions usually don't last for

long, but for a week or so the melting ice provides structure that fish will make use of, especially in bright sun.

Granted, the water at this juncture is probably hovering in the upper 30s — it's unlikely that you'll find the warmer water species like bass cruising this edge. But you will find perch, pickerel, pike and trout.

In the lakes that I fish, pickerel are the very first fish to poke their heads out into any open water, and will especially target shallow areas where they can bask in the sun. They usually stay near the edge of the ice, probably so they can duck back under it for cover should a predator like an osprey appear. But they will also cruise the edge itself, staying in the dark water and darting out to ambush pan fish or minnows that stray into open water. I've seen trout do this as well.

As with any other surface structure like lily pads or a dock, one of the better presentations is a cast parallel to the edge of the ice, perhaps a foot off, but make sure it's in the sunlight. Then strip



Photos by Brian M. Wiprud



Photo by Bill Byrne



Photo by Brian M. Wiprud

Break out the fly rod as soon as patches of open water begin to appear. Slow retrieves and big flies fished along ice edges on sunny days will produce good action from pickerel (above), yellow perch and bass. Note that author uses a 3-inch "bite tippet" of 20 pound test mono to foil pickerel teeth.

the fly along the edge to tempt a fish to rush out from the shadows. I usually use a slow retrieve as the water is so cold the fish can be a little sluggish. As the day wears on and the water warms, however, I often speed up my retrievals and get more aggressive strikes.

Simple streamers will work for both pickerel and trout, but those tied with synthetics are preferable to deal with a pickerel's nasty teeth. A large Mickey Finn, with some flash in it, is a good choice. Comprised of red and yellow — colors that pickerel seem to target — it is also a proven pattern for trout. Red and white streamers are also a good choice.

But sometimes the fish are a little flinchy with the bright colors, which is when you'll want to tie on something more

The author recommends big, head-weighted flies and varying retrieve rates for ice-out conditions. Our resident experts suggest that these flies (left) will fit the bill. From the top: two variations of the Woolly Buzzer (lead and cone head); a rainbow smelt streamer; a chartreuse "flesh fly" (originally developed for West Coast salmon fishing); and two variations of the Clouser Minnow.

subtle, like a black and white streamer with a modest amount of flash; maybe just a touch of red. I tend to use head-weighted flies, but have just as often taken fish near to the surface as I have close to the bottom. The sinking lead head provides the fly with more action, especially if you tie the fly onto the leader using a loop.

If the lake you fish has yellow perch (and there aren't many that don't), you can expect schools of them to sweep out from under the ice into the shallows in the afternoon. The water is often quite clear as a lake ices out, so if you have your polarized sunglasses on (which I always recommend) you can sometimes see and target these large schools of perch when they enter the open water. This is the time to switch from those larger streamers and tie on a #6 perch fly — that is, a fly that imitates a small yellow perch.

Perch will eat their own eagerly, so this fly is quite effective on them. However, it also serves a dual purpose. You can be sure that if the perch have come out into the open, game fish are lurking just under the edge of the ice. Pickerel follow schools of perch like wolves follow a herd of caribou, always looking to pick off stragglers.

So fish the school of perch, but also go back and cast the edge where the pickerel and trout may be lurking. If they're there, waiting for the perch school to sweep close to them, they will be anticipating a stray perch to wander within striking range. To avoid break-offs from toothy pickerel, I tie on a two to three inch "bite tippet" of 20 pound test. The perch don't seem to mind this short section of heavier line, and it will take several strikes from a pickerel to cut through it.

While pics, perch and trout are the prime game of ice out fishing, this isn't to say that good bass fishing can't be had at this time. Just after the ice vanishes completely, the bass fishing can be hot even if the water is cold. While the pickerel and pike will be found basking in the shallows on sunny days, and large perch schools will be cruising in about four to six feet of water, look for the bass and bluegills to be concentrated in deeper water, often huddled together.

Pockets of warmer water surrounding underwater springs are a good place to look for these bass/bluegill concentrations. The problem is finding them. This is where a sonar unit can be a very useful tool, especially in unfamiliar waters. Once you locate these spots, you'll be able to come back to them year after year. The competitiveness of fish in close proximity works to the angler's advantage. Each fish wants to be the first to grab what appears to be sustenance after a long cold winter.

Weighted flies are essential for reaching the depths where bass and bluegill

typically concentrate, and sinking or sink tip lines also help. Flies such as Clousers, both big and small, are a good choice, as are dragonfly nymph imitations and wooly buggers. When the water warms into the 40s, expect these warm water species to begin dispersing into pre-spawning depths where they will start seeking out early nymphs like those of the alderfly and dragonfly, as well as baitfish and crustaceans. Of course, things really start popping when the water surges into the 50s, and conditions only get better as the temperatures rise into the 60s and the fish begin to spawn.

But that's later. In March or April, you look out at a partially frozen lake. This wintry transitional period in a lake's annual cycle is not ideal for fly fishing. The weather is often cold, windy and wet. But then a warm sunny day comes along. Do you ignore the spring weather, stay in and do income taxes? Massachusetts fishermen are fortunate: Unlike the residents of many nearby states, they don't have to contend with a closed season on our most popular gamefish species. Taxes can wait for a rainy day — grab your rod and try some ice fly fishing. ♣

*Brian M. Wiprud is the author of award-winning and best selling novels, including **Crooked and Sleep with the Fishes**. In bookstores this May is his latest novel, **Tailed**. His website, www.wiprud.com, offers step-by-step photo instruction on how to tie many of his favorite fish offerings, as well as information on his novels and adventures.*



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Floating ice works like any overhead structure on a sunny day, providing cover that predatory fish will use for concealment until prey (or the right fly) appears.