

Common Sense On The Ice

By Jim Barta

Each year, we hear of someone who sadly fell through a weak spot on an ice-covered lake or river and is tragically lost. As an all-around outdoor enthusiast, I enjoy any form of activity that gets me outside the house, and icefishing is no exception.

Maybe it's because I'm a little older now and generally more cautious than I used to be, but I find that I no longer take the chances that I used to take while hunting and fishing. Today, I shudder at some of the things I did years ago.

To remain safe while icefishing and continue enjoying my sport for years to come, I now follow some solid (as in ice) rules before heading out to catch some winter fish.

A general guideline that I've heard for years concerning safe ice went as follows:

"Two inches of ice, one person on foot; three inches, a group in single file; 7 1/2 inches, cars; 10-inches, a medium truck; and 12-inches, heavy truck."

At this point, I'd like to ask for volunteers to be the "one person on foot" who will venture onto the ice, which by definition is too thin for single-file rescuers. Just how far apart should the group in single file be spaced as they tip-toe out to mid lake? And how about that car or truck that usually becomes uninsured for the duration of time it's on the ice?

On the other hand, because I fervently believe that at least half the fun in ice fishing is coming back alive and dry, you can rely on the few safety tips I'll share in the rest of this column.

Let's examine that business concerning ice thickness.

We all know anglers who practically sit on the shoreline waiting for that chance to take advantage of first ice. "Black ice" as it's sometimes known, is often associated with being the best ice of the winter for fishing. In much of the Midwest, this hard water curtain slides across the water's surface in mid-December to early January when most fish are eager to grab a teardrop jig or anything else that looks like food.

The trouble with first ice is that it ranks right up there with "last ice" as potentially the most dangerous of the season! Its thickness lacks any type of uniformity that can be relied on for safety. Often, first ice can be 4-inches thick right here and less than 2-inches over there, which is why I'm perfectly happy to let someone else do the actual measuring.

As a rule of thumb, I generally don't worry about rushing to get out there at the first sign of ice. I require at least 3 days of below zero temperatures to insure plenty of solid footing. When walking on the ice, I recommend using your ears as well as your eyes. Listen to the sounds made as you walk. If you can hear a crackling sound with each step or the footing seems a little spongy, it's time to reconsider making the trip on another day.

If you're uncertain about the thickness of the ice, spud a hole or two as you proceed out to your favorite spot. As long as the ice looks, sounds and remains solid as you go, then continue.

Another precaution should be used as a matter of common sense. Ice-anglers should give open-water areas, creek mouths, and pressure cracks a wide berth due to the fact that ice around these areas can be paper-thin. Fishing near them is not worth your life.

If you're like me and enjoy fishing at night, make sure to have a large beam flashlight with fresh batteries along with you. Never fish alone after dark, no matter how thick the ice may be. Another life-saver can be a compass. You never know when a storm may blow through and obliterate any view

you may have of the shoreline.

And what if the worst happens and you or your buddy falls through the ice? We've all read articles or seen pictures of ladders being slid across the ice to a person trying to escape the cold water. I've even seen a ladder or two out on the ice over the years, however, most are poor users of space on an ice sled or utility bucket. Consequently, very few ladders are included with our icefishing gear.

There are other alternatives that work well, though. A 50-foot coil of rope can easily be stored with the rest of your gear and taken along as a safety feature. There are also several devices on the market that anglers can buy that will aid in pulling themselves out of a wet situation. These are simply plastic or wooden handle-shaped devices with spikes protruding from one end. If the unfortunate happens and you fall through the ice, these inexpensive devices become priceless to you as they assist you out of your watery hole.

If somebody else falls through the ice, don't try to approach him in an upright position. Instead, get down on your belly and toss the aforementioned rope to the floundering angler. With your end of the rope firmly entwined around your forearms, begin to slide backward, pulling as you go.

Icefishing can be one of the most enjoyable outdoor sports of the year. The fishing success and camaraderie with friends is fantastic and worth a lot-but not your life. Enjoy this season's icefishing and be safe to enjoy it again.