

# Managing Your Ice Fishing Ponds all Year

by Dave Beasley

Each winter, fishermen of all experience levels travel onto frozen desolate ponds scattered throughout the North Country. Many spend time on privately owned waters, while waiting for bigger lakes to freeze up. Often, smaller ponds are overfished within the first few weeks of winter forcing anglers to move on.

With proper management these ponds can produce large quantities of keeper size fish. Managing a pond to generate ideal ice fishing throughout the winter can be both a fun and gratifying experience, but it takes more than winter time devotion.

Several key elements unite, making the ideal “under the ice environment.”

These elements are; (1) water quality, (2) ideal fish/fishing structure, (3) ample amounts of forage, oh yeah, and lets not forget (4) cool/cold water fish species.

Properly managing these four factors result in good quality fishing, especially if you focus on setting the stage for ice-fishing, even during the warmest months.

Form your management strategy now. First, take the condition of the pond into consideration.

Good water quality is a must, those fortunate to have a pond with steep edges dropping into the 8-10 foot range will have less trouble keeping aquatic vegetation down. The amount of plants in the pond throughout the summer will have a direct influence on the oxygen levels come winter time. Minimize rooted plants during spring and summer and it's best to remove rooted plants before ice up. If your pond is shallow and prone to grow abundant plants, consider dying the water late winter, just as the ice begins to melt. This will help prevent plants early but within a couple of months will

dissipate, in time for natural food production to kick in.

When ice isn't present, aerate the pond, if you can. Aeration keeps nutrients moving and helps minimize invasion of some plants. Use nature's tools to clean the water and keep it clean until ice forms. If you ice fish, turn off the aeration system come winter. It's a safety issue.

To properly manage a pond you must have a grasp on what species of fish live there and the health of their populations. Ideally, know the ratio of predator to prey, but for those individuals where sampling the pond using nets or electro-shocking gear is not possible, you must sample the pond through the process of angling. Go fishing and keep records.

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As water temperatures rise towards 60 degrees F. and plankton begins to bloom, consider adding small amounts of fertilizer to promote the growth of phytoplankton and discourage the growth of vegetation. But, don't get greedy, over-fertilizing northern ponds will result in an oxygen crash. Once you learn how to manage your plankton bloom you can stop using pond dye, as fertilizer is a much cheaper option.

If your pond has a good water source, such as a spring, use it to your advantage and stock baitfish that need moving water to reproduce. Ponds with a good water source are envied

by all pond owners and can give the owner a large advantage. Flushing water is good water.

When it comes to fish management, one of the most common problems with smaller bodies of water is largemouth bass overpopulating and consuming all the forage. Once this occurs, predator fish in the pond become stunted, sending the pond into a downward spiral. So make sure to harvest largemouth bass annually, to keep them from taking over the pond. If you're not sure how many and of what size, pay attention to what size classes you are catching and start removing bass from the more abundant size classes. Skinny fish go, fat fish stay. Most likely these fish are somewhere between 8 and 14 inches.

Since our main mission for this story is to set the stage for an outstanding ice fishing pond, we need to do most of our fisheries management during the main growing season, from May through September.

People tend not to harvest many bass, so for small ponds in the north, we tend to use some “out of the box” thinking that might get us in trouble with other fisheries biologists. Since our focus is trying to grow lots of large panfish such as bluegill, pumpkinseed and yellow perch for ice fish, we are faced with keeping bass numbers down. So, we have come up with other ways to keep bass numbers in check. One of those ways is to use Northern Pike. Northern Pike are fun to catch through the ice and can play a key management role in your program. They have a very poor reproduction success in smaller ponds (especially where bass can eat their babies) and most likely will not overpopulate.

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*During the warm months, this island is a great place for a feeder. At the same time, we put submerged brush or pvc pipe “trees” out in the water about 30 feet off the island. Fish congregate around the brush, come to the feeder and then are in place for ice fishing in winter.*

Besides, in a three or four acre pond, we may only want 10-12 of these toothy creatures. Another option up north is the Tiger Muskie, a hybrid cross between pike and muskellunge, an aggressive, sterile top end predator. What we stock is what we have.

The backbone to a consistent, high-quality fishery, as well as a fun winter ice fishing pond is large numbers of baitfish. An excellent way to encourage good baitfish populations is to supplementally feed the bluegill and yellow perch. While bluegill readily learn to eat pelleted fish food, we buy feed trained yellow perch. They grow much, much faster when feed trained. Also, feed trained largemouth bass are a good option of ice fishing ponds. Although it sounds contrary to statements above, feed trained bass can be effectively managed with feed. One of the side benefits of feeding fish is that they will be producing large numbers of offspring without consuming so much forage fish. Young fish have better survival rates, giving us better numbers of fish going into winter months.

To ensure survival of young fish, place dense cover along shorelines and shallow areas. Giving the baitfish a place to hide helps persuade larger fish to focus on pelleted feed. Besides, pelleted feed can be 10 times less expensive than live bait and will allow you to observe fish in your pond while feeding, giving you a front row seat to your own management program. When water temperatures are in the 80's your pond is at highest risk of have a summer kill. It could be wise to cut back feeding until the surface temperatures drop back into the mid 70's, unless you have a large pond or a good water source, or are aerating (recommended). If you would like to push the envelope and produce

the largest fish possible, purchase a test kit and monitor the level of ammonia, oxygen, pH, water temperature and take secchi disk readings throughout the summer.

As we all know fish tend to pile up in areas with good structure. So know your pond, know where the structure is. Make sure you have structure that allows ample amounts of cover for your fish to congregate. Mixing both thick cover for baitfish and large cover for target species sets the stage for a good fishing spot. Make sure you target key areas for structure, being careful not to overdo it by putting in too much. Keep your focus...you are setting the stage for ice-fishing. Be sure you think as an ice-fisherman when it comes to structure placement. Less may be better. In summer, fish tend to stay shallow, gathering around shoreline vegetation as well as underwater humps and bumps. But, when winter comes, where do the fish go? They head for deeper water where the temperature is stable and where they might find food when they want it. Look at the bottom of your pond in two different mindsets. One, warm water...fish production times. Two, dead of winter, cold as it gets, thick ice. Two different scenarios mean different tasks. The more structure you have, the more you spread out your fish, setting yourself up for slower fishing conditions. So, focus your winter fishing structure differently than what happens when fish are most active in summer.

Here's another key component of setting the stage for ice fishing. When the pond is ready to ice up and you have a cold night in the forecast, flush the waterfowl off the pond at sunset, encouraging them to overnight somewhere else, on a nearby pond. Waterfowl can keep water open for weeks after it

normally would have sealed over.

Here's another tip. While your aerator serves a distinct purpose during warm months, it can also help you cool your pond off a bit faster in the fall. If you are looking to get an extra few weeks of fishing through the ice in winter, place aerators in the deepest hole of your pond in the fall. Turn your aerator on when the outside temperature is cold and off when it is warm. Doing so, you can make a significant difference in the pond's water temperature, causing it to freeze up earlier and potentially keep thicker ice for the entire

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*Author Dave Beasley teaches this group of kids how to find fish with an underwater camera through a hole in the ice. He had previously placed structure under this area and has been 'chumming' with fathead minnows to entice the fish.*

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winter. But before ice-up, pull your air stones into shallower water. During winter when you need to aerate for one reason or another, it is important that you don't aerate the deeper parts of your pond.

If you're concerned about water quality in your pond, it is okay to keep your aerators on all through the winter, as long as the air stones are shallow. But, remember the safety issues associated with thin ice. And, never aerate the deepest part of the pond under ice. That's where your water is warmest and the fish are the safest. As a general practice, as stated earlier, turn off the aerator, come winter.

As the ponds cap over with ice, there is always a period of time where we hold our breath, hoping for a few nights of cold weather, without the threat of a substantial snowfall. If snow accumulates, be careful with the number of holes you drill on the pond. The weight of the snow can force water out of the holes, creating large amounts of slush surrounding your fishing area, endangering your safety and compromising the ice. Also, aerating your pond through the winter will create large areas of slush, so make sure to keep the air stones away from where you want to fish.

While early ice conditions allow you to catch your fair share of fish, keep on track with your management plan. If concerned about baitfish populations, release most of the female panfish you catch. After all, a one pound momma yellow perch has almost 110,000 eggs. So, being generous and releasing a few dozen of these big girls will have a positive effect on your fishery. Same with bluegill and pumpkinseeds.

Stocking minnows throughout the winter, similar to chumming, encourages fish to linger in a particular area of your pond and helps promote easy and fun fishing (i.e. your grand kids are coming into town for the weekend). So, the week before their arrival, start stocking a few hundred minnows above known structure. This will give some of the minnows a chance to avoid the initial feeding frenzy. By giving the surrounding fish a weeks notice and you'll set the stage for a memorable experience the kids won't forget.

Remember fish caught through the ice taste far better than in the warm summer months, so make sure to take advantage of the clear water beneath your feet and treat yourself to your hard work and dedication.



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