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Illustrations by RON FINGER

Let's Go Ice Fishing!

Ah, winter! It's time to put on your long underwear. Slip on some wool socks and a sweater. Climb into your snow pants. Pull down your stocking cap. And grab your fishing rod and bait bucket.

There's ice on the lake, and it's the season to enjoy a true Minnesota adventure—ice fishing.

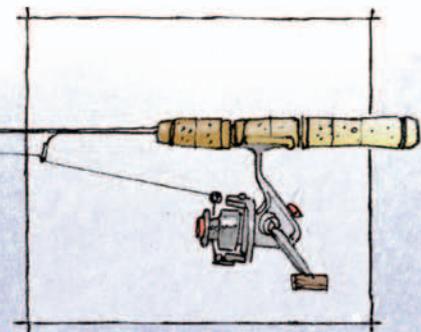
Don't worry about getting cold or bored on a frozen lake. Ice fishing is both easy and exciting. It's fun to hike across the ice imagining hungry sunnies or walleyes lurking below. It's an adventure to hang out around an ice hole with friends and family, telling stories and holding a funny-looking fishing rod as you wait for a bite. And it's thrilling when your bobber suddenly vanishes down the hole, and you pull a slippery fish from the water with a splash.

So grab a grown-up, a Thermos of hot cocoa, and get ready for an ice-fishing adventure.



Goofy Gear

Part of the fun of ice fishing is piling on comfortable, old, warm clothes and going out on the ice with goofy-looking gear.



Short Rod

An ice-fishing rod is just 2 feet long, much shorter than a summer rod. You don't need a long pole because you don't cast.

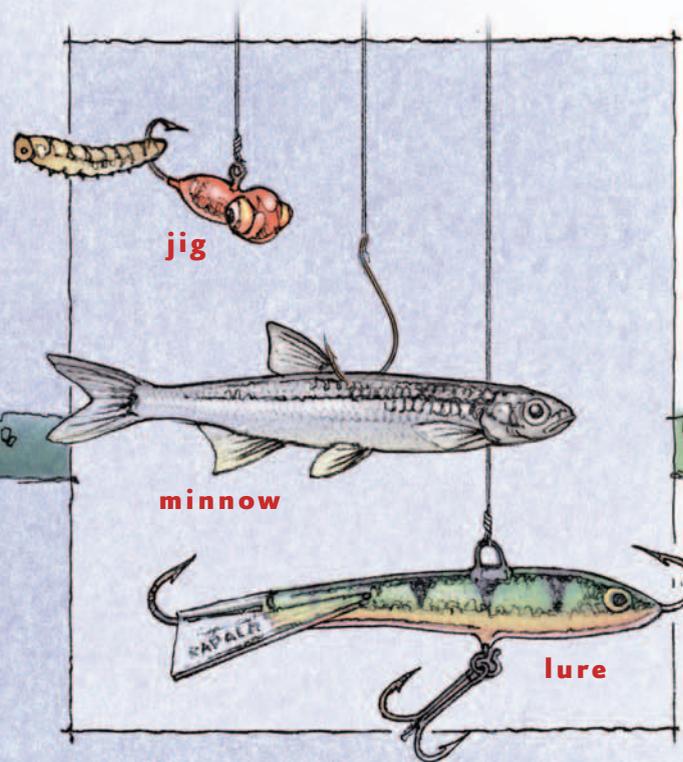
You just drop your line through a hole in the ice.

Ice-fishing rods can be stiff or flexible. You use flexible rods for small fish, so you can feel a bite. You use stiff rods for bigger fish, so they don't break the rod and get away.

In the old days, your grandpa might have used part of an old broom handle with fishing line. Some people still use a simple ice-fishing stick.

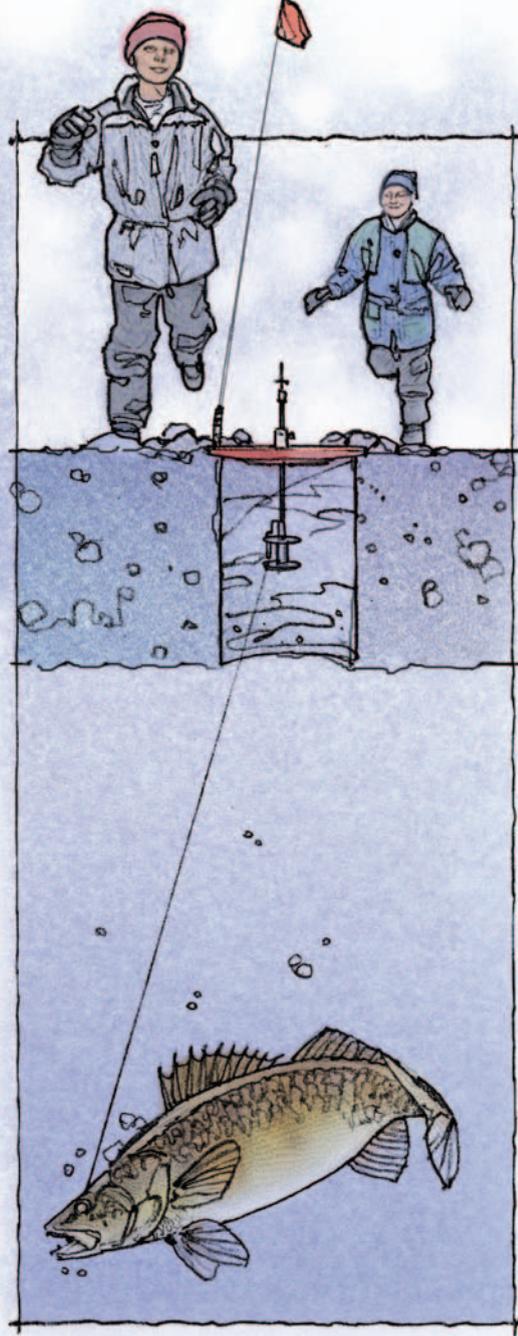
Reliable Tackle

Ice-fishing tackle is similar to summer tackle. You can use a bobber and a jig (a small weighted lure to which you attach bait) or just a plain hook with live bait. Anglers also use flashy spoons and weighted lures that look like minnows.



Best Bait

Minnows are popular. So are night crawlers, small moth larvae called *waxies*, and other insect larvae. Walleyes, northerns, and bass like to eat minnows. Crappies will bite on tiny minnows. Most panfish go for larvae and bugs in winter.



Tip-Up

You can use a regular reel, or some anglers use a device called a *tip-up* instead. A tip-up has two sticks. One lies across the hole. The other points down into the hole and has a spool with line. When a fish takes your bait, a flag springs up from the stick across the hole. Then you pull the fish up with the line. Tip-ups are fun because you can watch them while reading a book or tossing a Frisbee.

Chris Niskanen is a fanatical ice fisherman and the outdoors editor for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. He ice fishes on a lake behind his home near Stillwater.

Getting Started

Start with a visit to your local bait store or DNR Fisheries office. Folks there can tell you in which lakes the fish are biting and where you can get onto the lake. They can also tell you where the ice is most likely to be OK. Wind, warm weather, underwater springs, and currents can all make ice unsafe. Ice must be at least 4 inches thick before you walk on it. (See *Be Safe*, page 45.)

Once you know the ice is thick enough, you can go find a fishing spot. Here are three ways to look:

- If you know where fish hang out in summer, go there. Fish usually go to the same places in winter.
- Pick up a lake map at the bait shop or DNR and look for shallow areas or *drop-offs* (where the bottom gets deep quickly). Fish are more likely to be there.
- Look for anglers congregated at the best fishing holes. Ask if you can fish near them. (It's not polite to drill holes too close to other anglers.)

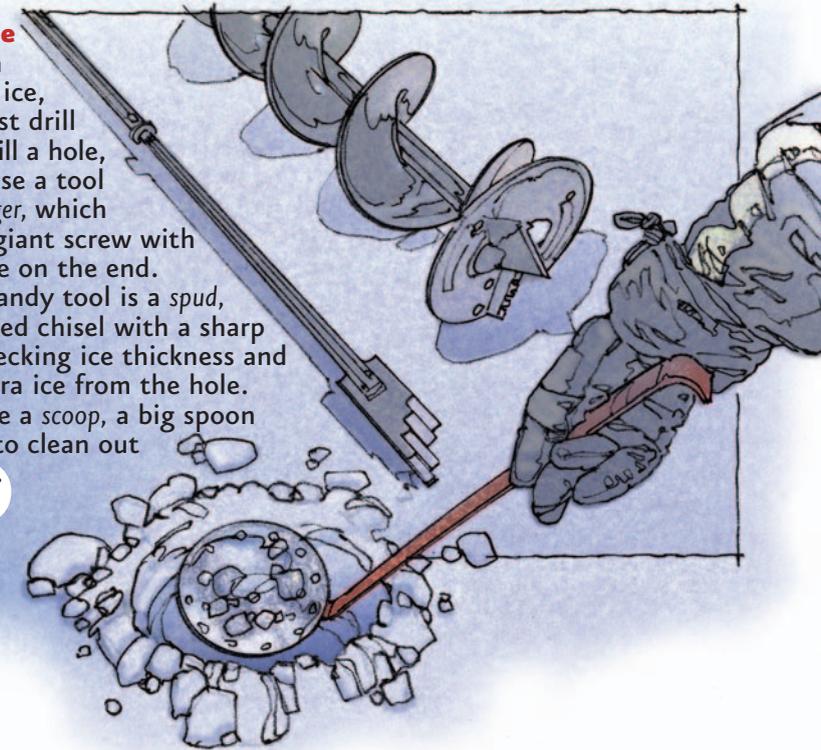
If the fish aren't biting in one spot, try another.

Cut a Hole

To catch fish through the ice, you must first drill a hole. To drill a hole, ice anglers use a tool called an *auger*, which looks like a giant screw with a sharp blade on the end.

Another handy tool is a *spud*, a long-handled chisel with a sharp blade for checking ice thickness and chipping extra ice from the hole.

Anglers use a *scoop*, a big spoon with holes, to clean out ice shavings.



Find the Depth

If you know the depth of the water, you have a better idea what fish to fish for. Bluegills and northerns like shallow water. Look for walleyes in deeper water. Some anglers use an electronic fish locator or a lead weight on a hook. You can also tie a string to a weight, hold the loose end in one hand, and drop the weight

to the bottom. Then measure the length of string that's down the hole. The simplest solution is to use a weighted hook, which drops to the bottom. Then you reel it up to fish as far off the bottom as you like.

Land Your Catch

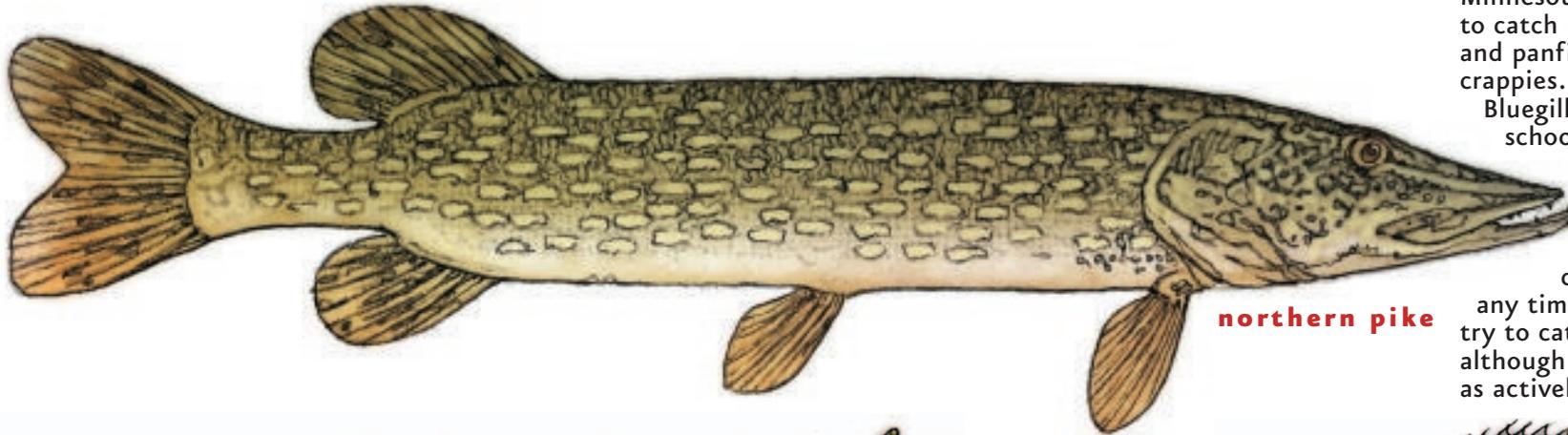
When you feel a fish on the line, reel it up steadily but not too fast

because you might yank out the hook. When you see the fish, ask your adult fishing buddy to lift it out. After landing a fish, remove it from the hook. It's easier to get a hook out with pliers than with your hands in cold weather. If the fish is too big or too small to keep, return it to the water. Or put your catch in a bucket or a snowbank. Watch out for dogs!

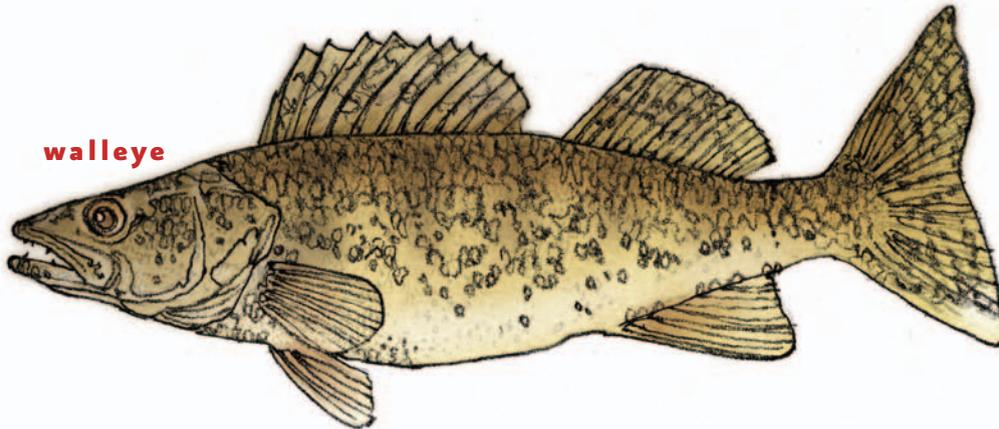
A dog might try to run away with your catch! It happens.

Use Good Manners

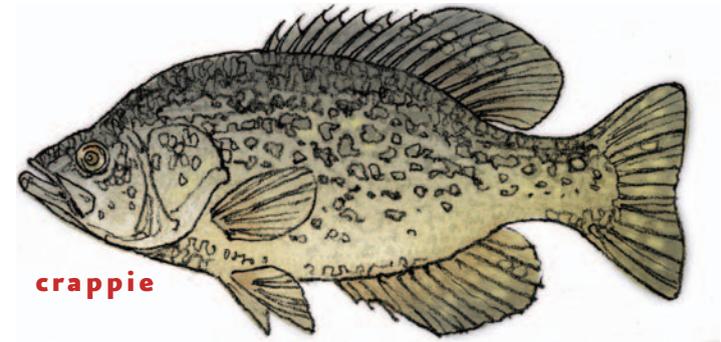
Be polite and don't disturb your fellow anglers with loud talk or goofing around. Always pick up your trash and anything else you brought. Remember: Anything you leave on the lake will go into the water when the ice melts.



northern pike



walleye



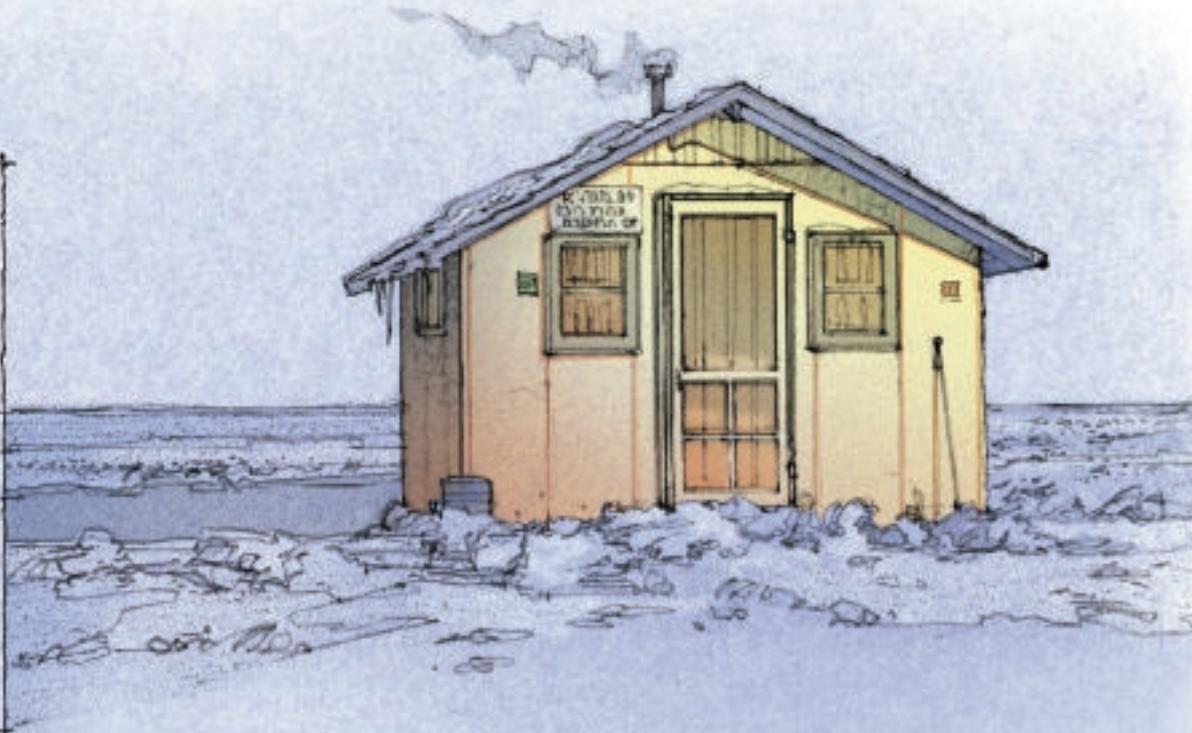
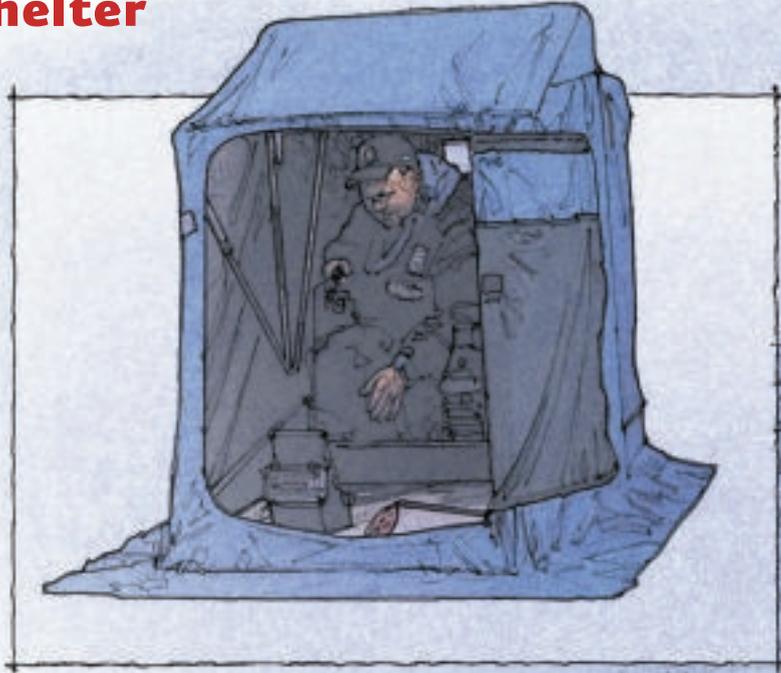
crappie

Know Your Fish

Minnesota's most popular species to catch in winter are walleyes and panfish, such as bluegills and crappies.

Bluegills and sunfish gather in schools and can be caught during the day. Crappies and walleyes bite best just before sundown. You can catch northerns and trout any time of day. You can also try to catch muskies and bass, although they don't seem to bite as actively as other game fish.

Shelter



A lot of people ice fish without a shelter. To keep warm, some anglers bring a small portable propane heater or some hand warmers. Bring a bucket to sit on, snacks to eat, something warm to drink, and you'll enjoy being outdoors. You might see eagles, deer, or even a fox sneaking along shore. In case the fish aren't biting, I always bring a book to read or a football to toss with my friends.

Basic Shelter

Many people bring little shacks called *fish houses* out onto the lake. Those made with wooden boards or metal look like cabins. Those made with canvas and aluminum poles

look like tents. To heat either kind of house, anglers use small stoves.

Cabin-style houses have skis or special plates on the bottom so they can be slid across ice. The owner ties a heavy rope to the house and tows it with a truck or all-terrain vehicle. Owners of these houses don't move them around often.

Tentlike houses, sometimes called *portable fish houses*, are light enough to pull by hand with a rope. They have a plastic floor with rounded sides like a snow sled. Aluminum poles attach to the floor and hold up canvas walls and ceiling. Snap the poles together, pull the ceiling over your head, and you have an instant fish house.

Homes Away From Home

Fish houses are like giant playhouses. Anglers sometimes paint the outside with bright colors or designs, such as red-and-white candy stripes or an underwater scene with fish. People decorate them with rugs on the floor and maybe a picture or mounted deer head on the wall.

Some fish houses are almost like real houses, complete with armchairs, television, VCR, microwave oven, kitchen stove, and even a bathroom.

Fish houses are usually small, but some have bunk beds for a family of four or more. I know of a fish house that had a staircase to a second-floor bunk bed.

What to Wear

Keeping your feet warm and dry is challenging when you are on ice. Try heavy, felt-lined boots. Wear thick, wool socks, and tuck an extra pair into your pocket to use in case your feet get cold or wet.

To keep hands warm, wear big mittens, such as leather ones called *choppers*, with insulated liners.

A thick wool or fleece stocking cap helps prevent heat loss from your head. For more warmth, wear a full-face stocking cap and put up your jacket hood.

Don't wear cotton. It gets wet easily, doesn't dry quickly, and will make you cold. Wear wool, down, or synthetic clothing.

Dark-House Spearing

On a snowy January morning when I was 10, my uncle took me spear fishing in a dark house—a windowless fish house with a large hole in the floor and the ice below. Instead of a pole and line, we had a spear, shaped like a pitchfork. We sat staring into the rectangular hole, which looked like a lit aquarium because sunlight outside illuminated the water. My uncle told lots of stories about big fish that swam past dark-house holes. After several hours, we watched a northern pike swim into view. My uncle slowly lifted the heavy spear, took aim, and carefully dropped the spear onto the green-backed pike. Soon he pulled up a wriggling 2-pounder, about as long as my leg. A picture of me holding the fish still hangs in my house.

You need a special license to spear from a dark house. Northern pike and rough fish are commonly speared in a dark house. You can use a live minnow or hang a fishlike decoy into the hole and make it swim by jerking its string. When a northern pike darts toward the decoy, you try to spear it. A rope tied to one end of the spear lets you retrieve the spear—and the fish, if you are lucky.

Ice-Fishing Events

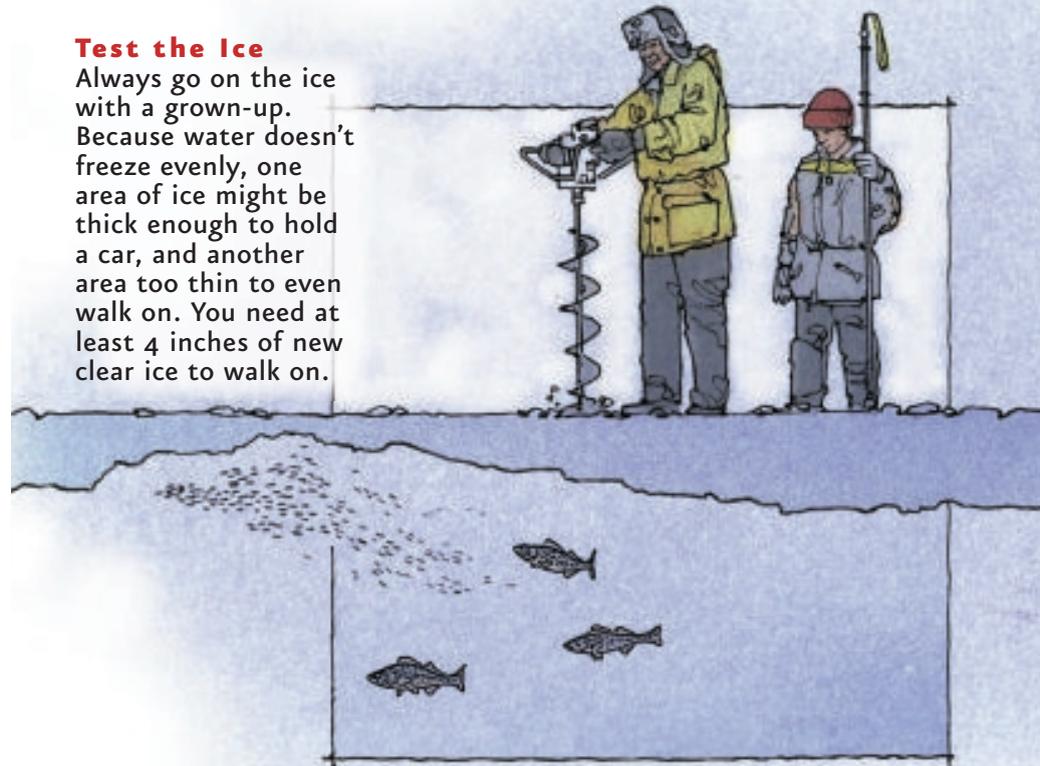
Find out about upcoming ice-fishing events for youths and families at www.dnr.state.mn.us/events or call the DNR Information Center (see page 63). For information about MinnAqua, the DNR's angling and aquatic education program, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/minnaqua.

ATTENTION TEACHERS

To find an online teachers guide for this article, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/young_naturalists/icefishing. To learn more about using *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer* as a teaching tool, contact Meredith McNab, meredith.mcnab@dnr.state.mn.us or 651-215-0615.

Test the Ice

Always go on the ice with a grown-up. Because water doesn't freeze evenly, one area of ice might be thick enough to hold a car, and another area too thin to even walk on. You need at least 4 inches of new clear ice to walk on.



Be Safe

Never go onto any ice without permission and supervision of your parents or other responsible adults.

Every year Minnesota newspapers run stories about children falling through ice. Often, the children are playing on ice without adult supervision and don't realize the ice is too thin. After breaking through, they might drown or die of hypothermia, a condition where the body gets too cold for survival.

Ice is never 100 percent safe. The Department of Natural Resources recommends at least 4 inches of new, clear ice for safe travel on foot, 5 inches for snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, and 8 to 12 inches for cars and small trucks.

Always use the buddy system when venturing onto ice. Walk apart from your companion so that if one of you breaks through, the other one can get help rather than fall in too. ●