

ICE FISHING ON WEST HARBOR POND
David McFarland



I grew up on Little River in *East* Boothbay, so I didn't get to know *West* Harbor Pond until I was in high school. In those days, we would come to the Pond to boat and swim, launching at the BHYC. I didn't do much fishing in those days. In fact, I'm still not much of a summer lake fisherman.

Then about 20 years ago, Beverly and I bought the cabin at the top of the small cove between the Arnolds and the Volpes. We bought it to rent and have never lived there, but the time we spent there quickly gave us a love for the Pond. Because our little cove is long and narrow, the only thing we can see when we look out from our cabin is a single, small cottage on the west shore of the Pond. Nothing else. It feels as remote as being on a lake up North.

I started ice fishing long before we bought the Pond cabin – Damariscotta Lake, Biscay Pond, and the Pemaquid peninsula. But once we bought the cabin (there were no renters in the winter), there was no longer any reason to travel that far to ice fish. So I became a West Harbor Pond ice fisherman.

Ice houses I have known: Early on I bought the “brick” ice house shown below. One time, I was down on Sebago Lake with two friends fishing from the Brick Ice House. A lady who happened by took for granted at first that it was actually made of bricks. When we enlightened her, she said, “Well, that still makes you the three little pigs.” The problem with the Brick Ice House wasn’t that it was made of bricks. The problem was that it was only large enough for a couple of adults. But too small for three little, or not so little, energetic grandsons . . . and the dog.

So I bought the American Flag Ice House shown below. (No, it’s not made of stone. It just looks like it.) There was room for me, three grandsons, the dog, a propane heater, and a gas-powered ice auger. But two winters ago, I left the American Flag Ice House out on the ice in my cove too late in the season. The Styrofoam insulation in the floor and the windows created a greenhouse effect, warming the interior so effectively that it melted right through the ice, coming to rest about a foot below the surface of the ice. I fastened Styrofoam billets around it to keep it from sinking all the way to the bottom. Eventually, I was able to get it back up on top of the ice and back to shore. Now that’s global warming for you!

A while ago, I sold the American Flag Ice House and bought one of those fancy pop-up ice houses. It’s not as warm as the Brick Ice House or the American Flag Ice House, but it’s certainly easier to put up and take down. And it doesn’t melt through the ice.

Technique: When you head out ice fishing, first, and foremost, always chisel a few test holes to check that the ice is thick enough to be safe. Five inches is a safe thickness to walk on (but not for ATVs or ice houses). When I started out ice fishing, I used a handheld ice chisel to cut the holes. After a few years, I went to a hand-turning ice auger like this one. I then graduated to a gas auger like this one. And now I use a battery-operated ice auger, which is great, as it is lighter and more convenient to use.



So, to start out, you don't have to invest a lot of money, just time, to decide if you like the sport. Then you can work your way up.



When I venture out onto the ice, I try to find a spot out of the wind, and preferably sunny, to make it more comfortable for fishing. I drill five holes to start out. I clean the holes of shaved or floating ice with an ice scoop. I set one trap at a time. The traps that I use, called jack traps, are made from wood. I put a weight and small sinker on my line and a button, so I can move it up or down easily to determine the depth of the water. I slide the button to the top of the water, that gives me my depth for further use in that

hole. Mostly, I use a worm or shiner for bait, but sometimes I use an artificial lure. I make another three holes the same, leaving one open for jigging.

Mostly, I like to fish five or six feet off the bottom. I set my flag on the trap, then wait for a fish to strike to release the flag, so I can spot it. When a flag pops up, I feel for a fish on the line, then give it a little jerk to set the hook. After I pull the fish up through the hole, I use needle-nosed fishing pliers to remove the hook. Sometimes the bait will be deep in their mouth, and I don't want to rip a hook out and injure the fish. With the hook safely removed, I release the fish back into the hole headfirst. If I don't get a fish within twenty minutes or so, I move my bait up or down a bit or try another hole. While I'm waiting for a fish, I will lots of time try jigging in the fifth hole, using a small pole with an artificial colored minnow or different man-made lures.

Fishing five to six feet off the bottom, my rig used to come up smelling like rotten eggs and my live bait would be dead. But bass are tough. During the winter, they stay low in the Pond, where it is warmest. They are able to live in water that will kill a worm. Last winter, however, was different. The bait didn't come up dead. And the bass came up bigger and more numerous than in years past. I think the siphon is starting to make a difference.

With all the new technology today, it makes going ice fishing pretty easy, and thus, more fun and relaxing, with things like a heated jacket, pop up insulated shelters, underwater cameras, lighted tips for traps for night fishing, handheld sonar to show depths through clear ice, so you don't have to use a button, like I do. Each year the State of Maine offers a free weekend for anyone to ice fish.

Ice fishing with kids: One of my favorite parts of ice fishing has been fishing with kids. I am blessed with three daughters, and they came ice fishing with me until they got to high school. Then, basketball and cheerleading stole them away. Fortunately, my daughters were



followed by seven grandchildren, all of whom I have introduced to ice fishing. Here are my three oldest grandchildren, Aiden, Isaac, and Johnny (left to right) with their catch (and the dog looking on from inside the old

Brick Ice House). Look at those grins.

It's not easy to get kids interested in ice fishing. Sometimes, there's not a lot of action.

And it's cold. And back home, where it's warm, there are those enticing video games waiting. So I welded runners on half of a 50-gallon drum (no debris left on the ice), and Beverly grilled hotdogs



while the grandkids and I fished. Here we are with the hotdog grill. The excitement of that flag popping and a freshly grilled hot dog are better than the same old video game time after time.

Here I am with one of my youngest grandsons, waiting for the flag to pop.



Starting out: When you start thinking about going ice fishing, I recommend you pick up a Maine Inland Fishing Laws booklet, free at the Town Office. Or you can get a copy online (<https://www.maine.gov/ifw/docs/20-MDIFW-30-Fishing-Lawbook-2021.pdf>). You can even download it to your cell phone for easy reference while out on the ice

([https://www.maine.gov/ifw/fishing-](https://www.maine.gov/ifw/fishing-boating/fishing/fishing-resources/online-angling-tool.html)

[boating/fishing/fishing-resources/online-angling-tool.html](https://www.maine.gov/ifw/fishing-boating/fishing/fishing-resources/online-angling-tool.html)). It will have all the information on getting a fishing license, kids under 16 years of age are free, what ponds or lakes you can fish on, species, size allowed to keep, the daily limits allowed, number of traps allowed on that particular body of water, and when the season opens.



What to do if you are not ice fishing: Sadly, the winters are getting warmer. The ice arrives later and melts earlier. And while it is here, there is less snow on it. But in those cold winter days a decade or so ago, we would skate the length and breadth of the Pond when the wind had swept the snow away. When the snow remained, I would ride the Pond on my snowmobile, towing my grandchildren behind in an old canoe. In my little cove, I would sweep the snow away, drill a hole in the ice, and put a small pump through the hole. In a day or so, I would have a perfect skating rink for the kids