

Safety First

Draw of first ice also dangerous

By Dick Ellis

It was in some ways a “do as I say, not as I do” kind of outdoor journey. At the same time that members of my family and close friends set tip-ups in front of the cabin by “spudding” through thin ice to target some of the best early fishing of the season, the DNR was issuing safety warnings pertaining to that very thing.

A new season with new hardware is a difficult draw for an ice-man to turn his back on. Gamefish usually bite early on traditional spots of our home waters on the Manitowish Chain, and on many lakes, rivers and sloughs statewide. We did set our tips-ups in shallow water that we know well, had multiple partners with us with safety equipment ready if the two inches-plus of ice did give way, and enjoyed a safe two days of ice action with plenty of tripped flags to answer.

I remember a “no-snow” first ice when we caught two mid-30 inch muskies in three feet of water. We were on one snow-shoe each to displace our weight on ice less than one inch. Watching the fish fight through the ice was surreal, like standing on a giant sheet of glass.

But, nothing in Wisconsin’s outdoors is worth gambling your life. Newspaper reports this week have already told the story of two Wisconsin boys drowned because river ice that they thought was safe in the northeast was not, with a third friend rescued. Imaging the families

receiving such news is in a word, “sickening.” Despite the warnings, and such tragic news, snow mobile enthusiasts and anglers will again

this year die on the water. Like the Wisconsin Hunter’s Safety programs that have seen the loss of lives plummet over the decades, the message



Jim Ellis unhooks the season’s first pike. Action on walleye and pike action was good but early ice demands great care by the angler.

by state ice safety experts is worth repeating every year.

Knowing when it is safe to venture out onto the ice, how to travel on ice, and what to do should the ice break were issues addressed by DNR Law Enforcement Safety Specialist Chris Wunrow in a media release December 5th. This becomes more important because Wisconsin is geographically diverse in terms of safe ice. When we have safe ice in the northland, much of southern Wisconsin still has open water.

“Most law enforcement personnel will tell you that because it can be tricky, there is no such thing as safe ice,” Wunrow said. “Although a lake or river is frozen, that does not mean it can be safely traveled.”

Clear, solid ice at least two inches thick is usually sufficient to hold a single person walking on foot, he said. For safety’s sake, wait until the ice is at least three inches thick and go with a friend. Keep a least 50 feet of distance between each other. Ice fishing with several friends and gear requires at least four inches of ice. Snowmobiles and ATV use requires at least five inches.

Ice will generally be thicker near shore and become thinner as one ventures out. Check ice thickness with an ice spud or auger starting from a few feet from shore and every 10 to 20 feet as you move toward the middle of the waterway. Lake ice is generally stronger than



Luke Ellis uses a spud to make a hole in about three inches of ice on Inland Lake near Boulder Junction during a first ice fishing trip of the year.



Bob Johnson's tracks tell the story of an angler checking an early flag up on the young ice-fishing season.

river ice. Springs, lake inlets and outlets, and channels can alter ice thickness.

Before moving onto early or newly formed ice, check with a local bait shop, resort owner, or outdoors store regarding ice thickness or known thin spots. Whether alone or with a friend on early ice, always carry a couple of large sharpened nails and a length of rope in an easily accessible pocket. The nails or commercially bought ice grabbers can help a



A watched pot may not boil but Matt Klick of Minneapolis hopes the law doesn't apply to a tip-up waiting on Island Lake near Boulder Junction as the sun drops in the west. On early ice, keep at least 50 feet between anglers and wait for a minimum of three inches of ice, DNR safety experts say.

person pull themselves out of the water and on to more solid ice. The rope can be thrown to another person for rescue.

If you are alone and go through the ice, take a few seconds to get over the "cold shock." Regain your breathing, kick hard and try to swim up onto the ice. If successful, crawl on your hands and knees or roll to more solid ice. Get to the nearest warm place quickly. If your attempts to swim onto the ice area unsuccessful, get as much of your body out of the water as possible and yell for help. Studies show you will have about 30 minutes or more before the body is incapacitated by hypothermia.

Proper clothing can increase chances of survival should a person break through the ice. A snowmobile type suit if it is zipped can and will trap air and slow the body's heat loss. Once filled with water, however, insulated suits become heavy and will hinder rescue. Newer model snowmobile suits have flotation material built in and anyone traversing ice should consider purchasing one of these suits. On early ice it is advised to wear a personal flotation device.

Refrain from driving on ice whenever pos-

sible. Traveling in a vehicle, especially early or late in the season, is an accident waiting to happen. When driving on ice be prepared to leave the vehicle in a hurry. Unbuckle the seatbelt and have a simple plan of action in case of ice break through. Anglers should leave a window open for easy exit.

Often vehicles will establish roads from shore to the current fishing hotspots. Repeated vehicle use may cause the ice to weaken. The ice roads may not always be the safest routes.

When using a gas or liquid heater to warm an ice shack or tent make sure it is properly ventilated with at least two openings, one at the top and one at the bottom of the structure. Any flame eats oxygen so proper ventilation is required.

"Common sense is the greatest ally in preventing ice related accidents," Wunrow said. "That includes checking ice conditions and preparing oneself before venturing out." Five minutes of checking ice from shore, talking to local authorities or bait shops, and systematic checks while going out on the ice can make the difference between an enjoyable winter experience and a tragedy, he said. *OWO*