

## Ice Fishing Lake Simcoe

By Wil Wegman

Jan 26/09

Lake Simcoe sees more fishing pressure during the winter than all other seasons combined. During a good old fashioned winter there can be 3-4,000 ice huts on the lake; many of which are part of commercial operations run by local businesses. These attract visiting anglers from across south central Ontario and many neighbouring states like Michigan and New York. These and other anglers/guests spend millions of dollars into Lake Simcoe communities every year.

The City of Barrie offers anglers some of the finest access found anywhere on the lake. Both open water anglers and those fishing the hard water utilize the public launch at the end of Tiffin Street to get onto the lake and the accompanying parking lot provides plenty of nearby parking. Here anglers go out on their own to try and catch a variety of species found in Kempenfelt Bay – the largest and deepest bay found anywhere on the 745 sq km lake.

Let's have a look at the four of the top winter species that so many visitors and locals come to Lake Simcoe for every winter.

**Lake Trout:** Thanks to an intensive MNR stocking program, 100,000 lake trout per year are stocked into the lake. Although there is now evidence of some natural reproduction, the stocked lake trout fishery is still dominant and offers plenty of fine action for those who know a bit about this species. Interestingly enough those who fish Kempenfelt Bay regularly – particularly up further along some of the Oro Lines, have reported increasing catches of wild lake trout. These trout are easy to tell from their stocked brethren because all the fins will still be intact. Stocked fish will have one of their fins clipped to indicate they came from the hatchery.

To catch lake trout out from Barrie, deepwater is usually key - but when it's close to shallower water like a shoal, ridge, drop off or point it becomes even better. This is particularly true early in the ice fishing season as lakers can still be close to their late fall spawning sites. Within a few weeks after the January 1<sup>st</sup> winter opener however many lakers are already roaming deeper main lake basins. How deep? 70-90 feet seems most productive but every so often they are caught even deeper surpassing 100 feet down.



Traditional techniques include working a Jigging Rapala near bottom, a Williams Ice Jig throughout the water column, or suspending a live, single minnow to where you think the big lakers may be cruising. The most effective way to know where that is to find the baitfish and that can be accomplished with a good sonar unit. A Lowrance Ice Machine for instance is completely portable and allows either a flasher type screen or an LCD mode. Either will pick out these baitfish and show you what depth they, or even the occasional big lake trout are at. Other less popular, yet still highly productive lures that can yield a big lake trout from the icy waters include Dominator and Quiver Spoons and HT's Mirage spoons

***Wil's laker tip:*** "Utilize a two hole system for lakers this winter. Try a Polar or Windlass Tip up in one hole rigged with either a live minnow or one of the Berkley Gulp! Alive minnows in smelt or shiner patterns. These can be rigged on a single red Gamakatsu hook and split shot rig or even on a 1/8 ounce darter jig head. In the other hole nearby - I'm jigging one of the above spoons or even a simple white Berkley tube jig at various depths to attract lakers into the area ... but I'm watching that Polar or Windlass carefully for that bright orange flag to pop up. And when it does ... whoa, the race is on - first one to the hole wins!"

**Whitefish:** 140,000 whities are stocked in the lake annually by MNR to maintain this popular fishery and although there are increasing signs of 'wild' whitefish the majority are still stocked. Whitefish are normally bottom dwellers and their underslung mouth is ideally suited to pick up crustaceans, invertebrates and other critters off bottom. It is no wonder that traditional rigs like the double spreader with live or salted minnows have worked for decades and continues to be a standard and effective presentation on Lake Simcoe. However ... more and more anglers are finding our whitefish are willing to chase food up as far as 30 feet from their customary bottom haunts. This comes as no surprise when you see so many big whities are

caught each winter. These big brutes don't get to the 10 pound range by simply picking up tid-bits of food off bottom - they crave large shiner minnows and smelt just like any other top predator fish. Therefore... jigging with a spoon like Williams Ice Jig, a Blue Fox Flash spoon, a Jig A Whopper's Lazer Rocker Minnow or HT's Chatter Spoon can be so productive.

For an alternate approach however try one of the seldom used HT Buzz Blades. These offer a horizontal presentation that can be just the ticket for whities that have seen just about everything an ice angler has to drop down a hole ... and on Simcoe there are thousands of ice anglers offering remarkably similar presentations. Another bait that can be very hot for winter whities that are not in the mood to chase their prey is the Lil'Foxee Jigging Minnow. These are best worked on or near bottom and tipped with a micro Berkley Gulp! Minnow or Power grub or tube jig and presented right near bottom. Just quiver the bait with a nervous-like twitch and set the hook with a sweeping upwards motion when a whitle takes hold.



***Wil's whitefish tip:*** " Whitefish can become rather finicky and even spooked - especially when several ice anglers are overhead in one area, drilling with power augers, moving around on ATV's and tossing down all kinds of spoons and spreaders. So to get ahead of the crowd to catch more fish ...And get out early!

*As tempting as it to stay in a warm comfy bed past sun-up, the sad truth is that if you don't begin your quest for winter whities until after the sun has been shining, then you are putting yourself way behind the 8-ball right from*

*the get-go. So, start drilling just before the whitefish are most active. Drop your line down when the sun is coming up and you could have your two-fish limit by the time other anglers are still waiting in line back in Barrie at the local coffee shop.*

**Northern Pike:** Thanks in great part to the proliferation of aquatic vegetation throughout many parts of the lake; a good pike fishery is flourishing in Simcoe right now. Perhaps not as many of the 15-25 pound trophy northernns we would see caught 15 or more years ago, but the number of pike available to the Simcoe angler may make up for it. Problem is, just because there's lots of them ... it doesn't mean they're easy to catch. Simcoe's wintertime pike can be some of the toughest hardwater northernns to catch anywhere in the province thanks in no small part to the ultra clear water conditions that zebra mussels have brought us. There are a few tricks however you can try this winter to up your odds.



**Wil's pike tip:** *Many Simcoe pike remain relatively shallow all winter - check out 4-10 foot flats with heavy aquatic plant growth. This can be tough to find in a deep bay like Kempenfelt so look for patches of weeds near shore over towards Orchard Beach or anywhere else where green weeds that are alive and healthy can flourish.*

*Flashy spoons can attract pike in to the area. Oftentimes though this only results in curious pike, not striking pike. A second hole rigged with either a Polar or Windlass Tip up that has a softer, more natural bait rigged near bottom can be the secret to success. That bait can be either be a jig and oversized Berkley Gulp Minnow combo, a tube jig or even a dead baitfish on*

*a quick-strike rig. A lively 3-8 inch minnow, chub or sucker is also a favourite of many hard core winter pike anglers. In some parts of the Bay you can have the Polar rigged in one spot for big pike and be jigging with ultra light gear a few yards away for delicious yellow perch! Now that's livin'!*

**Yellow Perch:** If the sheer volume of perch available in Simcoe isn't enough, then keep in mind that Simcoe also holds good numbers of true trophy class yellow perch. Fish exceeding 13 or even 14 inches are not as common as they once were but they are still there in fairly ample supply. These big females hold thousands of eggs and are very important to the future of the fishery so releasing them is critical if you want to perpetuate a trophy fishery.

Generally speaking perch are shallow (8-20 feet) at the start of the winter season, move deeper in mid season (25-50 feet) then move shallow again near last ice. Winter perch will roam over sandy flats with sparse aquatic plant growth or relate to mid-lake humps and points. Early mornings often see perch shallow with a progressive movement to deeper water as the day wears on. Kempenfelt's perch fishery has attracted great attention in recent years – particularly in the fall but more and more during the winter as well. One key selling card is that they are found within easy walking distance right from the City of Barrie waterfront, so unlike lake trout and whitefish where a ATV or Ski-doo is needed to travel to where these fish are – perch fishing can be done within easy site of Barrie. This makes them a great species for families to try for; nice and close to shore, lots of action and a tasty treat for all to enjoy afterwards.

Simple "Pickerel" type rigs with a couple of single minnows are still popular among some of the old timers but more and more the finesse approach has afflicted the Lake Simcoe winter perch specialist. Marmooska jigs (by HT Tackle) tipped with a couple of real live or Gulp! maggots have become incredibly effective. Berkley's tiny micro power craws, tubes, power nymphs and grubs have also proven to work real well on a small jig. "Leon's Bug" - a wax worm imitating jig produced out of Hillsdale Ontario, and the Lil' Foxee Jigging Minnows are also dynamite. The small jigging Rapala's, HT's Alien, Rocker and Ice Mite Jigs, are all artificial baits that have impressed Lake Simcoe's yellow perch anglers.



The key to these and other small artificials for yellow perch through the ice is to fish them with little movement on light line (1-4lb test). Try to avoid aggressively moving your bait up and down with continual jiggling movements. Also use the right rods for the right presentations. The same medium to heavy action rods you use for lakera, whities and pike are overkill for the light hitting perch. HT's line of Polar Lite Rods are so sensitive that they will detect even the smallest perch – or the most finicky jumbo at the end of your line resulting in more detected strikes and more fish.

***Wil's perch tip:*** Move! "Mobility is key. If you aren't catching them in one hole after 5- 10 minutes or so ... then try another somewhere else. I prefer to make a bunch of holes in one general area at a certain depth and then try them all. If there's nothing there, I will move either deeper or shallower and try a series of holes. Sometimes they're on top of a hump, sometimes they're off the deep side. Sometimes they're off a point or on a big flat, or buried in the weeds or even way out in deep water. The only way to know for sure is by going there and punching some holes. It's plain hard work, but when you do get on those spectacular Lake Simcoe perch ... the reward can be sweet .

- 30 -

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