

Food Food Everywhere

The Panfish were biting the game, fish were not

Terry Bitz of Outdoor Convergence

Last Thursday, I joined Jeff Waltz of Dousman and Paul Hanson of Waukesha on an ice fishing outing up in Waukesha County. The initial plans had us going to the outstanding fishery of Delavan Lake, but a late change of plans sent us instead to a small private lake near Oconomowoc.

Thursday greeted us with foggy conditions and slick roads. However, by the time the three of us had unpacked the trucks and started making our way out onto the ice, the sun started peaking out from behind the clouds.

Waltz has fished this lake a number of times, and pointed out what the depths would likely be in each location. This lake might be small, but it features sharp break lines, quickly going from 5 foot deep to 15 foot deep. Waltz has encountered northern pike on this water in excess of 30 inches and he has seen big crappies caught there as well. Waltz and I were interested in the pike, Hanson was thinking about the crappies.



Paul Hanson of Waukesha sets the hook on another panfish.

While Waltz and I have been ice fishing for years, Hanson is relatively new to the ice fishing scene.

“I started ice fishing two year ago,” said Hanson. “Now I am an ice fishing monster. I love it!”

The three of us drilled numerous holes in a variety of locations along the back side of the lake. After the holes were drilled and the water depths checked, Waltz and I rigged shiner and chub minnows onto our tip-ups and placed them in the ice holes. Meanwhile, Hanson tied a small jig onto his ice rod and then baited the jig with a wax worm.

Hanson put a fish finder down into the hole he planned to fish in and announced that he was marking fish on the equipment. Within seconds he landed the first fish of the day, a big bluegill.

By the time Waltz and I had finished setting up our tip ups, Hanson had caught and kept a handful of large bluegills and released numerous small and medium sized ones, all from the same hole.

Hanson holds a nice crappie caught in Waukesha County

“This is not normal,” Hanson said 20 minutes later. “Normally, I would have had to move to another hole by now to catch this many fish on other lakes.”



Eventually, Waltz and I sat down near Hanson to wait for the orange flags to fly on the tip-ups. A flag popped up in the air usually indicates a fish had taken the bait. While we watched,

Hanson continued to haul fish after fish out of his hole in the ice. They were mostly bluegills, but a couple large crappies were mixed in along with some undersized perch.



An hour later, things continued to be slow on the tip-ups. Outside of Waltz catching a small bass, the tip-ups were not living up to their name. Tip-down might have been more fitting.

Getting a little bored and also a bit envious of Hanson’s nonstop fishing action, I decided to pull one my tip-ups out of a hole so I could get in on the jigging action. Hanson loaned me a panfish pole, some bait and offered instructions on how he was catching the fish. Seconds later, I was pulling bluegills out of the icy water myself.

Waltz, however, was not willing to stray from his pike chase. He kept all three of his allowed tip-ups rigged and set in their holes. Waltz said he would leave the pan fishing action to us.

Hanson and Jeff Waltz of Dousnan kneel behind the limit of panfish caught by Hanson.

About two hours before dark, we picked up and moved to the other side of the lake. Waltz had seen nice crappies caught there by other ice anglers in previous outings and thought it might offer Hanson a better opportunity to catch some of the paper mouthed panfish.

Once the new holes were drilled, Hanson again told us that the fish finder showed fish in every hole he checked. He started jigging and started catching more large bluegills. I started jigging in a different hole and found panfish willing to bite as well.

As the sun started skirting the horizon, we saw three deer making their way around the lake, probably heading for a local field to find some food. We packed up a short time with food on our minds as well. Interestingly, we believe food is the reason the pike were unwilling to bite. With so many panfish in the lake, the game fish have all the food they need.

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