

Late Ice Fishing

Winter may be gone, but the ice may still be here

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March in Wisconsin brings with it the end of two things: Winter and the general inland game fishing season. Well, we hope it brings the end of winter.

Many years, ice cover throughout much of Southern Wisconsin can become iffy by early March. That appears to be the case this year as the recent rains have done their damage to what were decent local ice conditions just a couple weeks ago.

There are still some options available for those who want chase game fish, but do not want to wait for the season to reopen the first weekend in May. The most popular are the various walleye runs that take place around the state. Pretty much every major river system with a dam will see walleye make their runs during March and April. Anglers will undoubtedly make their own runs to the river once word spreads that the fish have shown up en masse.



Yours truly staring down an ice hole in March – Photo by Dick Ellis

However, if you don't mind driving just a bit north and you want to get in some late ice fishing action, there are spots where anglers can still utilize that game fishing tackle and not be afraid of getting pinched by a warden.

Most of the major river systems in the state are open all year for game fish species. For us anglers in the southern part of the state, that means open angling on the major waters such as the Crawfish, Fox, Rock, Milwaukee and Wisconsin rivers.

There are also a handful of lakes, all of which are part of river systems, which are open year round. These include two well known waters such as Lake Puckaway in Dodge County and Lake Koshkonong in Rock and Jefferson Counties.

Lake Puckaway in particular remains a popular destination for late ice anglers. This large but shallow body of water contains a good population of walleye and northern pike. The shad in this system provide fast growth rates for predator fish so don't be surprised if you haul in a big fish. As of the middle of this week, people were still driving on the lake as the ice was over 16 inches thick. I personally would leave my vehicle on shore as the ice along the shorelines is sure to begin thinning out and breaking up.



A nice pike caught on a cold day in March on Lake Puckaway (Dick Ellis)

For people looking to get away from the crowds, I suggest looking into backwater locations on the above mentioned rivers. You should not ignore backwaters on some of the smaller rivers either, parts of which are also open to game fishing this time of year. Often, these backwaters have solid ice while the main river channels have opened up with the spring thaw, though it might require moving to the northern part of Jefferson or Waukesha County to find fishable ice this year.

These river backwater locations tend to serve as holding areas for walleye and pike. The walleye will often enter these areas for a short time before continuing to make their way up the river to spawn near the dams. The pike are often following behind to both feed on the walleye and to find shallow, grassy areas to fulfill their own need to procreate.

Most of these backwater locations tend to be quite shallow with water depths often less than four feet. This partially removes one fishing variable, the depth you should be fishing. The fish are often active in just a foot or two of water.

The tackle for targeting the fish remains fairly standard with anglers using jigging poles and tip-ups. In the case of pike anglers, many switch this time of year to dead bait such as smelt or suckers that are attached to a quick-strike rig. Pike go into more of a scavenger mode come late ice and they are often attracted to smelly, dead fish hung under a tip-up

If it wasn't for the nasty cold front and strong winds this last Wednesday, I would have been on the ice up on Lake Puckaway trying to get in one last ice fishing outing before packing away the tip-ups and jigging poles for the season. Though I didn't get out on the ice, my mind is at ease knowing that my plans call for being in a boat fishing for walleye within the next week or so.