

Lessons learned from the 2012 ice fishing season

By Maj. Roger Tietz, Minnesota DNR Enforcement Division

The 2012 ice fishing season is drawing to a close. For those of you who spend time on the ice, there are a few things we can learn from this year's ice fishing season. These are important lessons, life's moments that will someday be the "I remember back during the winter of 2012" that will be ever etched in our minds. So, from an avid ice fisherman and a conservation officer for more than 30 years, here are "Lessons learned from the 2012 ice fishing season."

Putting a fish house on the lake requires dedication

In Minnesota we enjoy the opportunity to put an ice fishing or spearing shelter on the lake. The law allows us to leave it on the lake unattended. To be clear, I'm not focusing on portable ice fishing tents or shelters that an angler sets up and takes home with them.

I'm focused on the ones that anglers put out and leave on the lake overnight. In most cases, these are the houses that are constructed with building materials that are pulled out on a lake and are very comfortable to fish from. If you have one of these, the 2012 season reinforced the point, that as a responsible ice angler you have to check your shelter regularly.

This winter we experienced exceptional early ice season conditions. As the winter progressed abundant snowfall quickly changed the ice fishing landscape. Travel conditions on the lake, as well as the weight of snow on the ice, created serious problems. A good lesson is that you need to be checking your fish house daily and at a minimum weekly to stay on top of ice and snow conditions around your house to avoid problems. It's the responsible thing to do.

Ice anglers need to watch the weather

This sounds simple, but cannot be overstated. If you're going to make the investment and take time to put a fish house on a lake, you have to keep up on the weather reports; there is very little margin for error. As this winter taught us, snowfalls can be unpredictable and if the lake you're on gets 8 to 10 inches of snow things can change rapidly. My advice is if you learn of a 3+ inch snowstorm headed your way, take immediate steps to quickly get your house off the lake or at least near shore. The lesson learned is stay on top of the weather. Winter storms need to be respected.

Heavy snow leads to flooding and slush

As ice fishermen we know that a little snow is welcome. It helps us to bank our houses and soften the heating bill but too much snow is challenging. That's why after a recent snowfall, you need to check your fish house. Snow can be heavy. As that snow sits on the ice, it forces the ice down and the water through ice or open ice fishing holes.

This is a common cause of fish house flooding. If you have a fish house on the lake, you have to respect snow and check your fish house. Wet snow/slush can also make travel to your fish house impossible. That's why I earlier recommended pulling your house to shore when you hear of a weather report calling for significant snowfall. One day you can be getting around just fine, but with substantial snowfall travel can treacherous if not impossible. The lesson to be learned is that you need to be respectful of wet heavy snow and slush. The odds are in nature's favor and you

won't beat them.

It's okay to pull your fish house off early/don't wait until the deadline

This one is based on common sense and can't be overstated. As an ice fisherman if you're not using your house, take it off the lake or at least move it toward the shoreline. During my travels, it amazes me how many people will take the time and effort to put a house out, use it a couple of times and then leave it until the end of the season. This is a recipe for disaster.

This past winter I got calls from anglers who had houses out and explained that they couldn't get them off the lake before the fish house deadline. They said the lake was covered in snow and travel was impossible. In listening to their problems, I couldn't help but ask, "When was the last time you checked on it?" In most cases, I learn they haven't been to it for a long time. The lesson is to take your house off the lake if you don't intend on using it. Don't wait until the deadline.

The fish house deadline is the deadline

I will be the first to admit this sounds hard and cruel, but to be honest, it's an ice fishing reality. As an ice fisherman you have to respect the deadline. It's the law. As we know, the deadline is not a secret and needs to be respected. It's fair and allows us to enjoy a lengthy ice fishing season.

If you put a fish house on the lake and don't remove it before the deadline, expect to be issued a citation. Conservation officers are not authorized to allow you to violate the law, so when you call looking for an extension due to some unforeseen circumstance in getting your fish house off the lake, don't be surprised when they tell you, "You need to get your house off the lake;" there are no exceptions. This is probably the most important lesson from the 2012 season.

Public accesses are not public storage lots

Finally, when you get your fish house off the lake, finish the job. It's illegal to leave a fish house on a public access. As a responsible angler you need to do the right thing and take it with you. Conservation officers will issue citations to any fish house owner that leaves their fish house on a public access.

Most of us have watched the movie "Grumpy Old Men" and recognize the film makers desire to capture the essence of Minnesota ice fishing and as we know it. It's a unique winter sport and a great winter past time. It provides entertainment for Minnesotans and is engrained as a part of our winter heritage and culture. I encourage anyone that takes time to put a fish house on Minnesota waters to take the decision to heart and recognize the essential obligations that go with this activity. In closing, I will share the advice I got from a senior conservation officer many years ago. The final lesson is this: If you have time to build a fish house, and if you have time to fish in it, you also have to make time to check on it, and when the season is over, make time to get your fish house off the lake.