

OF THE OUTDOORS

Pitching The Ice Below Fort Randall

BY GARY HOWEY
Hartington, Neb.

I, like many other anglers, are impatiently waiting for the rivers and reservoirs to open up, giving us the opportunity to once again launch our boats to do some open water fishing.

When Joel Vasek (Missouri Valley Guide Service, Geddes) called and said the open water bite was on below Ft. Randall, it didn't take me long to make up my mind as the very next afternoon, Team member, Larry Myhre, Sioux City, IA. along with one of our cameraman and I were on our way to Geddes to get the latest report and to map a strategy to go after walleyes the next morning.

According to Joel, the boat basin below the dam was still frozen, with the fish holding right along the edge of it. The shallower north side

boat ramp was open, which would allow us to launch, giving us the opportunity to slide across the river to fish the outside edge of the frozen basin.

Our game plan would be to pitch light jigs tipped with minnows (1/4-1/8th oz.) up along the edge of the ice and to slowly work them back to the boat, enticing those walleyes lying along and under the edge of the ice.

As the sun started to appear in the eastern sky, Joel skillfully maneuvered our boat out of the shallow water out into the main current as we headed towards the ice covered boat basin.

Before the boats wake had dissipated, Joel fired a cast towards the jagged edge of the ice of the bay, after a couple of cranks on the reel; he reared back, yelling, "Fish on." As quickly as it hit, the fish

shook loose. Without missing a beat, he duplicated his previous cast, launching another up towards the ice. As before, another fish hammered Joel's 1/8th ounce jig, but this time, Joel won the battle and a chunky walleye soon came to the boat.

I'd started out pitching a 7 ounce jig, quickly switching to a 1/8th ounce jig once it became obvious that the fish were showing a preference to the lighter jigs as it appeared that the heavier jig was too bulky for the fish to inhale.

Shortly after, both Larry and I boated nice walleyes, shortly thereafter; Joel set the hook on what appeared to be another good fish. As the fish made an effort to reach the safety of the ice, Joel worked it towards the boat. By the way it was fighting, its appearance in the clear water it was obvious that this wasn't a walleye and after a short-lived battle, Joel brought the fish in, allowing me to slip the net under a fat Brown Trout.

Later when we filleted the fish, we found that it was loaded with Fathead

minnows, which aren't native to the river, with the only place they could have come from was some angler's jigs. Since Joel was using a light jig, on light line, the trout could easily suck in the Fathead minnow along with the jig.

Before long, what had once been our quiet little piece of the universe, quickly became crowded by other boats filled with anglers taking advantage of the warm weather, hoping to break the hold that cabin fever had on them.

Most were vertically jigging along the ice edge; others were slowly working along the ice edge, while others were pitching jigs up towards the ice from but a few yards away.

It didn't take us long to figure out why the boat we were in was being more successful, it appeared as if our boat, which was positioned farther away from the ice than the others, yet still within easy casting distance of it, the other boats were working right up along the edge of the ice, into the shallower water.

With the sun working its way up higher

in the sky, boat traffic increased, much of it in the shallower water adjacent to the ice, forcing the fish that had been feeding along the edge to retreat back in under the ice, making it difficult if not impossible for a jig to be presented properly to them.

Ours, was the first boat to arrive and armed with spinning gear, light line and 1/8th ounce jigs tipped with minnows, we were able to pitch our baits up against the ice, creating very little disturbance when they entered the water. Other anglers, throwing heavier jigs, created a lot of commotion when their jigs splashed down into the crystal clear water next to the ice, apparently spooking those fish located in that shallower water.

The cold-water conditions we were fishing required stealth like presentation. Anglers fishing the open water below the dam when water temps are cold will need to down size their baits as well as their line diameter in order to consistently take fish during this time of the year.

In the late winter, where you'll find the

fish located in some of the shallowest water they'll be in throughout the year, water with the excellent water clarity, which gives them plenty of time to eyeball our baits, you'll find that light tackle will out fish the heavier tackle you might ordinarily use.

Before long, one boat fired up, then another departing the area, leaving us as we were when we first arrived, by ourselves as they headed off to other fishing spots or back to the dock, while we continued to take some nice fish, using our stealth like presentation along with the lighter jigs.

In a few short hours, by mid morning, by pitching the ice, we were able to catch a nice bunch of eater walleyes from 1.1 to 5 pounds as well as the 3-7 pound Brown Trout mentioned earlier, allowing us to escape for a few hours of the dreaded cabin fever.

Gary Howey, Hartington, Neb., is a former hunting/fishing guide, the President of Outdoorsmen Productions and the Producer/Host of Outdoorsmen Adventures television, which can be seen on Fox, affiliates throughout the upper Midwest. For more outdoor information check out www.outdoorsmenadventures.com.

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