

ICE OUT BASSIN

Ice out bass fishing isn't for everyone and it takes a willingness to explore and keep exploring until you find the right area for that given day. The good news is once you find a quality area odds are it will produce year after year and for good reason; during that time of the year it possess everything a bass needs as it transitions from the hard water of winter into the open water period of spring.

Here in NY we've only recently implemented a state wide Catch & Immediate release artificial lure only season for black bass which runs December 1st through the third Saturday in June when the catch and keep season opens. However, not all regions were required to honor that rule so be sure to check the local regulations for the region you're fishing in.

What to Look For When starting your search for ice out bass the top three things to remember are depth, structure and temperature. It's considered common knowledge that most lakes and watersheds warm faster along the north and northwestern shoreline so that's a great spot to start your search. Look for hard bottom areas leading into the backs of coves or up onto flats. Ridges and secondary points coming out of deep water into these areas serve as a navigation aid and they seem to attract good numbers of fish, if it has scattered rock or wood along it that's all the better. A good starting point is to locate what depth most of the fish are holding at in open water and simply look for any submerged structure (point, finger, ledge, or hump) that intersects with that depth and odds are a group of fish will be some where near by.

Right after ice out the water is very clear and very cold with temperatures running 33-40 degrees and those near shore hard bottom areas absorb any sunlight which warms the water and attracts the fish. Quite often an area that seemed devoid of life will suddenly hold many fish once it warms up just a few degrees.

Lure Choices There are two schools of thought on lure choice for this time of year; some anglers select plastics such as tubes, small creature baits or lead head jigs attempting to imitate terrestrials, crawfish or gobies, while others select hard baits, (small crankbaits or minnow baits) hoping to imitate bait fish and draw a strike. At certain times one will out produce the other and it's your job to figure out which one works best on any given day.

I've enjoyed most of my ice out success with hard baits, so let's review a few lure choices and techniques that might apply to your local waters. I always try to keep it simple and stick with colors that replicate shad patterns, a dark back, silver sides and a white belly. There are countless lures on the market that fit that description but I use Lucky Craft products. Their color code Aurora Black or American Shad are two of my best producing ice out lures, bar none, and experience tells me our NY bass agree.



Top: Pointer 100 DD Bottom: Slim Shad D9
Color: American Shad

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The author with a Smallmouth on a Slim Shad D9

For crankbaits I like a medium diver that runs 7-9 ft (Slim Shad D7 or Slim Shad D-9) and for minnow imitators I use a suspending jerkbait (Pointer 100) or the spoonbill version (Pointer 100 DD) when I need to get a tad deeper in the water column. Both lures have served me well and I usually employ the crankbait first on a steady retrieve using a 6.3.1 reel or a slower 5.4:1 gear ratio. Remember we're scouting super cold water for lethargic bass moving up to put on the feedbag before the pre-spawn calendar period arrives; crankbaits allow an angler to cover a lot of water quickly .

In my experience you can't work crankbaits too slow, but you do need to cover water and a 6.3:1 reel helps with that. However, if you can't generate a strike and you're marking fish on the graph then switch to the 5.4:1 gear ratio and see what happens. Often times that subtle

change in retrieve speed is all you need to get the fish biting.

Once I've located (caught) a few fish on the crankbait I'll let the area rest a few minutes and then go back through with the jerkbait to pickoff any reluctant biters. I've also found times when the crankbait just won't generate a strike and the jerkbait is the lure of choice. I don't know of any magic rule or short answer on when to throw which one, but I do recommend if you aren't getting bit then change the cadence of your retrieve and don't be afraid to slow down.

If your crankbait retrieve is steady, then switch to a Stop & Go retrieve. Simply put just cast out, crank the reel three or four turns, stop, wait a couple of seconds and repeat, that's a Stop & Go retrieve. For the jerkbait I'll cast it out, crank it down 5 or 6 turns of the reel and then use a jerk- pause- jerk- jerk- pause retrieve. I usually start with 5-6 second pauses between jerks and then extend the length of pause until I start getting bites.

Each day is different and changing weather conditions might cause the cadence to change throughout a day's fishing. You have to pay attention and the fish will let you know what to do. Once you hook a couple of fish remember what you were doing that generated the strike and replicate it until they stop biting.



Largemouth taken on a Pointer 100 DD

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This past spring while fishing Onondaga Lake for ice out bass I let the Pointer 100 DD set motionless between jerks for up to 25-30 seconds suspended adjacent to a ledge. The Largemouth Bass would just suck the jerkbait in and start swimming off with it. The bite was a light tap, nothing vicious, but just enough to see a slight jump in the line and they'd set the hook on themselves as they swam away.

When casting hard baits for ice out bass consider using fluorocarbon or at least a fluorocarbon leader. I use Bass Pro Shops XPS Fluorocarbon in 8 or 10 lb. test and it works great for me. Remember that gin clear water we talked about earlier; that's when the fluorocarbon line really comes into play as the lure sits suspended in open water. That's also why I choose Lucky Craft lures, their color patterns are so lifelike that no matter how long a fish has to look at them it seems they'll ultimately strike.

Focusing on River Fish For catching ice out river bass we asked Mike Cusano (Clay NY) 2009 Anglers Choice Angler of the Year and NY BASS Federation President to share a few tips.

Cusano looks for deeper holes, steep depth changes and underwater points that are relatively close to potential spring time spawning locations as the fish will eventually be moving that way in a month or so. River fish in general try to avoid the faster current during this cold water period, and the fish seem to find places that allow them a steady break from the current.

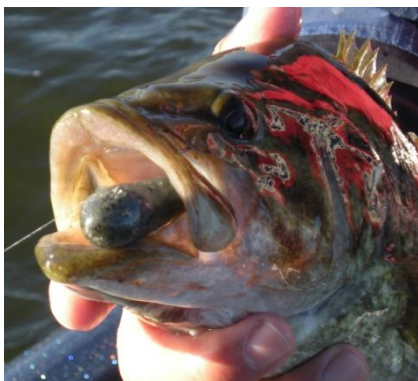
Try to locate bottom compositions that are mixed, meaning there may be a softer bottom but it should definitely have several hard patches of either cobble rock, smaller chunk rock or mussel beds. Mix in a larger boulder or two with a few remnants of left over vegetation and you've found a prime location. Rivers that possess two to three foot of visibility seem better, if it's too dirty right after ice out the fish just don't seem interested in biting. The one exception seems to be if there's a hard mud line from an incoming flow that intersects fish holding structure. Cusano recommends probing those areas with a variety of presentations.

Ideally what you're looking for is moderate current and it seems the harder the current the more likely you are to find the fish stacked at the very front of the holes or behind objects that offer the best current break.

To fish faster current requires precise lure control due to the smaller strike zone, where as the fish holding in moderate current are more willing to travel to strike a lure.



Bass Pro Shops Tender Tubes & ½ oz lead head



Once he's located the fish Cusano relies on a Bass Pro Shops Tender Tube in green pumpkin, melon pepper, or smoke/black / red flake. Depending on water depth and what he sees on the graph he'll adjust the jig head weight to maintain solid contact with the bottom. Unlike many anglers Cusano starts out heavier and works his way lighter. A good starting point is 1/2 oz. lead head, but he'll go lighter to a 1/4 oz. if necessary.

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To present the tube lure Cusano casts out, lets it settle to the bottom and begins a slow methodical drag maintaining bottom contact at all times. When he feels the tube hit a rock or other bottom structure he'll employ a shake-wiggle to help crawl the lure over the object. Often times the strike is a pressure bite where it just feels heavy, other times you'll just loose contact with the bottom and when that occurs he recommends a sweep hook set.

For dragging tubes Cusano uses 6 lb. Berkley Fireline with a 6 lb. fluorocarbon leader matched to a 6 ft. medium action spinning rod. The no stretch line enhances sensitivity, and it ensures solid hooks ups without the use of any rod snapping eye crossing hook sets. When detecting strikes Cusano advises if you aren't sure, just reel faster and lean into it; if it's a fish you'll know soon enough.



Mike Cusano with a Smallmouth taken on a tube



Storm Wild Eye Swimbaits & River2Sea Swim bait

Another effective cold water lure is the swim bait. Cusano recommends the Wild Eye by Storm lures. This is boot tail minnow with an internal lead head that is a great baitfish imitator. He presents this lure on a 7 ft. medium heavy rod with 14 lb. braid and a 10 or 12 lb. fluorocarbon leader matched with a 6.3:1 reel. Often times when the bite slows down on the tube this full body swim bait will get an extra strike or two from the biggest fish in the area. Cusano says a slow steady retrieve seems to trigger the most bites and pay attention to your graph. If you notice

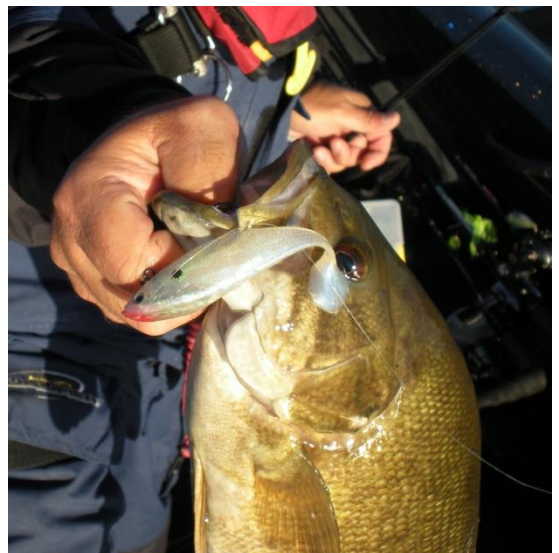
the fish are moving up in the water column then go with a lighter weight until your presentation intersects with the active fish.

Safety Considerations

NY state law requires all recreational anglers in boats less than 21 ft to wear a Coast Guard approved personal floatation device (PDF) from 1 November through the first Saturday in May. And remember the water is extremely cold so always bring an extra set of clothes to change into, if you get wet you'll be glad you did. Avoid fishing alone if at all possible, but if you do fish alone this time of year have your cell phone charged and keep it in a water proof bag. Above all use common sense, dress in layers, bring a thermos of your favorite warm beverage and have fun chasing some of those cold water ice out bass.

About the Author

Burnie Haney is a member of the New York State Outdoor Writers Association, Conservation Director and Public Relations Officer for the NY BASS Chapter Federation, Pro Staff member for Bass Pro Shops Nitro Boats, Lucky Craft, US Reel, Dobyns Rods and The Rod Glove.



Wild Eye Swim bait fools another Smallmouth bass