



CHAPTER 5

WINTER HABITS AND HABITATS (fish in the winter)

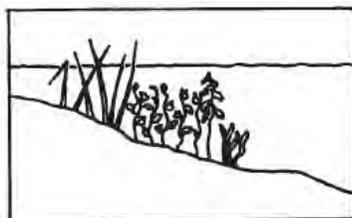
Days grow shorter, trees lose their leaves, and cold winds from the north send shivers down your spine. You change your actions. You slow down a bit. You're not as likely to wander far from home. Fish make similar changes. Fish are **coldblooded**, which means their blood temperature is the same as the temperature of the surrounding water. Fish are more active in warmer water. As water cools, a fish's activity decreases; therefore, its **metabolic** needs are reduced. In other words, because the engine (the fish) doesn't have to go too far (less active) it needs less fuel (food). Some species are affected more than others by colder temperatures. Because fish don't need as much fuel, they eat less often. So, chances are you won't often find them in an aggressive feeding mode. But they still need to eat, and can still be caught, if you do a few things to increase your chances.

One thing that is common for most fishes is their tendency to "hang around" some type of **structure**. This structure could be a weed bed, a land point extending into the water, or an abrupt change in depth. Structure helps fish hide from predators or helps them find prey. Tests have shown that fish placed in a child's wading pool wander randomly. When anything is placed in the pool (rocks, wood, etc.) fish congregate at that spot. Even a line painted on the bottom of the pool could act as structure and draw fish to it. This is important to remember any time of the year: *Fish usually "hang around" some type of structure.*

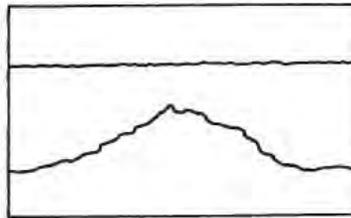
Another thing to remember is that both humans and fish have **habitat** requirements that must be met. These include food, shelter and space. Fish don't have the convenience of getting into their car and driving to the supermarket, so they must live close to a food source or swim around looking for their food. They can't lock their doors and windows from dangerous (predators), so they need some type of shelter in which to hide or escape. Rocks and weeds are two examples. Deep water is another possibility. They also need space. Just like humans, if they are too crowded, or if they don't have enough space, their quality of life will suffer.

Another habitat requirement that we share with **fish** is water. It's easy to take water for granted because that's where fish live. But neither fish nor people can thrive without clean, unpolluted water.

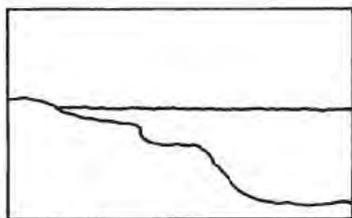
Even though sometimes it seems fish are everywhere (or nowhere), we can increase our chances of finding them by trying to find



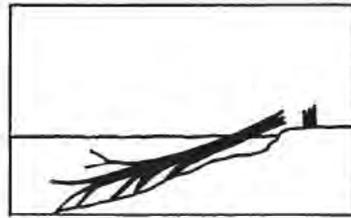
weed beds



sunken islands



breaks and dropoffs



sunken tree or bush

transition zones or edges. Simply stated, a **transition zone** is where the bottom changes. Changes might be: one type of weed to another, sand to gravel, mud to silt, or from shallow water to deep water. In other words, a transition zone is where a change occurs.

One more thing to consider is the lack of an edge or transition area that is available when the water is warmer. The **thermocline**, or horizontal dividing line between warm and cold water, helps concentrate fish in their preferred temperature range. As discussed in an earlier chapter, much of the water under the ice has a uniform temperature. This causes the fish to scatter more than they would if the water temperature was stratified (layered).

OK. Let's see ... Fish slow down as temperatures cool.

Fish need structure for habitat.

Fish need food.

Fish need space.

So if you find an area that has all of these conditions then you should be able to catch fish whenever you want ... right? Don't forget to use the right type of bait or lure.

HELPFUL HINTS

Think small: Chances of success will increase by offering a morsel rather than a meal. With a smaller bait you will attract both small and large fish.

Be a nomad: If fish are not being caught after 20 minutes at the first hole, then move. Go deeper or shallower. It is often quicker to find the fish than hope they find you.

Set the hook: After you feel the initial bite, it is best to set the hook. This helps lodge the hook into the fish's mouth to keep it from coming out. This can be done by raising your rod quickly and then start reeling and fighting the fish. How fast you pull

will depend on the size of fish, strength of line and the size of hook you are using.

Know your fish: If you are fishing for lake trout in an area where they don't live (wrong habitat), you are decreasing your chances. The person who knows WHO, WHAT and WHERE usually goes home a happy angler.

The KISS method: (Keep it simple, Sally.) You have been on the ice all day and finally get that humdinger of a bite, only to lose it because the ice froze around your tip-up or your hook wasn't sharpened enough, or your knot slipped. Forgetting the basics can make the difference between fishing and catching.

Move it: Don't forget that you create the action in artificial lures, so it is best to use a rod with them.

Make scents of it: It is a good idea to put some kind of scent (shrimp oil, herring oil or salmon egg) on the tip of the lure for extra attraction.

Where are they? Remember those spots where you were catching fish in the summer: the edges, drop-offs, points and weed beds. Those are also good places to

start in the winter. Work your way toward deeper water until you find fish.

Start here: Most often, fish will hold near the bottom. Start by setting your lure about a foot off the bottom. If after a while you get no bites, move it up the water column until you find the correct depth where the fish are holding.

Work together: While fishing with your buddy, it will save time if you each fish at different depths. When one of you starts catching, concentrate at that depth.

Hard water: The cold weather that allows you to stand on ice will also freeze anything that gets wet. Keep your equipment off the ice.

Hot hole: Catching a lot from one hole? Cut some more holes around it.

Hey Peg! Push-button bobbers used in the summer are often too buoyant for winter use. A small peg-style bobber works much better and is easier to use.

Split the difference: If you balance your bobber with split shot, weight it so that it just barely floats so that fish will feel less resistance.

What a drag: In warm water we use the drag on our reel to protect our line from breaking. In the winter when playing a fish while holding the line, our fingers are the drag. If the fish surges, you must let the line slip through your fingers or it could break. If you are using a mechanical drag fishing reel make sure your drag is just tight enough to slow line from being pulled out.

C.P.R: Don't forget C.P.R for your fish: Catch – Photograph – Release! You'll need to keep your camera warm and make sure your batteries are good.

Look into the water: Lay over the "ice fishing hole", block out all of the light, and look into the water. When fishing shallow water you can often see the bottom and sometimes see bottom habitat and fish.

Tip up: When using a fishing pole always keep your tip up. This will reduce the chances of your line breaking.