

WINTER FISHING OPPORTUNITIES

Lakes and ponds in the Tanana Valley provide abundant winter fishing opportunities. Many are along roads or are accessible by a short trail. Some provide recreational opportunity for anglers wishing to travel to a more remote lake by snowmobile, cross country skis, dog team, or light aircraft.

The four largest lakes in the Fairbanks and Delta areas (Chena, Harding, Birch, and Quartz lakes) are stocked and should produce good catches from November through early March. Ice fishing is especially good in early winter. In addition to the four large lakes, about 60 smaller stocked lakes provide angling opportunity. Species stocked include rainbow trout, silver salmon, Arctic grayling, Arctic char, and lake trout.

The Sport Fish Division pamphlet, “Interior Alaska Stocked Lakes,” describes location, access, and species present, and it is available at ADF&G offices in Fairbanks and Delta Junction, along with sport fishing regulations, detailed trail maps, and depth contour maps of the larger lakes.

Burbot, northern pike, and lake trout

All three of these species of large predators are present in various lakes in the Tanana drainage, and burbot and northern pike are present in the Tanana River and the lower parts of its clear tributaries. Lake-resident northern pike are primarily found in lowland lakes, while lake trout are native to mountain lakes and are present in a few lowland lakes where they have been stocked. Burbot are present in many lowland and mountain lakes. Bag limits, seasons, and regulations on methods can vary from one area to another for each species, so be sure to check the regulations before you go fishing.



burbot

Larger northern pike and lake trout may reach weights in excess

of 20 pounds. A few burbot weighing from 10 to 15 pounds are taken each winter by anglers.

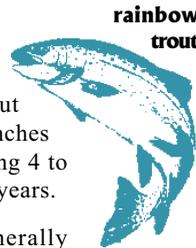
All three species can be taken by jigging brightly colored lures baited with herring, whitefish, or smelt. Most anglers prefer to use spoons with combinations of red or orange and silver or white coloration. Fluorescent blues and greens also work. The bait should be fresh and of a good quality (not rancid, or freezer-burned).

Burbot and lake trout (found in deep water in summer) forage in shallower water under ice cover, and may be taken in 4 to 20 feet of water under the ice. Northern pike forage in similar depths. Northern pike and lake trout bite best in the morning and late afternoon, while burbot feed heavily from sunset until about midnight.

Northern pike and burbot may also be speared in winter. Burbot may be taken in many lakes and all rivers by set lines left overnight. Check the regulations for seasons and details on legal methods for these activities.

Stocked rainbow trout, silver salmon, and grayling

Rainbow trout caught in stocked lakes in interior Alaska normally range in length from 9 to 14 inches, but many lakes with rainbow trout populations contain fish up to 20 inches and about 3 pounds—a few weighing 4 to 9 pounds have been taken over the years.

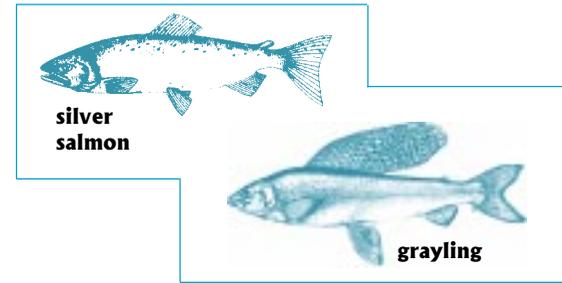


rainbow trout

Silver salmon and grayling generally range from 8 to 12 inches.

Experienced anglers have favorite locations, bait or lures, and ways to use them, but the basics for getting started are simple, and the same technique works pretty well for all three species.

To find productive fishing areas on a lake, watch or talk to other anglers or look for abandoned fishing holes with indications that fish have been caught through them. If you go exploring, try to find an area along the outer edge of a weedbed or where there is a steeper bottom gradient. Cut holes (two or more for each person fishing)



silver salmon

grayling

in a line from about 2 feet of water under the ice out to 8–10 feet. Start at the deep end and work to shallow so you don’t drill into the bottom.

Chum each hole with a little bait and fish (2 lines/hooks per angler) differing depths and locations until you find where the fish are biting. Sometimes there will be slow, steady action all along the line. If there are no bites after an hour at most, move. Sometimes there can be good fishing within 100 yards of where they aren’t biting.

Lure/bait combinations under a bobber, jigged occasionally, work best for these species. Sporting goods stores sell a variety of small jigs, lures, and baits geared especially toward ice fishermen. Orange or green lures work especially well. Recommended baits include salmon eggs, shrimp, corn, squid tentacles, or worms (if you can get them). Sport fishing regulations prohibit live FISH for bait, but there is no prohibition against the use of live earthworms. Lightweight terminal tackle requires a weight on the line to pull the bait down past slush that may stick to the sides of the hole and to add tension to the line so that the bobber will move as soon as a fish nibbles the bait. Rainbow trout are consummate bait stealers.

Arctic char

Arctic char have been successfully introduced into at least 20 lakes in the Fairbanks–Delta area. Char stocked a few years ago in Harding Lake and other lakes have survived to grown to 16–30 inches and to 1–10 pounds.

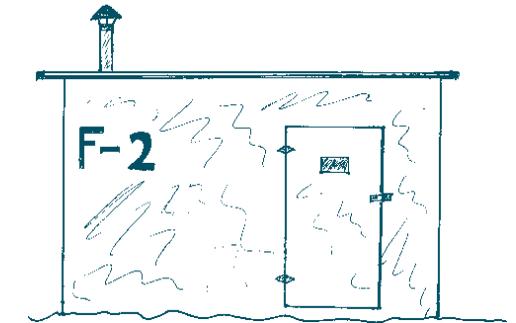
Arctic char require a slightly different fishing technique than other stocked species. While rainbow



Arctic char

trout, coho salmon, and grayling can be taken by “passive” techniques (watching bait under a bobber), angling success for Arctic char is greatly increased by rapidly jigging a bright orange lure. Schools of char can be attracted and fish caught by jigging a fluorescent orange lure within a few inches of the bottom. The best lures are spoons about 2 inches long and orange on both sides. The Gibbs Alaskan and Mepps Cyclops are two examples.

Arctic char seem to be very depth-specific in early winter. They congregate just off the bottom in about 20 feet of water. Fishing much shallower or deeper than 20 feet has produced poor results. Char seem to prefer open bottom, away from weedbeds. They bite best from right after sunrise until the sun is high, and again from mid-afternoon until dusk. When the fish come, salmon eggs or shrimp under a bobber fished just off the bottom nearby will also catch char.



Ice fishing shanties

Anglers planning to do lots of ice fishing and wishing to do so in comfort often put a fish house on the lake, or build or purchase a portable fish house. Ice fishing shanties left on the ice must be registered with the ADF&G. Registration forms are available from the Sport Fish Division, at ADF&G offices in Fairbanks and Delta Junction. Portable fish houses are usually collapsible, and can often be towed behind a snowmachine or truck. It is a good idea to build any fish house with skids under it.

The fish house should be of solid construction, as it provides shelter from the elements, and most are equipped with a small heater or woodstove. Fish houses usually have fishing holes through the floor in each corner, or there is a larger hole in the middle, with benches or seats along the walls.

The darkness inside of the shanty allows the fisherman to see down the hole and watch the fish react to the bait, and the warmth keeps the ice holes open and the bait and people thawed.

A disadvantage of fish houses is that anglers are “tied” to them—obligated to remove them completely from the lake by April 30, no matter how deep the snow and slush has gotten. Keep track of your litter as the day progresses; garbage that is covered by falling or blowing snow is an unpleasant sight when the snow melts in spring. □

Tools and equipment

❖ **ICE FISHING POLES**—short, generally inexpensive rods available at sporting goods stores. Rods with reels are recommended for water deeper than 15 feet or where you expect to catch larger fish. Sport fishing regulations allow an angler two lines, each with one hook, for ice fishing (see regulatory exceptions for burbot), so it is often to your advantage to have two poles for each fisherman. For most stocked lakes fishing, 6-pound test line is sufficient. For pike, burbot, and lake trout, use 10–15 pound test line and a heavier rod.

❖ **ICE SPUD**—a long handled ice chisel. This tool is good for opening or enlarging fishing holes and is all you need for ice up to 12 inches thick. Keep it sharp. Tie a rope to the handle and loop it around your wrist so you don’t lose the spud down the hole.

❖ **ICE AUGER**—hand auger or gas-driven power auger for drilling holes in the ice. This tool is essential for ice over 12 inches thick or when there are many holes to cut. Extensions are often needed to get through thick (36–48 inches) late winter ice. Protect the blades and keep them sharpened at the correct angle because a dull ice auger won’t cut into the ice. Don’t drill into the bottom, and remember to take spare blades along.

❖ **ICE SKIMMER**—a wide ladle with holes drilled in the spoon. This tool is for scooping slush and skim ice out of the hole.

❖ **SNOW SHOVEL**—for getting down to the ice so you can drill it or (heaven forbid!) for digging your vehicle out if you stick it in a drift or overflow.

❖ **RAGS**—for wiping goo off of your hands after you bait up or unhook a fish. These are better than the inside of your gloves.

❖ **DEPTH SOUNDER**—a weight attached to an alligator clip. You clip a weight on to your hook and drop it down the hole to determine how deep the water is. Then you can adjust your line length or bobber so that the hook fishes at the desired distance from the bottom.

❖ **WARM CLOTHES**—wear clothes warmer than you normally wear for the temperature. There is little physical exertion to keep you warm while you are standing waiting for a bite. The wind usually blows out on the lakes in winter. There will often be standing water at the hole or water slopping around when the hole is drilled, so insulated rubber boots are a necessity.

❖ **GAS LANTERN**—A gas lantern is better than a flashlight for checking burbot lines at night. A lantern lights up a larger area, doesn’t have to be held, and burns longer. It also gives off a little heat for cold fingers.

❖ **TACKLE**—bobbers, sinkers, lures, swivels, bait hooks, and bait.

❖ **REMEMBER:** A new fishing license is needed beginning January 1st. ❖❖❖

Ice Safety and Tips on the Weight-bearing Capacity of Ice

Extreme caution must be exercised in early winter by ice fishermen. The following information was compiled from various sources, including the Colorado Division of Wildlife. The most important thing to remember is that you are responsible for your own safety and, if you are driving the car, leading a group of snowmobiles, or walking out on the ice first, the safety of your family and friends depends on your judgment. These guidelines do not supersede your obligation to use caution, common sense, and to test the ice thickness before you travel on it.

- Right after freeze-up, ice toward the middle of the lake is thinner than that along the shoreline.
- River ice thickness can vary throughout the winter in different parts of the river, according to the strength of the current beneath it and whether we are having a cold spell or a warm spell. (*Whenever you are venturing out where no one has been yet, chop or drill holes to test the ice thickness.*)
- River ice is 15% weaker than lake ice.
- Ice thickness is not always an accurate measure of

its strength. Clear lake ice is the strongest. New ice is stronger than old ice, and ice formed by the freezing of slush and overflow is weaker than clear ice.

- Heavy snow cover drastically slows freeze-down, and causes overflow.
- Continuous travel over the same path will weaken thinner ice.
- Driving fast over thin ice can create a wave similar to a boat wake, which can crack the ice ahead of the vehicle under the right conditions.
- Sudden application of brakes increases the weight pressure of a vehicle, especially at the front wheels.
- Keep the weight spread out when traveling on minimal ice thickness. □

These guidelines are minimum thicknesses for a given load on good lake ice:

MINIMUM ICE THICKNESS	MAXIMUM LOAD
2 inches	1 man on foot
3 inches	group, in single file
8 inches	automobile (2 tons GVW)
12 inches	heavy truck
25 inches	45 tons
36 inches	110 tons

Courtesy Colorado Division of Wildlife.

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Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Sport Fish Division
1300 College Road
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701-1599
(907) 459-7207

