

ICE FISHING FOR LAKE TROUT

Lake Superior and Beyond

By Jason Swingen



THE AUTHOR WITH A NICE LAKE TROUT FROM LAKE SUPERIOR. THESE FISH CAN TAKE LONG HOURS TO ACQUIRE, BUT THE TAKE AND FIGHT ARE WORTH IT.

It can be intimidating to venture out onto the largest freshwater lake in the world, targeting a fish that can be in water as shallow as 2 feet or deeper than 200. But, if you gear up with the right equipment, use the right techniques, and focus on a few simple tips, you can catch one of the most exciting fish through the ice: The lake trout.

It's not every year that Lake Superior freezes over. So when it does, you should make sure to take advantage of it. If the ice doesn't form near Duluth, there are still often opportunities to fish near the Apostle Islands, or many of the lake trout-inhabited inland lakes in northern Minnesota.

Fishing for lake trout, or "lakers,"

can be similar to targeting species like musky or steelhead. You usually won't pull them in one after another, but all it takes is one on the end of your line, and all of the time spent on the water (or ice) is suddenly worth it.

The first lake trout I had ever caught also happens to be my most memorable. Not only because it was my first or the biggest one I've caught to this day, but mostly due to how surprised I was at how powerful these fish truly are. I had spent two whole days on the water trying to catch one of these crazy fish that I was, for some reason, obsessed with (even though I had never seen one in person before). Halfway through my third day I was starting to day-dream, slowly lifting

my rod and letting my little white tube jig fall back down onto the lake floor 80 feet below, wondering if I was using too thick of leader, or using the right color, or if I remembered to turn the lights off... When I lifted my rod yet another time, it felt like I was snagged on a log. All of a sudden my reel started screaming! After nearly a 10-minute fight, I had finally gained enough ground to pull the fish up to where I could see it through the extremely clear Lake Superior water. I was only able to get a short glimpse before it must have seen the light and shot down back to the bottom of the lake and I had to start the battle again. After another five intense minutes, I was able to get the fish up through the hole and finally get a good look at the creature I had been

searching for: a 3-foot long Lake Superior lake trout that I could barely fit through the hole.

Enough with my lake trout stories. Let's go over the equipment and techniques so that you can have your own story about catching a lake trout through the ice!

Catching lakers is a whole different world than catching walleye and panfish. Not only will you need to upsize your equipment, but you'll also often need to use different tactics to get them to bite. But before we get into techniques, let's cover the basic equipment you'll need to get started.

Although you could land a smaller lake trout on a walleye rod, it can be worth investing in a heavy action rod at least 32" long. Generally, these rods aren't that expensive and you can pick one up for fairly cheap. If you are targeting lake trout (especially in Lake Superior) you have the potential of catching a giant that could weigh 30 pounds or more, and you don't want to lose a trophy just because you didn't have the right equipment.

You can use either a spinning rod or a baitcaster. Each has its pros and cons. Spinning setups are more popular, cheaper and generally will have a better drag. The number one benefit of using a baitcasting rod and reel is that they reduce line-twist, which can be compounded when you are fishing in more than 100 feet of water.

Your standard 200 or 300-size spinning reels that you use for walleye and bass will work great. Having a spool with a large capacity and smooth drag is a



SPINNING OR BAITCASTING REELS ARE BOTH GOOD OPTIONS FOR ICE FISHING FOR LAKE TROUT. BE SURE TO STRENGTHEN YOUR SETUP FROM THE TYPICAL WALLEYE OR PANFISH RIG, LAKE TROUT TAKE LONG RUNS AND CAN REQUIRE STOUT RODS

must. Spool up your reel with at least 100 yards of 20-pound braided line. Lake trout can easily pull 100 feet of line out on their long powerful runs. Braid is extremely important and the only line that will allow you to set the hook when you are fishing in deep water. Monofilament line will stretch too much at these depths. It is also beneficial to use braid because you can fit more of it on your spool and it will keep your line from bowing in the current.

When using a spinning rod especially, make sure you use a high-quality swivel at the end of your braid, then tie on a few feet of 10-20-pound fluorocarbon. Lake Superior has extremely clear water so using a strong, nearly invisible leader is important. If you are using a baitcaster, it's optional to skip the swivel and tie straight to your leader. Then you can use a much longer leader. I prefer to use an FG knot that can easily be reeled through the guides, but an Albright knot is also a good choice for making a braid-to-fluoro connection.

Lake trout are predators and will swim around the lake chasing down smelt and herring, which is why the most popular lures for lake trout are 3-6 inches long and mostly white and flashy. You can catch these fish using different colors, but if you are just starting, it's hard to go wrong with something white. They rely on sight, sound, and smell, so adding some rattles and/or tipping your hook with a chunk of smelt can make a major difference and turn a looker into a taker. Some popular lures include jigg-raps, rattling traps, spoons, tube jigs, swimbaits, bucktails, and other similar jigs. One-half to 1 ounce jigs are ideal for fishing in water that is 100 feet or less. If you are fishing in more than 120 feet of water, or there is a heavy current, you'll want to use lures between 1 and 2 ounces. I've also recently had great luck by adding a swim jig head to a Game Changer streamer I tied.

Having a good flasher depth finder is pretty much a necessity when ice fishing for lake trout. Half of the fun comes from the excitement of marking a fish and watching it scream up to your lure. You can use any basic Marcum, Vexilar, or Humminbird unit, but having a graph with a screen that shows history

will be the most productive, allowing you to track these fish as they chase you up and down the water column.

I've caught lake trout in water ranging from 60-200 feet and there isn't a single magic depth. I've even been in 160 feet of water and seen one swimming a couple of inches under the ice. To start, you'll want to focus on depths around 80-160 feet. If there is a pile of anglers out fishing, don't get caught up thinking that they are all in the right spot. The best tactic is often to get away from the crowd. Try to not get too comfortable either. If you don't mark any large schools of bait or lake trout within an hour or two, move to a new spot.

Two of the most common techniques used include "pounding the bottom," and "playing keep away." Sometimes simply lifting your jig and letting it free fall to the lake bottom will kick up enough sediment to call in a laker. This can also be a great tactic if you don't have an electronic depth finder. However, the most exciting way to catch lakers is to play keep away. It's important to remember that lake trout do not act like walleye or panfish. So throw all of your previous finessing ice fishing knowledge out the window and resist the temptation to slowly jig above them, hoping that they will slowly swim up and eat. They won't.

Lake trout like to chase and will lose interest if their prey doesn't put up a fight. Keep your lure moving as if it's a fleeing smelt. Fish that show up mid-water column are more active and will chase more readily. If you mark a fish, reel past it at around 2-3 reel revolutions-per-second. They will often immediately start chasing. Don't slow down! If they lose interest, stop and drop your lure past them. If the mark of your lure on your graph stops at the fish and your fishing line goes limp, this means that they grabbed it on the way down. Set the hook hard and hold on!

Now all there is left to do is wait and hope it's cold enough this winter for the big lake to freeze again!

Editor's Note: Jason Swingen is a Gitche Gumee Chapter board member and resides in Duluth. Check out his outdoors blog at www.js-outdoors.com



A SELECTION OF LAKE TROUT JIGS AND SPOONS. WHITE IS A STRONG OPTION FOR LAKE SUPERIOR LAKE TROUT.



SPRING DAYS CAN MAKE FISHING WITHOUT AN ICE SHELTER POSSIBLE. A FISHFINDER, ROD, AND JIGS ARE THE ONLY MATERIALS REQUIRED TO CATCH LAKE TROUT THROUGH THE ICE.



ICE HOUSES DOTTED THE LAKE SUPERIOR NEAR-SHORE ICE THIS PAST WINTER. BE SAFE WHEN FISHING ON THIS OFTEN UNSTABLE ICE AND USE CAREFUL JUDGEMENT WHEN ASSESSING CONDITIONS ON THIS POWERFUL LAKE.