



Winter fishing opportunities plentiful

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The arrival of winter weather doesn't necessarily mean it's time to retire the fishing gear.

In fact, a wealth of untapped fishing opportunities await anglers willing to brave the harsh conditions of the seemingly endless west-central Illinois winter.

While many area outdoor enthusiasts are busy pursuing white-tailed deer, waterfowl or a variety of other animal or bird species, a handful of hardy anglers are enjoying some quality fishing action.

In fact, it might surprise some to learn that largemouth bass, walleye, sauger, panfish and even catfish are regularly caught from many waters throughout the entire winter.

Veteran winter anglers realize there's plenty of fishing activities for those willing to brave the elements. As an example, good year-round fishing can be found at each of the powerplant cooling lakes and, when conditions permit, area farm ponds also produce excellent ice fishing.

Lakes like Coffeen, Baldwin, and Sangchris are excellent choices for the winter fisherman. Warm water released by the power plants keeps these lakes open and offer anglers an early taste of spring fishing.

Anglers can often find water temperatures of 50 or even 60 degrees near the warm water discharge areas. Good catches of bass, crappie, bluegill and catfish are regular occurrences from these areas.

The tailwaters below the Mississippi River navigational dams are also good bets for cold weather action. Each winter, walleye and sauger gather in these areas to prepare for the early spring spawn.

The key here is to watch the river conditions. Oftentimes, the best fishing is usually found when the river is running low and fairly clear.

Large jigs tipped with minnows usually produce the best results. Depending upon the current, anglers use lures weighing three-fourths to one and one-fourth ounces.

Though most of the walleye and sauger action is enjoyed by anglers fishing from boats, some tailwater areas also offer access for bank fishing. The tailwaters below the Chain of Rocks Dam near Granite City occasionally provides quality wintertime shoreline fishing.

Ice fishing also appears to increase in popularity among area anglers. The small private ponds are among the favorite places for ice fishing.

However, good ice fishing can also be found at many public waters. When the ice is thick enough (three and one-half to four inches), many state-managed lakes yield good catches of bluegill and crappie.

Small lures and light line will increase an ice fisherman's odds for success. It is also best to tip the tiny ice fishing jigs with a mealworm or wax worm.

The most important thing about winter fishing is to be prepared for the conditions. Anglers should dress in layers, avoid dangerous situations like thin ice and always fish with a partner.