

An alternative to ice fishing

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ALTON - The early months of the year typically bring limited angling opportunities for local fishermen.

There are some years when enough ice forms on our ponds and smaller lakes to support limited ice fishing activities. These opportunities often come and go with the various passing weather fronts.

As the winter weeks pass, the chances of finding safe ice fishing conditions quickly diminish. Once February arrives, many downstate anglers begin to turn their attention to the hot water lakes of central and southern Illinois.

Due to the discharge of warm water created by the cooling of the power plant turbines, these lakes are the place to be during a mild February day.

Electric power plants utilize water to cool the turbines which create the electricity. Water is taken in from the lakes, used to cool the turbine, and then returned to the lake at a much higher temperature. Even in mid-winter, temperatures at the outflow can be well above those near the intake.

Baitfish are attracted to the warmer water. Bass and other predator species are attracted to both the warm water and the forage fish. Catching fish in a cooling lake is the perfect way to warm up for spring.

Generally speaking, power plants do not produce enough heated water to radically change the entire lake. One arm of the lake nearest the outflow will be known as a hot water arm. A current is created as the water warms and cools.

The pumping of warmed water creates a torrent. The water is run through a pipe that pushes the heated water away from the shore under the surface. Current breaks and eddies are as productive as the same areas in a river.

Locally, anglers are blessed with a number of excellent hotwater lakes. Virtually all of these waters offer excellent winter fishing opportunities.

Lake of Egypt in the southeastern part of Williamson County is just one of these fine fishing lakes. Located near Interstate 57, this 2,300-acre lake has 93 miles of shoreline with an average depth of 18.3 feet and a maximum depth of 52 feet. The power plant is in the northwest corner of the lake.

The stabilizing influence of the power plant keeps the surface water temperature about 56 degrees. On sunny days, water in the backs of coves can be warmer.

Many anglers find their best success fishing the grass weedbeds off the points. These areas often have sandbars in the center that attracts bass.

Most of the better areas are found in the north end of the lake closer to the power plant. The waters there typically warm more quickly during periods of milder weather.

Coffeen Lake in nearby Montgomery County is among the more popular of these local waters. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources manages the fishery of this popular lake.

Biologists report that fishing in the lake has been stable since it first opened. Three to four-pound bass are taken regularly, with some fish up to six pounds and larger.

The lake has 49 miles of shoreline with the average depth of 19 feet and a maximum depth of 59 feet. There is one boat ramp on the west side of the lake north of Donnellson. A 25-horsepower motor limit is in effect. During winter, water temperatures in the hot water arm can be near the sixty-degree mark while air temperatures are in the thirties.

Anglers can be found on the lake under almost any temperature. It actually is a matter of what angler can handle. The die-hard anglers can often be seen on colder days with ice forming on them. But, it might be cold fishing but also good fishing considering the numbers of fish in the lake.

The Coffeen Power Station is located on the southeast shore of the main arm of the lake. The warm water discharge area is in the upper area of the eastern arm. It is the best fishing area.

Newton Lake is yet another cold-weather fishing hotspot. A typical bass caught from these waters will weigh about four pounds. It is entirely possible, however, to take fish of five, six or seven pounds.

For most winter anglers, the west arm shoreline is the best area to seek bass. The discharged warm water from the power plant warms the water to the seventies.

Boat anglers should be aware that high winds can cause dangerous wave action. In addition, a dense fog can occur at dusk during the cold months.

Located southwest of Newton in Jasper County, this 1,755-acre lake looks like a giant horseshoe with Sandy Creek and Laws Creek forming the two sides of the formation. The power plant is located in the middle of the horseshoe, with the warm water discharge to be found in the northern reaches of the Sandy Creek arm. Sandy Creek is the westernmost area of the lake.

Though all of the previously mentioned lakes offer good winter angling even in cold temperatures, care should be exercised when on boat ramps. Ice can quickly form on the ramps making them slick and a bit dangerous. It is always best to call ahead to these locations to check the conditions.