

Ice Fishing Is Fun!

By Steve Macone March 4, 2020

No, really. A trip with a New Hampshire guide reveals how much the sport has evolved, while keeping the eternal battle of angler and fish at its heart.



Ice fishing on Silver Lake in Madison, N.H., with a fisherman using a tip-up device whose flag goes up when a fish is on the line. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

With frozen dirt road crunching under the car tires, my longtime fishing buddy (and [paleontologist](#)) Mike and I pull out of the driveway of my family cottage in New Hampshire for the hour drive north east toward the White Mountains , where an invite we've long coveted has us giddy.

It's to sit on a frozen lake.

Any mention of ice fishing usually comes with a built-in beat of silence,

requiring either no explanation at all or eliciting puzzled, are-you-joking comments.

Growing up, ice fishing was the angling of last resort. We'd set our tip-ups — wooden devices that sat in the hole and popped a flag up if a fish took your bait. Then we'd play hockey.

There aren't many sports so boring that you have to start playing other sports in the middle of them.

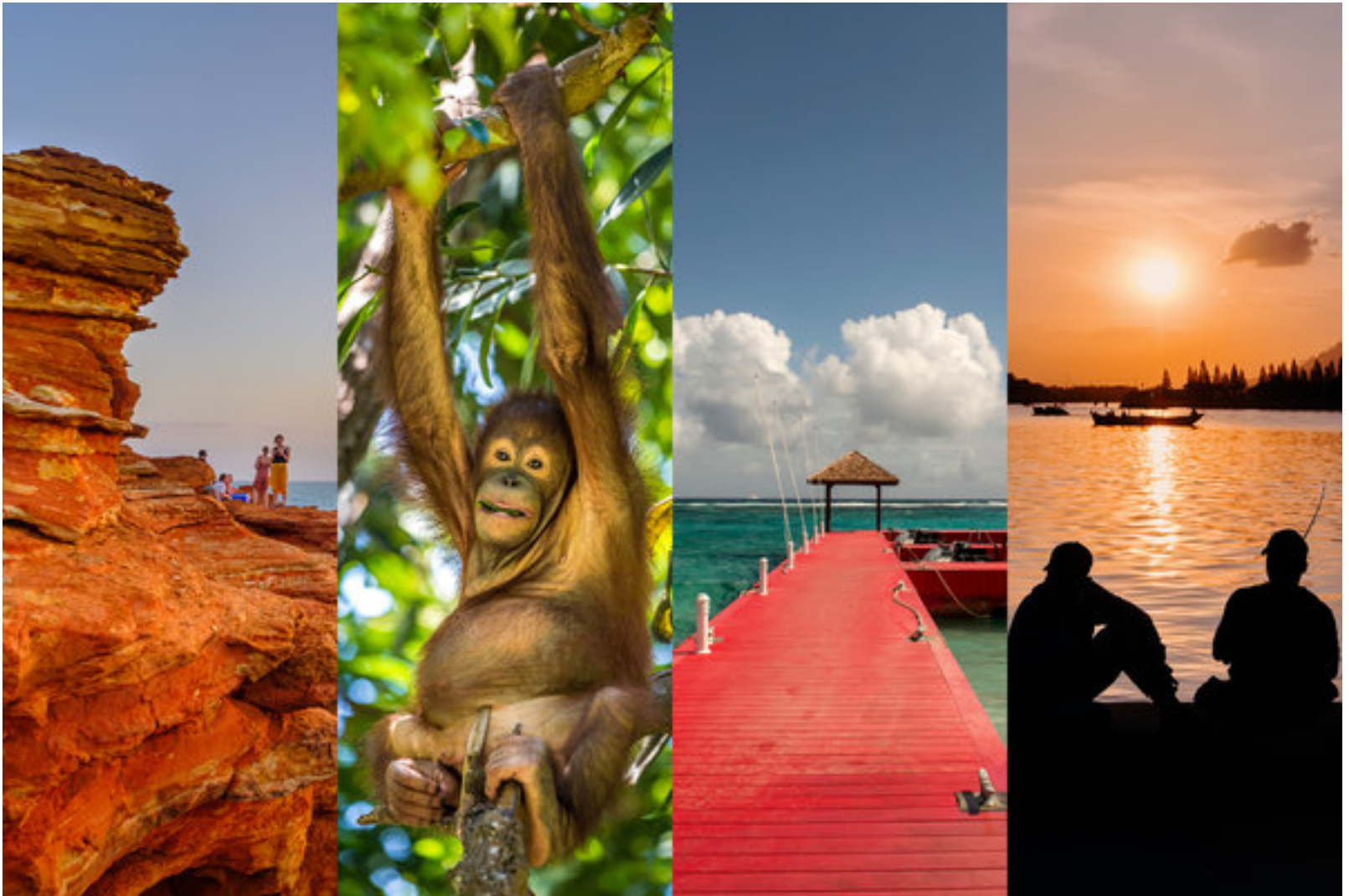
Our games were rarely interrupted by flags. But advances in fishing technology, better understanding of fish behavior and even social media have changed the sport from a caricature of inactivity — a metaphor for blind, ineffectual waiting in subpar conditions — into an action-packed, fish-producing winter pastime. There's way more moving around now, meaning some. And exciting gadgets threaten the sport's fundamental sad conceit by actually telling you if anything's down there.

So instead of the movie “Grumpy Old Men,” I tell people to imagine zipping across a frozen lake on a snowmobile, an ice shack so warm you may take your coat off, and a real-life video game on a sonar screen where winning leads to celebrations at whatever pokes through the hole. Imagine fishy photos — true Instagram bait — and maybe dinner to take home.

Add warm snacks, jokes, stories and fortifying beverages, and suddenly ice fishing doesn't sound so bad.

And today we'll be fishing with Clay Groves, a licensed New Hampshire fishing guide, obsessive fisherman — he once went on a quest to catch and eat all 48 legal species in the state, and host of [“Fish Nerds,”](#) a podcast that brings together — “codifies?” — people interested in fish, fishing and eating fish, covering everything from biology to cooking. A former science teacher, Mr. Groves hosts like a cross between Click & Clack of “Car Talk” and Bill Nye the Science Guy. His campaign against lead tackle and data-backed

discussions about the gentlest way to hold fish lean toward an informed, hunter-hippie vibe similar to Steven Rinella’s Netflix show “MeatEater.”



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So Mike and I are at Silver Lake, in Madison, for the same reasons people listen to the podcast: community within an often lonely sport, a few laughs, and to steal as many fishing tips as possible.

I suspect what prevents people from trying ice fishing, besides its reputation for being unpleasant, boring and dangerous, is not realizing that guides exist. A guided trip — like a nature tour mixed with a deep-sea fishing charter, minus the seasickness — helps anglers safely visit spots and does away with the guesswork and hassle of gear and bait.

At 164 feet, Silver Lake is one of New Hampshire’s deepest bodies of water,

and has no reported invasive aquatic plant species. Once we arrive at the lake's public boat launch, Mr. Groves scoots up the snow-covered boat ramp on his snowmobile, says hello, and ferries us one-by-one to the fishing spot.

We zoom over foot-thick ice covered in packed, crusty snow. The cloudless sky is Windex blue. I'm glad I remembered my sunscreen, sunglasses and face mask. Mount Chocorua crowds us from the north. Mr. Groves points out spots on shore — where E. E. Cumming's treehouse was, where Grover Cleveland partied. A solitary blip becomes our destination, a hut fashioned from a pop-up camping trailer, converted with plywood sides and solar panels.

As I hop off the sled, the insulating snow gobbles all sound. The light out here, amplified by the grand plaza of ice, is extreme: somewhere between white sand beach and operating room. As Mr. Groves goes to pick up Mike and the snowmobile fades, I realize something miraculous: there's no wind today. Ice fishing is always fun, sometimes because of enthusiastic weather. But on days like this, when besides the occasional distant whine of a gas auger or the ice pinging as it thickens — a sound like whales playing laser tag beneath you — when you're a half mile from anything that even could make a noise, the silence feels almost holy, cloistered as one is on the pop-up remoteness of a newly frozen lake. For three months New Hampshire essentially gains more than 250 square miles — roughly a quarter the size of Rhode Island — of flat, undeveloped, public space.

Fish out of water

Seat cushions and propane heater welcome us inside, as does a bearded man in unironic Carhartt: Vinnie Maturro, another Fish Nerds guide. Solar-powered Christmas lights hang on “simulated hard wood” walls. There's an iPhone charger and the floor has holes in it.

Ice fishing gear usually looks ridiculous or cool or both: The rods are two feet long. The augers are lawn mower engines or cordless power drills attached to

3-foot corkscrewed blades. (“The hardest part of ice fishing used to be making a hole in the ice,” Mr. Groves says.) Stubby computers in zippered lunch coolers help find fish. And outside, Mr. Groves sets those rustic Rube Goldberg devices, tip-ups.

But our focus will be jigging from the warmth of the shack, targeting larger, generally tougher-to-catch lake trout.

We load neon jigs with dead smelt, plop them through black holes and check our fish-finders with the head-sideways, looking-one-place-but-moving-something-important-with-your-hand-somewhere-else self-seriousness of arthroscopic surgeons. It’s so cool.

Within minutes, I mark a fish. But honestly when the image translates to machine-gun tugging on my rod it feels the way all bites do: like nothing short of divine intervention. I set the hook. My rod bows and jerks like a horse tossing its head. I don’t suspect a monster, but the vibe among spectators is cautiously thrilled. Through the hole comes a sleek, foot-long lake trout, flapping angrily in this strange resistance-less vacuum and hearing the unfamiliar vibrations of human cheering.

It’s stunning. A dark back glistening as if shellacked, Dijon speckles. Critical, predatory eyes question our whole enterprise and inquire after our intentions. A toothy jaw mouths piscine curses or prayers.

Mr. Groves produces a gag tape measure that says the fish is 25 inches. We snap a photo. This slow-growing, native apex predator well below the legal 18-inch minimum can reach 3 feet. I tend to release all lakers. The real battle in catch-and-release fishing is sometimes between the desire to get the fish back in the water and the urge to keep marveling at its beauty. This basically being outer space for it, I think of how long I’d enjoy a moonwalk without a spacesuit and cradle the fish back through the hole.

Anglers are getting better at handling fish, but catch-and-release fishing is

still recreational abduction: validation-seeking, insecure people like myself bothering fish just to confirm primal skills long rendered unnecessary. Fishing encourages a full-bodied communion with the water, though. So spending free time being humbled and outsmarted by creatures we supposedly evolved past can instill a sense of connection, modesty and reverence.

That's another reason I enjoy Mr. Groves' podcast. He feels like a voice of reason, reminding anglers that prized and much-coddled bass have only even been in New Hampshire since the 1800s, and that yucky fish like lampreys are native and ecologically important. He rails against New Hampshire's biggest ice-fishing derby not offering a catch-and-release option, while happily frying up invasive species. Fishing both allows for and often demands this bespoke morality, called upon as frequently as pliers and variable even among anglers on the same trip. So Mr. Groves, who learned the biological history of every species he goes after — when they came to the state, who stocked them — has enough information to serve as something like a moral guide as well.

The rest of our morning will prove just how lucky my catch was. Mike gets two bites, but can't set the hook. Mr. Groves switches between patiently teaching and playful teasing, asking distracting questions about working with dinosaurs.

“So when you're digging for these things, and you find a bone, is that like fishing?”

“Oh it's very similar,” Mike says, “You don't just dig randomly, you prospect.”

They discuss the nearby Ossipee Ring Dike, a geological formation created by an ancient volcano, and how there's never been a dinosaur found in the state.

“So there's an opportunity to be the first one,” Mr. Groves says.

“Yeah let me focus on setting a hook first,” Mike says.

Mr. Groves’ approach to fishing is somewhere between a Zen koan and “Catch-22.”

“I believe fishing should be fun, so it’s not about the fish, it’s about having a great time. But I don’t like fishing — I like catching fish. That’s the fun part. Clients are always having a great time. I’m not having fun till I catch a fish. So the whole approach is: how much fun can we have while we’re doing this.”

One takes the bait

The holes stop producing bites. Time to move. We check “cusk traps.” Cusk are also called burbot, eelpout or “poor man’s lobster” for their flaky, sweet fillets somewhere between cod and catfish. Some lakes allow anglers to set six simple “cusk lines” for 24 hours unattended. The joy of sitting around a wood stove with beer and chili knowing that at that moment you’re technically fishing is one of my favorite parts of fishing in the state. And pulling up each line is like starting the day with six scratch tickets.

Mr. Groves drills a hole beside the first frozen-over trap.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I ask.

He takes a coat hanger fashioned into a long hook and reaches into the new hole, pulling the line through.

“Then you just cut the line, pull it through and retie it,” Mr. Groves says, “Cusk don’t care if the line is pretty.”

Mike and I groan, thinking back on all the time and energy we’ve wasted chipping out iced-over cusk lines with crowbars. The lines are empty, but we just got something amazing to take home with us.

We move again for one final attempt, switching species to target rainbow

trout. Our time has been part fishing lesson, part natural history tour, part entertainment. But we'd still like some fillets to take home.

Mr. Groves directs us to a spot in a foot-and-a-half of water. We jig, with a baited tip-up 15 feet away. It seems like an insane place to fish, another of his pranks. He urges us to watch the holes.

Sure enough, a shadow flutters past, gone like a horror movie monster before my eyes can focus.

Minutes later my tip-up flag shoots up. I race over, sliding to the hole on my knees like a snow-suited Springsteen. Up comes a 15 inch rainbow trout. Fat, iridescently pink and absurdly pretty. A stocked species Mr. Groves is happy to remind us is originally from California, it will be coming home with us.

We jig for another 20 minutes, and then turn toward the chilly gloom of our waiting car.

Ice fishing leaves an experience afterglow, a pleasant, tingly emotional windburn. There's a high, from the logistical boldness it requires, the smallness it engenders. A mystical appreciation. You've just done a wild, silly thing, there's adrenaline and calm, and now your day could never be the same.

This is the very real harvest us weirdos who love ice fishing seek to leave with as much as photos or dinner: this little doggy bag of blessedness. Because a day on the hardwater replicates being alive like nothing else: it's sometimes successful, sometimes unpleasant, always beautiful. Often you find yourself standing there, implausibly upright in a gorgeous, uncaring place, taking it for granted. Yelling out petty triumphs or failures. Or enjoying the peace. Then, just when you're figuring things out, it's time to go.

Stepping off the ice always feels like just having lived a whole, strange little life. And who wouldn't want to try that, at least once.

Steve Macone is a writer and comedian; he is on Twitter @Steve_Macone.

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