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Opicka a top panfish angler

Jerry Opicka has fished for most of his 68 years, and more times than not the target he's after fits just right in a pan.

Sure, he's no stranger to muskies and salmon, but give him a school of bluegills or perch and there's no second-guessing where his line will fall.

The former president of the Wisconsin Fishing Club is considered by many to be one of the best panfish anglers in the state. He says now is the time to get out for some furious action.

"But safety is the first thing to consider," he said. "It can be real dangerous, especially now with the ice we do have having a coat of snow on it. That insulates it and it takes a lot longer to get good ice."

Opicka has gone through the ice seven times and knows how to make it out when it happens.

"It's best not to go in at all," he said. "I carry a spud when I go out so I can test the ice thickness. I always carry a GPS, too, because if fog rolls in on the ice, you can get turned around quickly. Don't forget rope, ice picks of some sort and a throwable cushion, too. They have all helped me out."

If you do go in, he said to attempt to roll out, and to always go back the way you came.

"Even when you get on ice that will hold you," he said,



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"Keep rolling a while until you get far from the hole. Your weight is more evenly distributed that way. The key thing is to not panic."

Once he knows the ice will support him, and some holes are drilled, his fishing locator gets fired up before any lines are wet.

"They can be critical," he said. "I've been using a locator for a long time. When you are fishing deep for perch out in Madison, it's a must. There's just so much water to cover. But, I do believe a locator can hurt you, too. If you are fishing in shallow water, the fish can hear the ticking from the transducer. I've experimented and it really is the truth."

Opicka, of Colgate, said his favorite lakes are those in the Madison area.

"Monona Bay and the Cherokee Marsh are both producing good numbers of fish right now," he said. "They freeze fast, too, which makes them a great

FYI

Jerry Opicka will be giving a seminar at Calhoun Station in New Berlin for a Wisconsin Fishing Club meeting at 7 p.m. on Dec 22. Cost for nonmembers is \$3. For more information, go to www.wisconsinfishingclub.com

spot to hit for early ice."

Around here, Opicka considers Pike and Keesus as his go-to lakes for perch.

"Keesus has some nice perch in it," he said. "But access can be a problem. I like fishing for them in the deepest part of the lake on that body of water. But on Pike, the perch action seems to be better in shallower water off weedlines."

For crappies, Fox Lake is one of his favorites.

Regardless of the species of panfish Opicka is after, he likes to start out with soft plastic as his "meat."

"You don't need to have wax worms or spikes," he said. "It's hard to be a thin piece of white plastic like those on the end of a tube jig. The bigger panfish will really go after it."

If conditions are real tough, he adds live bait to the hook.

"I opt for spikes over wax worms," he said. "The spikes hold up better than wax worms so you don't have to re-bait as



Submitted photo

Jerry Opicka, considered to be one of the best pan-fish anglers in the state, has fallen through ice seven times and knows how to make it out.

much. I'll tip my jig with three to five spikes, depending on how the bite is going."

He also goes with the lightest line he can manage.

"I like 1- or 2-pound test at the heaviest," he said. "The lighter the better. It can be hard to tie it out on the ice in the wind and when you're cold, so I rig up several rods with different jigs so they're ready to go."

(Dan Durbin writes a weekly outdoors column for The Freeman. Call Durbin at 644-7940, or e-mail him at ddurbin@bast-durbin.com if you have a story idea.)