

# Diehard

## Practical and perhaps life-saving tips for fishing in extreme weather conditions

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

The air temperature was around 26 degrees as my clients and I launched my boat on December 7, 2014. At that point over half of Lake St. Clair was frozen over, and the crazy few of us who still sought muskies despite the frigid conditions were left with only a couple of areas to fish. Still, clients John Cowan and Craig Sterling and I landed six muskies, with Craig catching an absolute monster.

Although this may seem wild to most, ice-up musky fishing can be some of the best fishing of the season and offers a chance at the heaviest fish of the year. Super-late fall fishing provides some amazing opportunities, but has a unique set of obstacles. The level of preparation required is 10 times that of a summer day. It is important that you be equipped to fish effectively and remain safe. Once you catch a musky that looks like it swallowed a beach ball you will know that the challenges were more than worth it!

### Your Vehicle

I know that you don't normally see a lot of articles that talk about having your tow vehicle prepared, but for this kind of fishing it is something that needs to be addressed. A shovel, de-icing salt and a tow strap should be in every vehicle.

You need a vehicle that has four-wheel drive. If you are using a truck, carry a couple of large sand bags in the bed for extra weight. I can't even tell you how many times I have watched guys launch their boat and were then not able to get their truck up the icy ramp. If you don't have the ability to add weight to the back of your vehicle, with things like sand bags or people sitting on the tailgate, your only option becomes putting your boat back on the trailer and using its weight to give your back tires enough traction to get up the ramp. Obviously this means you will not be going fishing that day.

The shovel comes in handy when light snow falls overnight. Even if there is no precipitation, when people use the ramp the water dripping from their trailer has a Zamboni-effect on the ramp, turning it quickly into a sheet of ice. In that case the de-icing salt is invaluable.

If you launch your boat and are not able to get your vehicle back up the ramp due to extreme ice, there are a couple things you can try. First of all, the ice on the ramp normally goes from the waterline up the ramp, while the area under the waterline remains ice-free. Do not be afraid to back the rear tires of your truck into the water a couple feet (while making sure you don't put your exhaust completely under water) and use the solid pavement under the waterline to get a little momentum going up the ramp. If that still doesn't work, your last option will be the tow strap — buy one that is longer than the length of the incline of the ramp. You may need to attach two tow ropes to one another. By attaching a tow rope to the front of your vehicle and then to another vehicle that is on flat ground, above the crest of the ramp, you should be able to overcome any ramp condition.

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# Fishing

## In The Boat

Now that you have your boat in the water successfully, the next thing you need to worry about is cold weather supplies for your boat. Warm clothes are very important but keep in mind you and your clothes will be getting wet. Therefore, make sure your clothes are not only warm but waterproof.

In addition there are several items that make fishing more comfortable and safe. The first would be some rubber pads to stand on when the boat deck gets icy; I prefer imitation pavers made of rubber. The rubber seems to really keep the ice off and because they are flexible you can shake them out as you would a rug. If you don't want to go that route you can bring along some standard salt. If you use non-treated salt (without chemicals), you can put it on your carpet without any damage. Yes, you will have to hose out your boat at some point but the carpet will be fine. Anyone who has run boats for any length of time knows that standard boat carpet in most quality boats is more or less indestructible.

The next thing you need in your boat is some de-icer. There are a lot of different brands on the market but I really like to use standard 20-below windshield washer fluid to keep reels running in subfreezing temperatures. It isn't the best for the reel, but considering these trips will be the last ones of the season and

Extreme late season fishing may mean you'll have to deal with ice on the water — but the rewards can be huge, as demonstrated by the author.

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## Diehard Fishing

you should be having them cleaned after the season, it is not a big deal.

Fueled or chemical hand-warmers not only work on hands, but can be used in compartments to keep them warm for gear, and for de-icing. A large rubber band can hold hand-warmers on reels to thaw them.

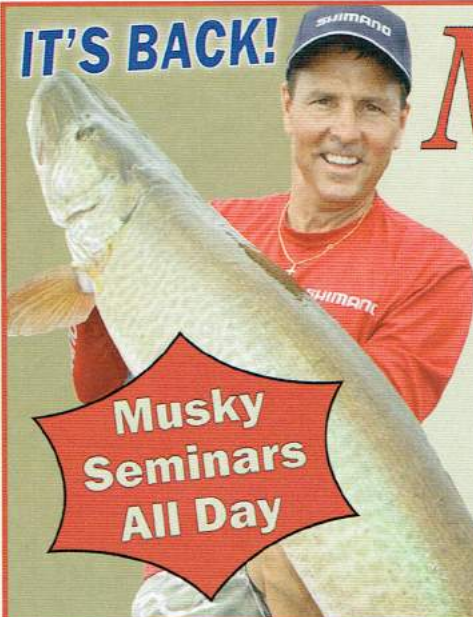
A portable heater is something you shouldn't be without. I prefer to use a propane camping model and always carry extra propane containers. They can be used to warm your hands — especially after releasing a fish — and to thaw your reels when they lock up. By placing the heater between the boat seats you can normally hang the rods over the heater with the reels about seven to 15 inches above the flame, which will thaw them in a few minutes. When the conditions are this bad I like to have everyone in the boat set up with three rods each, all with the same lure, so they can rotate between rods, hopefully getting 10 to 30 minutes out of each before they need to be thawed.

The next necessity is a propane torch which will come in handy when things freeze up. Use the torch to thaw out your trolling motor housing, and metal rod holders if you're trolling.

## Your Boat

There are a couple of important things you need to check on your boat before

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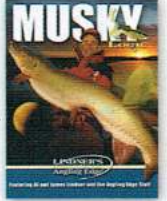
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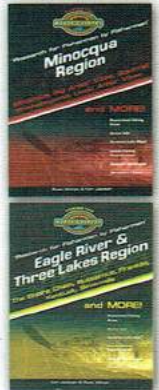
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## Diehard Fishing

you head into extremely cold fishing conditions to ensure you don't damage your rig. First, check your lower unit oil. If there is water in your lower unit and it freezes, you are looking at some serious repairs.

Next, make sure that all of your batteries are in top shape. Cold weather is much tougher on batteries than warm weather and they'll wear down much quicker than you'd expect. If you

are running pumps and graphs all day on a weak cranking battery, you may not have enough charge to crank your motor over at the end of the day. Always load-test all your batteries to make sure they are in top working order before you head out on those year-end trips. If they are under par, change them out.

It is always a good idea to keep some marine anti-freeze aboard. I do not run it through my pumps unless I have to, but it can save you in a pinch.

Lastly, make sure that you put your boat plug in before you leave. While you drive to the lake the trickle of water inside your boat will freeze the boat plug hole shut. That means you will have to start your morning trying to thaw the plug hole with your fingers — not fun!

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### Equipment

Be prepared to break stuff! It's just an unfortunate side-effect of ultra-cold fishing so when it happens, don't let it destroy your day. Having said that, there are a few reels that hold up better in the cold than others. Avoid reels with a lot of plastic in them because in extreme cold plastic gets very brittle and can break. A basic rule of thumb is that any reel under \$300 has a lot of plastic parts in it. My favorite is the Shimano Calcutta TE 400 which has almost all-metal parts and holds up to cold very well. When they start to freeze-up they don't engage and start reeling, so simply hit the butt of the rod on the deck of the boat with the rod pointing toward the sky — the reel will engage every time.

When the air temperature gets below 27 degrees all reels' levelwinds start failing, so you need to use reels without levelwinds such as the Shimano Trinidad.

Another option when the weather is this brutal is to troll. You are better off to spool up with monofilament since it does not pick up water, like braid. This will vastly limit the amount of water that comes into the reel when you reel in the baits and will help keep your reels ice-free. When trolling, reel up a couple inches of line every few minutes to ensure the reel is working and that the line

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is not frozen in place inside the guides or the reel itself.

Lastly, sharpen all your hooks before you leave for the lake. Given that feeding windows are extremely short but the chances are good for a giant during late fall, you must make every bite count. Sharp hooks are an absolute must and it's always easier and more comfortable to do this before you get to the lake.

### Leaving The Lake

After your wintery adventure there are a few extremely important things to keep your boat prepared. When you pull the boat from the water, keep it on an incline with the motor lower than the bow. Often times this can be on the ramp itself. From there trim the outboard, and kicker if you used it, all the way down to let all of the water drain out. This will normally take five to 10 minutes. Next start your motor — out of the water — while it's trimmed down, and let it run for three to five seconds to blow any leftover water out of the exhaust. Normally you will see water come out for a second or two. I usually repeat this process twice just to make sure all the water is out.

Next, take the plug out and let the angle of the boat drain all the water out of the rig. After all of this is complete put the plug back in so it can't freeze, tilt the motors up, put on the transom saver, and you can leave knowing that your boat is ready for the next day.

I know this whole concept seems crazy, but this is the reason why the few of us who brave these conditions normally have the lakes to ourselves. It's the dichard's way of life. And trust me when I say that as soon as you catch a big musky when the water temperature is below 40 degrees you will see just how monstrously fat fish can be at this time of year. From that moment on you will be a believer.

For more about Field Editor Spencer Berman, visit [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com)



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