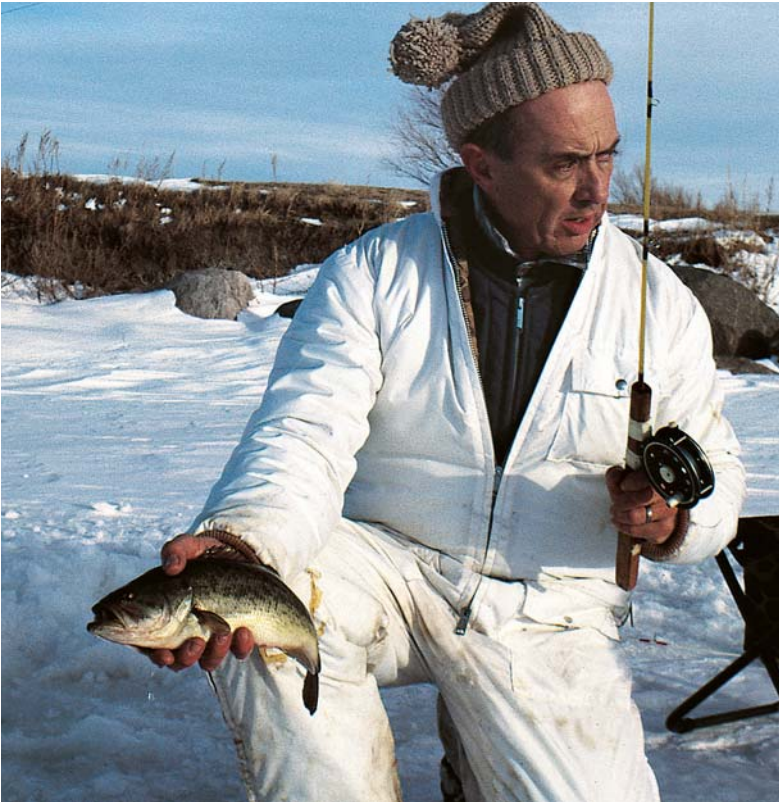


A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



CRAIG BHIRLE

Largemouth bass

Winter Lethargy

Things you don't often see during winter in North Dakota: suntans, flip flops and warmwater fish species caught through the ice.

In winter, ice anglers mostly target the state's coolwater fish species, including yellow perch, walleye and northern pike. Like trout, a coldwater species, these fish remain active when area waters ice over for the winter.

Conversely, warmwater species, such largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, white bass and catfish, slow way down, doing as little as necessary to make it through the leanest, coldest months. "You could say their internal furnaces are not running on high in winter," said Randy Hiltner, Game and Fish Department northeast district fisheries supervisor, Devils Lake. "Their metabolism slows down and they just don't feed as much."

White bass in Devils Lake, for instance, likely aren't wasting energy by chasing minnows, but rather eating from the incredible – and easier to catch – scud menu the lake is noted for.

Biologists can see this period of lethargy by looking at fish scales, which read like growth rings on a tree. In winter, white bass scale rings are packed closely together, indicating little growth.

Fish are adapted to optimums, said Scott Gangl, Department fisheries management section leader. In summer, for instance, when waters warm, trout become stressed, while bass thrive. In winter, the opposite is true.

"We don't know a lot about fish behavior under the ice other than warmwater species slow way down and likely don't go actively searching for food," Gangl said. "So by not being very active, they can reduce their stress level."

Every winter, though, ice anglers catch the occasional white bass, largemouth or other warmwater species. "Likely what's going on is the angler just happens to put the bait right in front of the fish, and the fish could be biting more out of natural reaction than because it's hungry," Gangl said.

These chance encounters with warmwater species may also have something to do with winter fishing techniques and where fish are hanging out under the ice. "The majority of ice fishermen are putting their bait on or near the bottom, and it just may be that many of these warmwater species are suspended somewhere in the water column," Gangl said.

Then again, who knows for certain?

"It's difficult enough to study fish during the open water months, let alone trying to figure out fish behavior when lakes are frozen," Gangl said.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.