
Ice Dangers and Safety

Frozen Water in winter

Deep Creek Lake is a different world in the winter. Anglers sit over drilled holes in the frozen lake to fish through the ice while others may venture onto the ice to wind ski, ice skate, cross-country ski, or just to explore this frozen environment. Each year however, there are recreational ice-related accidents and fatalities on ice-covered bodies of water throughout the United States. Often these tragedies and accidents are a result of poor judgment or poor decision-making based upon inadequate information. No ice is safe. Anyone who decides to go out onto a frozen body of water must make a personal decision to do so, realizing that there is a degree of risk associated with this choice. There are many factors that can affect ice quality, strength and thickness. For these reasons, the Department of Natural Resources does not support any “hard, fast rules” about ice safety. It is crucial that anglers, and others considering recreating on the ice, take individual responsibility in evaluating the quality and soundness of the ice on the lake.

Fast Facts

- Never attempt to go out on the ice until there is at least 4 inches of clear, solid ice.
- New ice is usually stronger than old ice. As ice ages, the bonds between the crystals decay, making it more dangerous and weaker even if melting has not occurred.
- Wind velocity influences ice formation. Light winds speed up the formation of ice. Strong winds force water from beneath the ice and can decay the edges of the ice.
- Snow can insulate ice and keep it strong. It can also insulate it and keep it from freezing. Snow can also hide cracked, weak ice and open water areas.
- Slush is a danger sign. It indicates that ice is no longer freezing from the bottom and indicates weak or deteriorating ice.
- Ice can change with the surrounding climate conditions. Temperature, precipitation (such as snow, sleet, rain), wind speed, ice age, water depth, and water quality are all factors that affect ice strength and thickness.
- Never check ice thickness or attempt to rescue a victim of ice failure alone.

Ice Safety Tips

Check ice quantity and quality: Before venturing out onto the ice one should determine if the ice is safe for the proposed activity. During early and late winter ice is most likely to be unstable.

Fluctuation above and below freezing will not allow the ice to freeze consistently throughout, thus there is a high probability of weak spots. Because Deep Creek Lake is a stream and spring fed lake there are some areas that do not freeze. Be aware of stream inlets and outlets. Ice can be highly variable in thickness due to the erosive action of underlying current. Be suspicious of gray, dark or porous spots in the ice as these may be soft areas. Ice is generally strongest where it is hard and blue or clear. Snow cover is deceptive and makes evaluating the ice cover difficult. Never assume ice under snow is safe. Test the thickness of the ice before venturing out. Use an ice chisel or even a cordless ¼ inch drill with a 6-inch or longer bit to cut a hole in the ice and measure its thickness. Don't assume that the ice thickness from yesterday is the same as today. There should be a minimum of at least 4" of new clear ice for travel on foot and ice fishing.

Plan ahead: Once it has been established that the ice is of the appropriate condition for the planned activity, certain safety measures should be taken in case of an accident. Always leave information about your plans with someone. Tell them where you intend to fish or walk and when you plan to return. Fish or walk with someone, children should ALWAYS be supervised on the ice. Wear a life vest under your winter gear. Carry along a couple of large nails, ice picks or wooden handle screwdrivers (they float) and some nylon rope or a walking stick in case of an emergency. The nails or ice picks can be used to pull yourself back onto the surface of the ice if you fall through and the nylon rope or walking stick can be used in the rescue of another. Use an ice spud bar or an auger to test the ice ahead of you. Never venture out onto the ice after dark, as it is more difficult to see if danger is ahead. Wear appropriate clothing. Wool in contrast with cotton will retain heat when wet.

Know what to do if the unthinkable happens: Should you break through the ice, try not to panic. Remember to turn toward the direction you came from – towards the ice that supported you. Use the nails, ice picks, or your hands to gain hold on the unbroken surface of the ice, and advance by kicking your feet. If the ice breaks, maintain your position and slide forward again. Once you are out of the water and are lying on the ice, don't stand! Roll away from the point where you broke through until you are on solid ice. This sounds much easier to do than it is. If you witness someone else break through the ice, keep calm and think out a solution. Don't run up to the hole. Use the nylon rope, walking stick, or some item on shore to throw or extend to the victim to pull them out of the water. Be creative, even jumper cables or skis can be used to pull someone out of the water. If you can't rescue the victim immediately, call 911. Get medical assistance for the victim as soon as possible.

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Seven days advance notice is requested.

