

## Military Youth Ice Fishing Jamboree

What lurks in the cold, dark depths of Hillberg Lake near Anchorage, Alaska? With an average depth of 13 feet and a width of just 200 yards, most people would think there's probably not much. The bald eagle perched overhead was there for something, wasn't he? Throw 130 kids and 60 parents with nearly 150 fishing jigs onto the frozen lake, and you'll quickly learn that landlocked Chinook salmon and rainbow trout lurk beneath the ice.

And kids catching salmon and trout make for some pretty awesome smiles. Fourteen U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service staff partnered with 41 volunteers from Joint Base Elmendorf Richardson to create this exciting experience for 3 Cub Scout troops.

Our adventure began with the hum of eight gas-powered ice augers drilling 200 holes in the ice before sunrise, quickly turning the lake into Swiss cheese. At 9:30 am, we gathered 190 kids and parents into the Hillberg Lake ski chalet, and taught them how to safely fish on ice, what they might catch, fishing regulations, and of course, the exciting careers offered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. By 10 am, the youth had their new ice fishing rod in hand, and eagerly dropped their hooks into the water. Though the bite wasn't hot, enough folks were catching fish to keep excitement levels high. The two warm up shelters we set up on the lake were scarcely used! Thirty fish were caught by the Scouts and their siblings, some released and the rest destined for the frying pan. An underwater video camera added to the excitement – the screen revealed lots of fish just below the 2.5 feet of ice.

Our goal was to excite a life-long interest in fishing and 85% of the youth indicated they would fish again this year. We let them keep their new fishing rod; our only request was that they bug their parents to go fishing again. Fishermen are strongly connected with nature, and support one of the Nation's largest conservation efforts, the [Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration Program](#), through license sales and the excise taxes they pay on sporting goods. Our recruitment and retention efforts from ice fishing will contribute to this conservation effort as well as connect children and their families with Alaska's abundant natural resources.

