

Ice fishing on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Mimi Thomas

Have you considered ice fishing this winter? There are plenty of opportunities for you on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. You may have to overcome some access difficulties to reach some of the lakes, but once you begin fishing, the first bite from a big fish makes the effort worthwhile. Many of the more popular ice fishing lakes are sometimes hard to access without 4-wheel drive or a snowmachine, and you may have to walk, ski or snowshoe to certain lakes because snowmachine use is prohibited in those areas. (Copies of snowmachine and fishing regulations can be picked up at Refuge headquarters on Ski Hill Rd.)

Waters on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge contain salmon, trout, grayling, and char. Many of my patrols on the Refuge have enlightened me as to some of the more popular places to catch these fish. My travels bring me into contact with many people that are out and about doing their best to catch the “big one.” One of the most happening places seems to be Skilak Lake near the outlet, where it flows into the lower Kenai River. Recently I have talked with several people who have been fortunate enough to bring in good sized rainbow and lake trout from this location. The limit for rainbow trout in Skilak Lake is one per day and one in possession.

Hidden Lake is also one of the more popular ice fishing spots. The lake is located about 3 miles from the east entrance of Skilak Loop Road. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult to access the lake if Skilak Loop Road hasn't been plowed. The limit and possession for Rainbow Trout from Hidden Lake is five per day, and only one 20 inches or more.

Off-road vehicles, such as 3- and 4-wheelers, are not permitted anywhere on the refuge, including on lake and river ice. Licensed highway vehicles are permitted on Hidden, Engineer, Kelly, Peterson, and Watson Lakes for ice fishing purposes only, and you must enter and exit these lakes via existing boat ramps. Snowmachines are prohibited within the Skilak Loop Special Management Area, except on these same lakes for ice fishing purposes only. The boat launches at Upper and Lower Skilak Lake campgrounds may be used for snowmachine access to Skilak Lake.

Swanson River Road and Swan Lake Road are well

used in the winter to access the smaller lakes in the area. Swanson River Road runs north from the Sterling Highway at the Sterling Elementary school. Near the end of Swanson River Road you can turn right on Swan Lake Road which will take you another 10-11 miles to the east, before reaching a locked gate. Along both of these roads there are many lakes that are used for ice fishing. Some of the most popular along Swanson River Road there are Forest, Breeze, Dolly Varden and Rainbow, and along Swan Lake Road we have Fish, Doghouse, Ice, Canoe, Campfire, Willow, and Paddle. I may have missed a few lakes, but that doesn't mean there are no fish in them—you just never know until you try. Please remember that snowmachine use is prohibited for accessing lakes within the Swanson River and Swan Lake canoe systems, because these areas are set aside for non-motorized uses, such as dog mushing, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing. All lakes and ponds in the Swanson River drainage have a limit and possession of rainbow trout of five per day, and only one 20 inches or more.

With the beginning of a new year, all anglers 16 years of age or older are required to have on their person a current (2000) fishing license. Fishing licenses purchased in 1999 are no longer valid. Ice fishing with two closely attended lines is legal, provided only one hook or artificial lure is used on each line. The use of live bait is prohibited.

There are special regulations for large rainbow/steelhead trout. The yearly limit for rainbow/steelhead trout harvested in combination from Cook Inlet and its freshwater drainages (north of a line from Cape Douglas to Point Adam) is two trout 20 inches or more in length. Furthermore, all anglers who are sport fishing for rainbow/steelhead trout are required to maintain a current harvest record on the back of their regular sport fishing license, and harvest information should be recorded immediately upon landing a rainbow/steelhead trout 20 inches or more in length.

OK, now that you've caught your fish, here is my favorite recipe for poached trout. (As a law enforcement person, it's hard for me to recommend anything “poached,” but this is still a great recipe!)

(Legally-Caught) Poached Trout Recipe

- 1 ½ lb. frozen trout
- 14 oz chicken broth
- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 1 tbl red wine vinegar
- 4 lemon wedges
- dash garlic powder
- dash pepper

Wash the fish but do not thaw. Wrap in cheese cloth. Combine broth, vinegar, pepper and garlic powder in a pot or skillet and bring to boil. Reduce heat to a simmer and gently lower the wrapped fish into the liquid. Poach, carefully turning after 3 minutes. Cover and poach for an additional five to seven minutes or until flesh flakes easily. Serve with melted butter and lemon wedges. ENJOY!

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