

## Hidden Lake ice fishing adventure

by *Chis Johnson*

I am going to tell a story on myself in the hopes that it may educate others and maybe save someone from going in the drink.

Last March we had been experiencing a warming spell for several weeks. The snow was leaving fast; most of the lakes on the Kenai Peninsula were snow free and had standing water on the ice. I was on patrol in the area of Hidden Lake about an hour or so before dark. Hidden Lake is located in the central Kenai Peninsula off of Skilak Loop Road within the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The Lake is approximately 2000 acres and has a developed campground on the south end of the lake. The fishing on Hidden Lake is primarily known for the good-sized lake trout and kokanee.

I spotted a group of fisherman with whom I had had previous encounters regarding illegal methods of fishing, i.e., using live fish for bait and using too many fishing lines. In Alaska it is illegal to use live fish for bait while sport fishing in fresh water. This is to prevent introduction of non-native species of fish and fish diseases into our lakes and rivers. It is also illegal to use sport-caught fish for bait, dead or alive, although the head, tail, fins and viscera of legally caught sport fish can be so used. For ice fishing only two lines may be used through the ice. Additional lines may be used for fishing for pike and burbot in some waters, but not on Hidden Lake.

I set up surveillance on the suspects in the campground. I could see that they were preparing to go ice fishing, as they were loading ice fishing poles and an auger into the back of a truck. They loaded up and headed north on the lake. The ice on the lake was about two feet thick in most places. Six inches of strong ice will support a passenger vehicle and eight inches is the recommended thickness to support a pick-up truck. I followed on foot, sticking to cover along the lake shore so my surveillance would not be compromised.

Approximately a mile down the lake I located a tip-up set up. A tip-up is an ice fishing device that is designed to sit over the top of a hole in the ice. It has a base that sits over the hole and a spool of fishing line dropped through the hole. A flag is attached to the spool so that when a fish takes the bait, the flag pops

up and alerts the fishermen that they have a bite. The suspect fishermen were a couple miles further down the lake. I pulled up the line on the tip-up and found a live fish hooked in the back for bait. I dropped the line back into the hole and set the tip-up back up. I then hid in the woods near the tip-up to wait for the suspects to return to the tip-up.

Right at dusk the suspects' truck stops at the tip-up and one of the guys starts pulling up the line. I jump out of my hiding spot and identify myself as "Game Warden" and tell them that they are busted. As I said before, these guys were known to me. They proceed to tell me that the tip-up is not theirs but another guy's that is known to use live bait on occasion. I asked them why they were pulling up the tip-up then. They told me they did not like the other guy cheating, and they were going to mess with his line. I told them that it was illegal to mess with other peoples' fishing or hunting activities.

It was dark by now and I could see a set of headlights towards the north end of the lake headed towards our location. I told the guys to get going, and I would catch up to them later. I dropped the tip-up line back in the water, and hid along the shore again. About ten minutes later, a second truck stops and the driver gets out of the truck and starts pulling up the line on the tip-up. I again jump out and identify myself as "Game Warden" and tell him that he is busted. The guy who I am also acquainted with tells me that the tip-up isn't his but that it belongs to the first guy that pulled up the tip-up. He does not know that I had talked to the other guy. He finally admits that the tip-up is his, and I give him a ticket for using live bait.

We then all head back to the campground. I pretend to leave, but continue my surveillance of the suspects, unknown to them. A short time later I watch both suspects head back out on the lake. This time I decide to follow them in my truck with the lights off so they didn't know that I am following them. It's pitch dark and difficult to see with the naked eye. I am driving with a night vision monocular and can see fairly well. I spot both suspects at different locations on the lake and decide to contact the vehicle farthest to the south on the lake.

I am focusing on the suspect vehicle down the lake and forget where I am on the lake. I know that there are some areas on the lake that tend to have thin ice, particularly areas where there are dark-colored rocks just under the surface of the water. You probably know what happened next. I hit one of those areas of thin ice. I knew immediately what I did. I waited a few seconds for the vehicle to stabilize. I grabbed a flashlight and looked out the open driver's side window. I could see three or four feet of open water.

I crawled to the passenger side and found that the running boards were flush with the ice. I tested the ice, and found it strong enough to support my weight. I got out of the vehicle and surveyed the situation I was in. My truck was approximately 100 yards from shore. The body of the truck was supported on a large rock. All four tires were over open water. Under the front tires was a steep drop off about 20 or more feet. I emptied my truck out in case the truck went in farther and walked back to the campground, where another

officer met me and gave me a ride home.

The next day I gathered up equipment and help. One of our maintenance men Al O'Guinn, my boss Jim Hall and I headed out to Hidden Lake to retrieve my patrol truck. On the way I received a call on my cell phone from one of the guys to whom I had written the ticket for using live bait. I thought he was going to gloat over me sticking my truck in the lake, adding insult to injury. He asked me if I had sunk my truck in the lake. I told him that I had, and I was headed out to retrieve it. He asked me if I could take a look at his truck too; he had sunk his truck that same night in a different part of the lake. With a little thought, some hard work and a lot of prayer we were able to retrieve both vehicles.

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