

## **Field Note: Darkhouse Spear Fishing at Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge**

It's time for Field Notes, brought to you by the Montana Natural History Center.

You may not realize it, but one of the consistently coldest spots in Montana is not Glacier National Park or other mountainous reaches, but the plains of the extreme northeast corner. This sparsely-populated corner of the state averages more than fifty days a year with temperatures below zero. Only the hardiest Norwegian, Danish, and German homesteaders ended up calling this area home.

So what do folks in the ice box of Montana do for fun to get through the cold winter months?? Well, quite a crowd can sometimes be found at the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge, braving the elements in search of the wily Northern Pike. Here on the largest natural lake in eastern Montana, anglers pursue the ancient art of darkhouse spear fishing.

Darkhouse spearing is a simple sport in theory...you suspend a decoy into clear water through a large hole in the ice, and when a fish comes up to inspect the decoy, you spear it! The ice house must be totally dark inside so the spearer can see the fish from above.

Come along to the Refuge for a glimpse of how it works...

As you bundle up and head out across the thick ice of Medicine Lake (sometimes up to 3 feet thick!), you see clusters of small, windowless shacks scattered around the ice in shanty towns ...sometimes only a wisp of smoke from a chimney gives away that a darkhouse is occupied. (Most folks count the number of pick-ups in the parking area, and figure one vehicle equals one occupied house this is a solitary endeavor.) You pull your house along on a homemade sled until you find a promising spot.

But there's some work to be done before you start spearing, plus you need to warm up! So grab your auger and ice saw and cut out a 2 foot by 2 foot block of ice...and then pull that chunk up onto the ice with your ice tongs (this can take a good ½ hour when the ice is a foot thick, and considerably longer when it gets up toward 3 feet thick). Push your darkhouse over the hole, bank the sides with some snow to insulate and keep light out, and you're in business.

This 2 x 2 hole is your window into the underwater world of the northern pike. After stoking up your heater, you pull up a stool and peer into the murky, eerie, green depths... it's about 3 feet deep--perfect...you lower down a 6-8 inch brightly painted fish decoy until it dangles

a foot or so below the bottom of the ice...and you wait...ready with spear in hand. Minutes, and then hours go by without any action. As you stare down into the aquatic environment, it looks warm and inviting, especially compared to your crunchy, frigid station on top of the ice. Schools of minnows swim by, and extra-terrestrial-looking aquatic insects peddle and float by in the water column...fairy shrimp, waterboatmen.

Finally,,. just when you are starting to drift off, a shadow approaches, and there, nose to nose with your decoy, is a huge northern pike! You lower your spear to the water, ready to jab, but before you get a chance, the cautious fish moves off into the darkness...But just that glimpse of it was enough to get your blood pumping and adrenaline flowing--you wait at attention now! They really are down there, and they are hungry!

Northern Pike go by the scientific name of *Esox lucius*, which comes partly from the Greek word *lukos* meaning *wolf* - a reference to the predatory behavior of these fish. Pike are the largest and most voracious predator in our northern waters. The adults feed mainly on other fish as well as frogs, crayfish, mice, muskrats and ducklings. It is this predatory nature that makes it susceptible to human predators, when the pike comes in to investigate a decoy carved in the likeness of its favorite menu item!

Darkhouse spearing involves much watching and waiting, but has the unique fishing perk that it allows the angler to actually watch the fish approach the bait, so it can be much more engaging than traditional hook and line fishing. In fact, local anglers affectionately refer to the activity of staring down into that 2x2 ice hole as *watching the Norwegian Television*. And when the northern pikes are active, it certainly beats any show on the Discovery channel!

In a good winter, when the water is clear and the pike numbers and sizes are up, as many as 40 fish houses can be found on the Refuge and that is quite a population explosion in a county like Sheridan that averages 2.4 people per square mile. Stop in at the gas station in Medicine Lake and you will more than likely get some very recent statistics on the weights of fish speared on a given day. Five to eight pound northern pikes are common with the occasional 12-15 pounder speared. It is not unusual for an angler to spear a limit of 10 fish in a day.

So next time you see the Montana weather map, and that extra-cold thermocline dipping down into the northeast corner near Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge...think of those intrepid spearers bundling up and heading out to their darkhouses, to a window into the world of the northern pike.

This is Pat Jamieson for...*closing*...