

Kaleidoscope

Branched Oak contest puts Nebraska fishermen on ice

Fishermen from across the state gathered Saturday before sunrise on Branched Oak Lake northwest of Lincoln.

They came to celebrate the outdoors, see old friends, drink some beer and hopefully, catch some fish. For one winter's day, they formed their own community on the frozen lake and fished for the lunkers through holes in the ice.

The event that brought them together was the seventh annual Malcolm Gun Club's Ice Fishing Contest. This year's competition lured 98 two-man teams to vie for the \$500 prize offered for the day's largest fish. Each team paid \$25 for a chance at the grand prize and other cash awards for largest fish in six species categories.

In the end, Jeff Veskran, of Madison, netted the top prize with a 7.7-pound catfish that he caught with a minnow. His partner was Leroy Monroe of Lincoln.

But nobody who participated was a loser. Though the action was slow for most of the anglers, and some came away empty-handed, there were no disappointments.

The contestants came well-stocked with food and drink, bait and fishing tackle. Most were equipped with gas-powered augers to drill through the 18-inch thick ice. Others used hand drills to burrow 10-inch wide holes where they could drop their lines.

Ice houses — shelters constructed to protect the fishermen from the elements — made of wood, canvas, plastic, cardboard or a combination of materials, were towed onto the lake by hand or with snowmobiles. The procession of shelters and fishermen started before dawn and camps were set up through the morning.

"Is anybody catching anything?" was a common question at most fishing spots on the lake. Two main encampments were situated along the dam on the eastern shore. About a dozen ice houses dotted the ice in these areas. Other isolated shelters and non-sheltered encampments were scattered around the lake.

Contest officials zoomed from camp to camp on snowmobiles, making sure contestants adhered to the rules. Two ice sailboats skated across the ice, providing entertainment for their drivers and for the fishermen. The smell of cooking fish wafted over the lake and grandfathers, fathers and sons took turns checking tip-ups (set lines with flags that signal a strike) baiting hooks and checking the programs of others nearby.

A 30-mile-per-hour wind blew across the lake from the west most of the day but a warm sun and 40-degree temperatures kept things comfortable. The warm weather proved troublesome as the day wore on, though, thawing the surface of the lake and causing sloppy puddles to form. But insulated overalls and heavy coats cut the wind and rubber boots kept feet dry. Most of the anglers were veterans and came prepared for anything.

By mid-afternoon, the ice was deserted as the anglers headed to the Branched Oak Inn in Malcolm for the final weigh in and awards ceremony.

Numerous tales of the day's activities were recounted over cold beers. Dean Spath, coordinator of the event, weighed each entry, bringing shouts from the crowd as he displayed the larger catches. Dozens of door prizes were handed out and trophy winners proudly displayed their payoffs for a day of patience and fun.



Photos by
Craig
Andresen

Story by
Terry L.
Hyland

Clockwise from upper
right:

Contest coordinator
Dean Spath, of Malcolm,
weighs a 7.7-pound cat-
fish that won the \$500
grand prize.

Ray Forycki, of Lincoln,
uses a hand drill to poke
a fishing hole in the ice
near his camp.

Day breaks over Bran-
ched Oak Lake Saturday,
illuminating the east
shore and two ice houses
on the point.

Norm Henggeler, of Lin-
coln, waits for a tug on
his tip up line after a
fish hit his bait.

A thirst-aid kit cools
on the ice, part of the
essential equipment of
the well-prepared angler.

