

## **Fighting Ice**

**Hard work becomes part of the program when the weather turns bitter cold and open water disappears. As the degree of difficulty increases, the rewards can often become significant**

For some duck hunters, ice is a plague.

A hard freeze can ruin a hunt and create hardships faster than just about anything. It can shoo ducks farther down the flyway. It can transform once-realistic decoys into motionless blobs. Ice can wreak havoc on blinds and spreads. It can tear up equipment. It can endanger gun dogs and increase the difficulty in retrieving birds. These are all reasons why many duck hunters hate to see ice form.

But there is a flip side to this coin. Ice can also lead to – or accompany – some of the best hunting of the season. Harsh winter temperatures frequently bring new ducks. These birds are easier to work, and they can be more predictable in their habits. It's just that they're doing things differently from when the weather was milder and shallow waters were open.

Thus, veteran hunters change tactics when ponds and potholes turn into skating rinks. They know where to go, how to set up, and how to keep their hunting waters open so that ducks will keep coming. Here are several strategies for fighting ice – and winning. Follow the advice of these cold-weather pros, and you will come to welcome ice instead of dreading its arrival.

### **Philip Sumner: Boat Motor Opens Shallow Water**

Phil Sumner of Clarksville, Tennessee, has been an avid waterfowler since boyhood. In recent years, Sumner has hunted on a lease with several shallow ponds that were planted and flooded to attract ducks. The only problem was that these ponds iced over when the temperature dipped to 31° F, and when they locked up, the birds stayed away.

Sumner devised a simple method for rectifying this problem. He owns a large V-hull aluminum boat with a 55-horsepower outboard for hunting on big lakes and rivers. One sub-freezing morning he hauled this rig to his lease, hooked it on behind his ATV, towed it to his favorite pond, and backed the boat in, breaking ice as he went. He backed the boat deep enough to submerge the motor's water intake to supply the cooling system. Then, with the boat still strapped to the trailer, he started the motor and engaged the forward gear. With the throttle half-open, the turning prop set up a strong current under the ice.

While the motor ran, Sumner began wading through the pond, breaking the ice into smaller chunks that would melt quicker in the swirling waters. Within 30 minutes, he had a wide-open hole almost an acre in size. He pulled the boat and trailer away from the pond. Then he returned, threw decoys out in the open muddy water, and hid in his blind. When ducks started coming, they decoyed with little hesitation.

Sumner continued this ice-melting ritual throughout the several- day freeze. The ice never formed so thick overnight that he couldn't break and melt it out again the next morning. By starting shortly after daylight, he could have his hole open and his decoys out within an hour. By then the sun and wind would keep the water open throughout the day. The result of his effort was a string of good hunts when other shallow-water hunters were frozen out of their spots.

### **Duane Kovarik: Open a Hole Off a Point**

Duane Kovarik lives in Ord, Nebraska, and hunts mostly on Calamus Reservoir in the center of the state. Kovarik is a boat-blind hunter, setting up wherever he finds ducks working.

When freeze-up begins on Calamus, Kovarik changes tactics to stay in the action. He explains, "Ice will form first around the shoreline, but the middle of the lake will stay open longer. My partners and I chop ice out of the ramp so we can launch our boat, then we load in and break our way to the open water."

Kovarik says he doesn't head out until first light, for safety's sake. Also, he's watched the weather forecast that morning to learn the direction of the prevailing wind. "This is extremely important," he emphasizes. "Ducks will go out to feed early, then they'll start coming back to water in mid-morning. If the wind's kicking up, they avoid the open water. Instead, they'll try to find a resting spot on the upwind side of the lake."

"So, we'll motor to the upwind side and find a point of land that juts out toward the open water. Again, there'll be a ring of ice around the shoreline. We'll break a hole in the ice just off the point and toss out our decoys. They we'll set up the boat blind next to the bank and wait for the ducks to start coming back. When they do, they see that open hole and the decoys swimming around in it, and many of them will fall right in."

Kovarik says opening a large, clear hole in the ice to crucial to this strategy. He uses his boat to break an oblong hole measuring approximately 50x100 yards. He starts slowly, crunching through the ice to break the perimeter of the hole. Then he begins circling inside this perimeter, breaking the ice into small pieces and rocking them with prop wash. This fresh, warmer water helps melt the surface ice, and the wind blows the chips to the upwind side of the hole.

"You really want to get that hole as clear as you can. Even if ducks start flying back to the lake, try to ignore them and keep working on the hole until it's wide open. Sometimes it takes up to 45 minutes running around and around before it's good enough. Then we throw out our decoys, set up our blind, and get ready to shoot some easy birds."

Kovarik says the one thing that can thwart this strategy is a no-wind condition. "If the wind isn't kicking up, the ducks will raft up out in the open water in the middle of the lake instead of looking for shelter along the shoreline. With this style of hunting, no wind is a bad thing."

### **John Amico: Fighting Ice in Flooded Timber**

John Amico is a professional retriever trainer (Deep Fork Retrievers, Choctaw, Oklahoma), and he gets out frequently during duck season to give his pupils some hunting experience. When heavy rain falls over this state, Amico and his buddies head up the Deep Fork or Salt Fork River to look for ducks working into flooded green timber. They boat in, then abandon their boat and wade into the woods to holes where ducks are alighting.

This strategy works fine until a freeze comes. “Ice can form in the shallow backwaters overnight,” Amico explains, “but that doesn’t necessarily mean the ducks abandon the timber. Instead, at least for a couple of days, they’ll return to the same holes where they’ve been feeding. If we get there first and break the ice out of the hole, many times they’ll drop in with little hesitation.”

Amico says the secret to opening a good hole is breaking out the perimeter first, then sliding large free-floating sheets of ice underneath ice that’s still intact around the hole. “Big chunks are easier to move and slide under. If you break the ice into little pieces, they’re harder to clear out of the hole. So work slowly, try to keep those big pieces together, and get the hole as ice-free as you can.”

Amico says it’s not necessary to break out a large hole when hunting in flooded timber, but he likes to have an opening large enough to allow ducks to work into the prevailing wind. Also, he puts out only 12-15 decoys in such a hole, setting them around the upwind edge of the hole.

“I always use a jerk string in this situation,” Amico adds. “I rig one decoy so it’ll tip up and bob. Unless the wind’s really gusting, you need this movement and ripples on the water’s surface to convince circling ducks that the decoys are real.”

#### Steve Fugate, Ricky Waldon: Ice Eaters Keep Duck Holes Open

Steve Fugate and Ricky Waldon both hunt waterfowl in Ballard County in western Kentucky, and they share something else in common. Both use “ice eaters” to keep ice from forming in their decoys. An ice eater (proper name: Pyramid Guest D-Icer) is a submersible electric pump that is designed to keep water from freezing in boat slips, fish ponds, industrial lagoons, etc. However, Fugate, Waldon, and others deploy ice eaters to keep water open in front of their blinds. These pumps work by continuously propelling warmer subsurface water up to the surface and maintaining strong current flow.

Fugate hunts mainly from one blind in a flooded cornfield. He uses three ice eaters – two in his decoys and one along a ditch that provides boat access to his blind. He powers his units off an electric line run to his blind. With all three pumps running, he can keep up to two acres of water open on even the coldest night.

“They’re a really good tool,” Fugate says. “They work better when they’re set just under the surface and pointed sideways, so they set up a good crosscurrent. My partner and I set our ice eaters on a frame made from metal rods. This lets us adjust the depth and the angle of the outflow.”

“Also, besides preventing ice from forming, the ice eaters make the decoys move around like they’re swimming. This makes them look more realistic on days when the wind is slack.”

Ricky Waldon runs Waldon’s Lodge, a commercial waterfowl operation near the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers ([www.WaldonLodge.com](http://www.WaldonLodge.com)). Waldon sets 22 ice eaters throughout his flooded fields. Like Fugate, he powers his units directly from electric lines. “I’ve heard of people using a generator to run an ice eater all night, and this would work if you had a large enough gas tank. But the problem with this is that the noise from the generator would keep ducks scared away at night instead of letting them come in and feed. You want ‘em there at night so they’ll come back the next day.”

Waldon cautions hunters considering using a generator or a long power cord to power an ice eater to make sure it’s supplying enough amperage. Amperage that’s too low can burn up the motor. “The main way to get around this is to use a heavy-enough gauge wire to supply the amperage needed by the unit,” Waldon says. “The safe thing to do is to check with an electrician about the right size wire, considering amperage requirements and how far the line has to run to reach the unit.”

Another potential problem with ice eaters is sucking debris into the pump, which can clog and burn it up. “We prevent this by using a welded stand that’s got a flat piece of metal over the intake,” Waldon explains. “This stand is designed to keep debris out and prevent clogging.”

Waldon also sets his ice eaters about a foot under the water’s surface, and he tilts them to push current sideways. “You don’t want the water splashing or spattering on the surface. You just want moving water to keep ice from forming, and these units certainly provide that.”

(The Pyramid Guest D-Icer is made by Pyramid Technologies: phone 203-238-0550; Web site [www.pyramid-technologies.com](http://www.pyramid-technologies.com). D-Icers come in a range of sizes and prices, starting at ½ hp and approximately \$500.)

## **Other Ways to Fight Ice**

Necessity is the mother of invention, and duck hunters have come up with a variety of other methods for keeping ice out of their holes.

For instance, some attach a Go-Devil motor or outboard to fixed mounts on the edge of their hole, feed it from a large capacity gas tank, and run the motor all night long to keep the water moving and ice from forming. (Guide Ronnie Capps of Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee, uses two Go-Devil motors on opposite sides of his hole – rigged cater-cornered and facing opposite directions. At night, he runs both motor at the same time, resulting in a racetrack current that keeps his hole open in the coldest weather.)

Perhaps the ultimate way to fight ice is to drill a well and set up an electric pump to run 55-degree ground water into a pond. Some hunters also use sprayers or then run pipes with

perforations along the bottom of their ponds. By pumping fresh water into these pipes and allowing it to escape up through the perforations, they keep the water temperature above freezing.

One additional tip: When stomping ice out of a permanent decoy spread in shallow water, use a metal-tooth rake to clear small ice chunks out of the hole. Simply rake the ice back onto the adjacent, unbroken ice to get the hole as clean as possible.

### **Ice Isn't the Enemy**

Here's the final word on this subject. Ice doesn't have to be the enemy of waterfowl hunters. Ice changes things, to be sure, but these changes can be positive as well as negative. Hunters who learn to deal with ice can keep on hunting successfully as long as birds are present. By keeping ice out of their holes, changing locations, and employing other proven tactics, they can continue experiencing good shooting.

Then, when The Big Chill finally locks everything tight and the birds move farther down the flyway, at least these hunters will have the satisfaction of knowing they weren't defeated. They fought ice to a standstill, and they got the last ounce – and hour – of enjoyment out of their season.

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