

Ice fishers and outdoor enthusiasts are urged to remain patient when it comes to winter's early ice cover, which state conservation wardens classify as not thick enough to safely support a human -- much less any type of vehicle.

Todd Schaller, recreation safety chief for the Department of Natural Resources, says the ice always is unpredictable but it is nearly certain to be too weak to be considered safe during these weeks of weather's transition from late fall to early winter.

Conditions vary throughout the state with some of Wisconsin still having open water and other areas developing a thin ice layer.

"It is important that ice fishers use caution if conditions in their area allow them to venture out," Schaller said. "If ice thickness is unknown, stay on the shore and stay dry. The ice fishing season will be here soon."

Schaller says people should use this time to brush on some ice safety precautions. Review these with others who enjoy the outdoors -- especially any children. Ice poses dangers on ponds, lakes and rivers.

"You can enjoy the winter and stay safe at the same time," he says. "Follow these safety tips."

How to dress:

- Dress for the conditions. That means the proper clothing and equipment. Please include a U.S. Coast Guard-approved Personal Flotation Device (vest or coat) that will help you stay afloat and slow body heat loss should you fall in. Extra mittens and gloves should be standard so you always have a dry pair.
- Wear ice creepers on your boots. These are idea to prevent slips.

Before you go:

- Contact local sport shops to ask about ice conditions on the lake or river you want to fish.
- Learn about the water you are going to use. Know if the lake has inlets, outlets or narrows that have currents known to thin the ice.

When you go:

- Do not go out alone. If you do, carry a cell phone and let someone know where you are and your expected return time. Follow that timeline.
- Carry a spud bar to check the ice while walking to new areas during daylight only.
- Carry a couple of spikes and a length of light rope in an easily accessible pocket to help pull yourself -- or others -- out of the ice.
- Do not travel in unfamiliar territories at night.

Watch out for this:

- Look for clear ice. Clear ice is generally stronger than ice with air bubbles in it or with snow on it.
- Watch out for pressure ridges or ice heaves. These can be dangerous due to thin ice and open water and may be an obstruction you may hit with a car, truck or snowmobile.