

Is That Ice Safe?

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Ice fishing and snowmobiling on frozen waters can be a very enjoyable experience. However, you should be aware that when traveling on frozen lakes you could be just one poor decision or miscalculation away from plunging into icy waters.

Before you venture out onto the ice, especially early in the winter, you should check the thickness of the ice. It doesn't take very long to chop a hole in the ice with an axe or chisel. I usually chop until I can see at least six inches of good dark ice. Six inches of ice is enough to support 4000 pounds according to the U.S. Army Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory. I figure that is plenty to support me and my snowmobile. See the chart below for ice thickness and strength calculations. Don't assume that if there is a track on the lake that the ice is safe!



To minimize your risk when traveling on frozen lakes you should check with the rangers or wardens who patrol the area where you plan to take a trip. The AWW usually has a ranger on duty at Chamberlain Bridge. He will know the current ice conditions and give you advice concerning areas that should be avoided.

When riding on large inter-connected lakes, some hazard areas to avoid are thoroughfares, inlets, outlets, pressure ridges, and spring holes. Basically, anywhere there is moving water should be avoided because moving water will not freeze as easily as standing water.

I recommend that you bring some basic safety equipment on your winter excursions on frozen lakes. My emergency equipment includes a throw bag for pulling someone else out of the water and the "picks of life" for pulling myself out of the water. These are nothing more than ice picks with a retractable cover over the sharp end. A couple of good-sized spikes will serve the same propose. I also pack matches in a watertight container, a compass, and small first aid kit.

One of the most important things you can do for your safety when embarking on any outdoor adventure is -- tell someone where you are going and what time you expect to return. This will help rangers and wardens find you when you really need help.

Minimum ice thickness required to support a load		
Load (tons)	Required ice thickness (inches)	Distance between loads (feet)
0.1	2	17
1	4	34
2	6	48
3	7	58
4	8	67
5	9	75
10	13	106
20	18	149
30	22	183
40	26	211

The equation and table are valid when the load (such as a person on foot, or a wheeled or tracked vehicle) is distributed over a reasonable area of a continuous ice sheet. The larger the load, the greater the area it should cover for the calculation to remain valid. *Neither large loads that are concentrated in relatively smaller areas, nor loads that are at or near the edge of a large opening in the ice, are safely described by the equation or table. In such cases, seek more advice.*

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