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Successfully Catching Perch (at Lake Sundance)

By Kevin L. Egan

So, you want to catch perch and as many as possible! Well you are in luck as while it is sometimes tricky it is not difficult once you key in on a few “secrets”. As our perch problem evolves so too does our understanding of how best to catch perch via angling and netting. Please note that these are my personal recommendations and are not set in stone or intended to endorse any specific business or product. Experimenting and trying different techniques along with practice, patience and perseverance will generally improve your skill and ability to catch perch. Nothing beats trying to will make you better and better with time while remembering to observe others and ask many questions. No one should be keeping catching perch a secret. Remember to get a “Bill of Lading” from the front gate which grants you the right to remove more than your provincial limit of perch from the lake to your home or destination!

EQUIPMENT:

Rod: My recommendation for ice fishing or vertical jigging is the Marmish rod, Frabill pan fish popper or similar short, ultra light, highly sensitive ice fishing rod. Rods with ultra-sensitive spring tips can really help you see the uber light, sensitive bites that perch are known for. For bobber or slip bobber fishing I highly recommend a ultra-light or light action 6 to preferably a 7 foot rod. This is required for casting with longer leader and for quicker and stronger hook sets. For casting I would recommend a 5-6-foot ultra-light action rod. Often a more sensitive rod will indicate subtle bites and have a better feel over what the jig is doing under water. When trolling an ultra-light rod is still my go to.

Reel: Any fishing reel will do as long as you size it to the rod and line strength. Hand lining while ice fishing or over the side of an

anchored boat with just a spool of line would work as well unless a larger trout is hooked. Matching your reel to your rod for balance as well as line will make for easier casting and fewer tangles.

Line: Nothing heavier than 6 lb. test! I can not stress this enough. Heavier line as well as some cheaper 6 lb test has too much line memory (ie. line maintains a curl off the reel) I have a preference on brands but for the most part they all should work. I prefer 4-pound test line although difficult for some to use and easier to break and should only be used by more skilled anglers. The reel drag must be set appropriately should you hook a large trout. Keeping the reel full will make for longer casts with light jigs. Some winter ice fishing lines are promoting less memory and may be more advantageous than other products during the winter. Line selection may require some experimenting on your part to ensure your line is straight and without any curl from rod tip to hook regardless of depth fished or hook weight. I have begun to see some line shyness by perch in the last few years so fluorocarbon line is the hardest for perch to see.

Hooks: Use small ice fishing jigs recommended for perch by your local store. The hook should sit horizontally on the line and not hang straight down. I love the glow in the dark yellow and chartreuse Genz Worm and Fat Boys but have had plenty of success with similar hooks as shown below (Figure 1). I had a lot of success with the ones with a splash of orange on them, so I call them my favorites most days. The heavier the hook the easier it is to feel the weight of the hook through the shaft of the rod when hook is underwater and therefore any subtle bites are easier to detect. Heavier hooks need to be reeled in faster yet since they sink quicker when retrieving however feel more sensitive when vertical jigging and taking out any slight line curl versus a lighter hook. When casting and retrieving you must play with your retrieval speed and size your hooks based upon how picky the perch are biting and what method you are employing.

Figure 1.



Bait: To successfully catch perch, you must almost always have bait on the hook. I prefer in order of preference either a perch eyeball, or 2-3 maggots (black fly larvae), or 1-2 mealworms (beetle larvae). I caught my biggest ever perch (16 inch) on maggots whereas I have had 300 perch days using eyeballs.

LOCATION:

In the summer I have successfully caught perch all around the lake from just off the boat docks to the middle of the lake. If you are just starting out and want to fish from a boat, try along the shore in 8-14 feet of water. During early Spring the perch seem to be in the deeper water and come the heat of the summer most perch are readily caught within 15 feet of most boat docks.

If you want to fish from shore, I have been having great success fishing off the shore fishing area beside the beach. I have caught numerous perch along this whole stretch with both the bobber method, fly fishing and casting. When casting from shore you need to get out past the drop off and get your hook down to where the perch are. Weeds and algae can be a pain and ALL plant material must be removed from the hook or perch will not bite.

Depending upon various factors perch typically live right near the bottom of the lake. Occasionally they do move up in the water column and can be caught near the surface. This behavior tends to occur closer to shore in the summer time but occurs all over in the winter time. This is probably a result of being able to feel more secure from predators with the ice forming over head cover. There is also a diurnal migration from the deeper water during the sunniest parts of the day to the shallows in the early morning, evening and during heavy overcast or raining conditions. While there are perch around at night, they seem to stop biting after dusk. I have caught perch fly fishing both between docks and out in the middle of the lake.

Perch are found in schools sorted by various size ranges and appear to stay in a relatively small area. Schools can be from 10 to 1000. While in the past I have caught a 7 inch perch followed by numerous 10-12 inch perch and then the big 16 inch perch now it is more likely to catch dozens of 6-7 inch perch with a few of 8-10 inch ones thrown in. Perch sizes appear to be increasing again from the low average of 5-6 inch and continuing to kill perch can only help the sizes increase. Currently perch are stunting due to lack of available food supply as they can easily out compete the trout for the same food which is why we want them removed. Smaller fish are generally faster to the hook and bait and more aggressive, so catching and removing them will general pay off in bigger and bigger fish. Perch tend to hold near the bottom of the lake and my experience show that they are most often found 6 inches to 1.5 feet off the top of the weeds. Aquatic weeds appear to be about 6-12 inches high at the most in 14-20 feet of water versus sometimes 6 feet high in shallower water. Therefore, fishing just above the weeds in the deep water and along the weed edges and pockets in the shallower water. Along the shoreline weed beds the perch live under the canopy and dart out to take the bait which means the slower you can move your hook over them the more likely you will get a willing bite.

TECHNIQUE:

In the summer you can use a boat, fish from shore, or off a dock (if you have authorized access). When fishing open water there are three methods, bobber or slip bobber fishing, casting or vertical jigging. While I have also caught numerous perch trolling, this technique catches limited numbers of perch due to the trolling speed and time between bites.

A boat was the easiest method in the past as you can put yourself directly over the fish while more recently shore fishing has taken off with great success. It is not unusual to catch 10, 20 or 40 perch an hour! The best fishing method while using a boat is to select a location about 40 feet from shore (or roughly 20 feet off a dock) or essentially in about 14 feet of water, anchor the front of the boat, drift downwind ~ 20 feet, drop a stern anchor and then tighten up such that the boat is in the

middle of the two anchors. This is desired in order to allow fishing right under the boat and prevent boat sway and movement with the wind. If wind is negligible or you have a heavier weighted jig you only need one anchor. Constant feel of the line is needed to catch the perch effectively. I have caught more than 10 perch from the same location. Vertical jigging from a boat is very similar to ice fishing.

When fishing from shore I will either use a simple casting method or use a bobber or slip bobber set up and adjust the bobber starting at 9 feet and alter the depth by 6 inches either direction until bites occur. In July – September I have caught perch with only 2-3 feet of leader below the bobber while fishing in less than 9 feet of water. Often you can spot perch in water as shallow as two feet deep. Effectively the intent is to find the optimum distance above the weeds where the perch are holding and feeding. Hold the rod in your hands at all times as bites can be numerous but also very quick. Move around often to cover more water when fishing slows. Take care to use the ultra sensitive bobbers sold by most fishing stores. When casting from shore you need to get your jig out past the drop off, count down to say 15 and then start retrieving with regularly twitching your rod up to give the hook a little jigging motion. Alter the count down as well as retrieval speed as the optimum plan is to walk or glide your hook as slowly as possible along the bottom of the lake and just above the weeds as you slowly retrieve up slope back to shore. Constantly check for weeds and if you catch weeds alter either your count down or retrieval speed. You can also tie in an un-weighted fly as a trailer to slow the sink rate. I prefer to use perch eyeballs as bait as they stay on way longer and slow the hooks sink rate. A perch can feel like a weed so if you feel anything different on a retrieve is it best to set the hook! Different often means a bite.

In the winter you will need an ice auger or find an open hole and fish in the allowed fishing area. The marmish style rod or Frabill pan fish popper with the tiny spring at the end works great to see the tiny bites. Usually the little spring hardly moves, and the rod rarely moves at all so if you feel ANYTHING different...set the hook! Small jigs work the best. Remember to fish just above the weed line at 6 inches to 1 foot off bottom. I like to try either a slow, short up and down jig or else a

little wiggle motion on the hook while painfully slow lifting the rod higher. Picture a natural bug swimming upwards...most of them swim very, very slowly. Sometimes I even alternate between the two. Some perch fishermen like to jig a couple of hard 1 to 2 foot jigs then let the hook settle back down and repeat while altering the waiting period between jigs and the height of the jig lift. Remember, perch are methodical predators that are not darting around like trout. They sneak up on the prey and they suck the food in and then usually not dart away after. Therefore, often they don't like a lot of movement and you must be in constant feel of the hook and set the hook with any change in feel such as extra weight on the line, slight tap, jerk or even reduced tension. When you wiggle the hook, it should be just heavy enough that you can "feel" it moving. Sometime the line will go slack because the perch has picked up the bait and is now supporting the hook. **SET THE HOOK!** All these bites are almost imperceptible to someone use to catching trout. A bite by a perch can be so very, very, gentle and often fast meaning you must always set the hook quick and be on your toes.

If you find other methods work, write them down and let us know, we can never over fish perch in this lake. Each spawning female perch will be dropping ~ 30,000 eggs each Spring when the water temperatures hit 9 degrees Celsius. With hundreds of thousands of perch in the lake, the more perch all of us catch the bigger the perch become, and the better chance trout have of growing due to reduced competition for food.

PERCH BEHAVOIR:

The three main perch feeding behaviors I see on camera are:

1. **Panic Feeder** - Every 5 minutes or so a perch or two comes screaming through the field of view and hammers the hook like a trout. Generally, hook sets itself. Very aggressive feeding behavior. I think this has something to do with competition and seeing other perch around and a handy meal staring the perch in the face. Eat before you lose it kind of idea. Hooks held still works best.

2. **Home Feeding** - Resident perch (perch that just hang around and never leave the field of view) basically stay hunkered down in the weeds at the bottom of the lake. When a hook falls to the bottom they tend to come out and move towards the falling hook. Before the hook hits bottom a perch has often struck the hook without any indication thereof at surface. Then as the hook sits there the perch slowly move over to survey the new arrival. They tend to pick at any bait and in general occasionally try to "suck in" the hook. If a weighted jig this fails. I started using a dropper fly and the perch tend to suck in the fly easier if lighter like a scud or chironomid fly pattern. Sometimes the perch just stare at the hook and swim away. They also seem to like jigging less and shy away. They do however get excited and can be induced to strike with a slow rising ultra short wiggle (similar to a natural chironomid rising (Youtube has some videos of this for reference)). Then often some perch will rise from the weeds and chase the hook up as high as 4 or 5 feet and can strike at any time. Otherwise holding hook motionless seems to work often. Sometimes the hogs seem to be loners just circling around. They get turned off by my jigging and the hordes of little fish bite first.

3. **Feeding School** - This is most interesting and often overlaps Home Feeding. This is where a loose school of perch numbering from 6-100 will swim slowly by, partially suspended about 1-2 feet off bottom. They are very aggressive and will chase other fish away in a rush to get to the hook once they spot it. You can often keep a school around longer the quicker you get your hook back to the bottom or fishing near buddies. A light jigging behavior lures them in but still or relatively still with very minor jigging action work best. While perch tend to school in somewhat similar class range, a school may contain bigger perch with them so as you thin out the school you may catch the hog!

TIMING:

Perch are Spring spawners and just after ice out may be difficult to catch. Also most fishing is poor when the lake turns over in the Spring and Fall. Turnover is when the lake natural has the deeper water switch with the shallower water bringing more oxygen to the deep and more nutrients to the surface.

I have caught perch at all times of the day and throughout the winter and summer. In late winter you may find they are gearing up for spawning and are harder (but not impossible) to catch. Early Winter and mid-Summer is typically awesome perch fishing.

CLEANING:

There are three main ways to prepare these delicious perch for consumption. Boneless filleting gutted and de-scaled, or skinned whole (referred to as the 10 second method on Youtube). Perch can be easily cleaned with a narrow sharp knife and can be made boneless with minimal effort.

Filleting boneless (Great method when preparing for kids to eat!):

Firstly, make an incision on the side just behind the pectoral fin from the top of the body to the belly. Do not go through the backbone. Then while the knife is resting on top of the backbone, twist the blade such that the edge is facing towards the tail. Then slide the blade along the top of the backbone down to the tail and remove this fillet. Repeat on the other side. Practice makes perfect here!

While firmly holding the narrow end of the fillet, skin down, slide the knife down from the narrow end (but not through the skin). Twist the blade so it faces towards the big end of the fillet and slide the blade along the top of the skin down to the tail separating the meat and the skin and remove this skinless fillet. Flip the fillet over and remove the ribcage. On small fish just cut down around the ribcage and remove.

On large fish, slide the knife edge under the bones to save some meat and then just notch the area at the top of the ribcage to remove the remaining bones. You can feel these bones with your fingers as tiny bumps. Now the perch is boneless.

Gutted and de-scaled:

Large fish may be also treated like any other larger fish and baked or barbecued whole after cleaning out the body cavity of organs etc. Scales can be removed by back scraping with a knife or de-scaling tool. Please note that this method does have bones in it. Once cooked the bones are easy to separate from the meat. If scaled some people also eat the crispy skin while if not scaled, the skin still peels away easily.

10 second method:

This is easiest to see by searching on Youtube or clicking on the link on the website. General description of this method is as follows:

While holding the perch upright with the head facing towards you, make two length wise shallow cuts down either side of both upper dorsal fins starting at the head and finishing at the tail. Slide the knife under the end of both cuts and pinch the flap of skin and fin and pull up and towards you lifting and removing the strip of skin and fins. Pry off the skin from the flesh on either side near the head and wiggle your fingers under the skin. Then cut with the knife through the backbone at the base of the head. Grasp the head and while gripping the flesh under the skin with one hand and the head with the other, pull apart. Cut around the anal fin and cut off the tail. You should be left with just the carcass in one hand and the skinned perch in the other. Please note that this method does have bones in it. Once cooked the bones are easy to separate from the meat.

Clean all fish well under cold running water and freeze immediately if not to be cooked within a day. Use proper freezer bags to prevent freezer burn.

COOKING:

You can use your trusted, tried and true cooking methods, experiment on your own or consider the following.

1. Use a store bought fish coating and either bake or fry.
2. Use crushed Ritz crackers, egg whites for coating fillets, spices and a pan with virgin olive oil
3. Use a lemon herb spice mix and butter and fry in pan
4. Use a pepper medley spice mix and either bake or fry.
5. Fry in butter and then put in a creamy mushroom and onion soup and serve on either rice or spaghetti
6. Various marinades like golden Italian Salad Dressing works as well as others.
7. If you discover other great cooking ideas, give it in writing to the front gate and we will get it out to the members in future "Perch Updates"!

Now you know the "secrets". Fish and have fun!

Bon appetit!

GET OUT AND ENJOY SOME SUMMER OR WINTER PERCH FISHING!





