

A Frozen Adventure: Friends Fish-A-Thon



By Nissa Petterson, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

I have a tendency to be a warmer weather recreationist, choosing to spend my time outdoors during the spring and summer months. On long, warm sunny days teeming with new and renewed life, it's easy to relax and let the beauty of nature displace your worries and sense of time. Alternatively, winter recreation in Alberta has a different appeal. While cold, winter days can be spectacular, spending time in the cold outdoors generally takes more effort and work. Most of my outdoor recreation in wintry conditions takes place during the hunting seasons, when you are putting in days upon days with a singular objective in mind, filling your freezer. While I think winter recreation may take more effort, I have recently learned that, as for summer pastimes, there is an equal opportunity for fun to be had.

Over the past three years, I have been fortunate enough to expand the breadth of my winter activities thanks to some dear friends. In particular, my friends and I have committed many weekends in the winter months to ice fishing. I've learned to love it.

This year's introduction of AWA's *Adventures for Wilderness* gave me the opportunity to organize a new challenge for our ice-fishing escapades – an overnight ice-fishing camping trip to Burnstick Lake. The *Adventures for Wilderness* fundraising program gives staff and AWA members the opportunity to invite fellow outdoor enthusiasts and conservationists to join them in adventures that speak to their unique or favourite ways to experience Alberta's wilderness. My friends and I imagined the Friends Fish-A-Thon as our adventurous vehicle for raising money for a wonderful organization and its work.

On Friday, March 6th, we packed up our gear and drove to Burnstick Lake. The weather was agreeable, approximately 10 degrees with sun and cloud which made the setup of our staging area relatively stress free. One of my friends had already scouted out a spot on the lake near the boat launch, that was somewhat sheltered by a crest of evergreen trees. He had already been out there for a full day, and didn't really have a lot of excitement on the other end of his line, but that didn't dampen our spirits!

While many clothing layers and hot beverages are a must, my friends and I are by no means "roughing" it on our ice fishing trips. We fish from a small, but decked out, insulated shack that can seat up to six people. We had organized our fully enclosed fishing shelter, otherwise known as the "Ice Palace," to open up into a pop up canopy



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tent, where we bored two holes through the ice. The canopy tent was our main fishing area, we had a table for our supplies, gear, and propane cooking stove. Camping chairs were placed strategically for a clear line of sight of our fishing holes and to accommodate the flow of traffic into and out of the Ice Palace. We also drilled five holes outside of the canopy tent, with belled/flagged tip-up rods to increase our chances of catching fish throughout the weekend.

The Ice Palace was a pretty comfortable home away from home; we had managed to fit two inflatable queen mattresses on stands side by side, with foam pads lining the floor to help with insulation and to keep the moisture out. The Ice Palace was heated with a wood burning stove, which we routinely stoked with wood. Keeping the stove burning hot was imperative. We needed it hot to maintain a comfortable temperature inside the Ice Palace and to prevent the fire from reaching a smoldering point. When it smoldered it just coughed

out plumes of smoke, something that was highly problematic in the evenings while we were trying to sleep. There were definitely some bumps in the road when it came to figuring out the intricacies of the wood stove, but overall it made for some really good learning opportunities.

Keeping the stove hot in the Ice Palace became even more crucial as the weekend went on. By Friday night, we found ourselves in a complete white out on the lake, with all other anglers having packed up and left. The temperature dropped dramatically, reaching a low of minus 20 during the night. It also snowed throughout the night, almost four inches, making us add the chore of sweeping snow off the roof of the Ice Palace to our house-keeping list.

Saturday morning came with a pause in the snow and slightly warmer temperatures (-15). Some more friends and colleagues joined us for some fun just during the day. They brought their day gear, families, and even cooked up some delicious chicken

wings to share alongside great conversation. The fish weren't biting, but that didn't seem to dampen the mood. By midday, the Friends-Fish-A-thon group had grown to almost 20 people, with children playing in the snow and practicing how to use the fish-camera, in hopes to catch a glimpse of our elusive fish friends.

We also took some time during the afternoon to take samples from Burntstick Lake for our colleagues from the Alberta Lake Management Society (ALMS) as part of their Winter LakeKeepers Program. The program assesses the overall ecological health of Alberta's lakes with the help of citizen science. Volunteers can contact ALMS for testing kits which contains the gear necessary to measure a variety of parameters such as dissolved oxygen, temperature, and phosphorous content of the lake water. The program registered over 40 samples this season, helping significantly to depict the aquatic health of lakes sampled across Alberta. Having the opportunity to



While on Burnstick Lake we sampled the lake's water quality as part of the Alberta Lake Management Winter LakeKeepers program. PHOTO: © N. PINK

help collect samples that generate data and a real-time picture of the ecological health of a lake allows the public to be actively engaged in conservation initiatives. It gives them a stake in protecting places that are near and dear to them.

By late afternoon Saturday, the snow had returned with a vengeance, and our extended Friends-Fish-A-Thon group soon cleared out. Once the sun set, the temperature dropped to -25 with no sign of the snow stopping. We bunkered down into the canopy tent hoping to catch a fish, while our dinner, Costco lasagna, baked on top of the wood stove. With no catches to date, the possibility of being shut out on our Fish-A-Thon adventure looked more and more likely. Then, Mother Nature threw us a bone.

Prior to supper being ready, one of our friends had gone to check his wood stove, when he noticed a bright little orange flag fluttering in the wind. Once he reached the line, he could tell there was a fish on the other end given the tautness of the line. While he was slowly reeling the line up, the fish kicked off, but the bait was still intact. Determined to catch the same patrolling fish, he lowered the line down again and held it still in his hand. After a few moments, there was a small nibble,

and then there was a full bite. Pulling the line up again, he hollered to the rest of us inside the canopy tent that he had caught something. By the time we all made it out of the canopy tent, he was holding his prize: a 26-inch northern pike. This catch buoyed our spirits. To celebrate our big catch, we decided a side of battered fried pike would be a nice accompanying side to our lasagna dinner.

The remainder of Saturday evening was quiet on the fishing front. But, we didn't mind that one bit as we filled the tent with lively conversation. Despite only catching one fish over the entire weekend, we considered our adventure to be a success. Between the less-than-desirable weather, finicky wood stove and the sleeping schools of fish, we had learned a lot of valuable lessons. To quote my friend Karsten "we're only going to get better at this".

A brilliant sun and clear, blue skies greeted us when we woke up Sunday morning. As we dug ourselves out of the snow and tore down our camp, the temperature continued to rise, and the clothing layers started coming off. By afternoon, we were packing up in our t-shirts. I'd be lying if I told you we didn't feel some resentment towards Mother Nature for not giving us the beautiful weather earlier. After we threw a few snowballs and took some "fun in the sun pictures," we had everything packed

up. The snow on the lake was considerably deeper than when we had arrived Friday afternoon, with the top layer becoming pretty soft from the bright sun beating down. We weren't very surprised then when one of the vehicles in our convoy got stuck, causing us to unpack the kitty litter and start digging. Eventually the car broke free, and we made our way back to Calgary.

Friends-Fish-A-Thon was a true adventure; there were highs and lows, challenges and victories, and of course, sun and snow. All of it made for a unique experience that taught us many valuable lessons. And while it was a considerable amount of work and effort, I don't think any of us would have wanted to have it any other way. As one of my friends said, we have a foundation to build upon now, and experiences that refine our skills and allow us to take on new adventures in the future. We can thank AWA's *Adventures for Wilderness* for helping us build that foundation. I'm not sure whether I would have broadened my horizons and learnt how to overnight ice fish if it weren't for *Adventures for Wilderness*. Regardless, I am thankful for the experience because it put my feet to the wood stove fire. Perhaps the Friends-Fish-A-Thon will become an annual adventure that we can share with more people, helping them broaden their horizons and celebrate Alberta's wilderness through a different experience. 🍄



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