

Successfully Catching Perch

(at Lake Sundance)

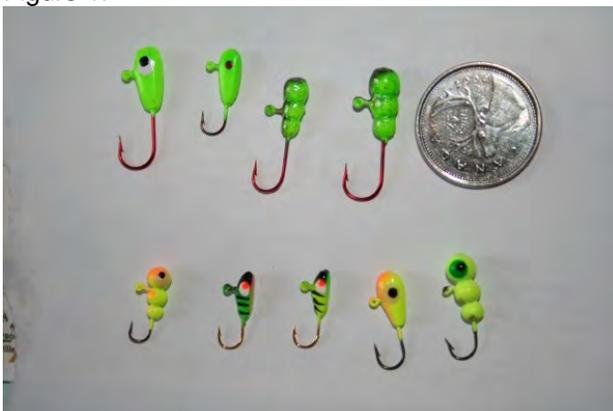
By Kevin L. Egan

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 particular store or product. Experimenting with your technique and lots of practice, patience and perseverance will generally improve your skill and ability to catch perch. Practice will make you better and better with time. 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 Frabill pan fish popper or similar short, ultra light, highly sensitive ice fishing rod. For bobber or slip bobber fishing I highly recommend a medium 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 or 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 pretty much any rod will work.
- Reel:** Any fishing reel will do as long as you size it to the rod and line strength. (hand lining with just a spool would work as well unless a larger perch or trout is hooked. That being said matching your reel to your rod 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. 4 pound test line is best but difficult for some to use and easier to break and should only be used by more knowledgeable fishermen. The reel drag must be set appropriately should you hook either a large perch or 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. That may require some experimenting on your part. Otherwise, perch do not seem to demonstrate much line shyness so far.
- 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 prefer 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 picked some up. The better they are weighted the easier it is to feel the weight of the hook underwater and any subsequent subtle bites. Heavier ones need to be reeled in faster yet since quicker when vertical jigging. You have to 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 have bait on the hook at all times. I prefer in order of preference either a perch eyeball, or 2-3 maggots (black fly larvae), or 1-2 mealworms (beetle larvae) or 1 small minnow (store bought frozen spottailed shiner or minnow caught in Lake Sundance). Minnows are easier to lose to perch but tend to attract bigger fish. However that being said the 16 inch perch was caught on maggots.

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 south central shore in 8-14 feet of water. Some days it appears the fish are most 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.

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.

Perch travel in schools and are sometimes separated loosely by size so where there is one there are literally thousands. 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 nice number of 8-10 inch ones thrown in. Perch sizes may change by increasing over time if we are able to net enough perch out of the lake. Currently perch are stunting due to lack of available food supply as they can easily out compete the trout for the same food. Smaller fish are generally faster to the hook and bait and more aggressive, so catching and removing them will generally pay off in bigger and bigger fish. Perch tend to hold near the bottom of the lake and my experience shows that they are most often found 6 inches to 1.5 feet off the top of the weeds. Aquatic weeds appear to be about 1-2 feet high in 14-20 feet of water. Therefore fish just above the weeds. If you catch Lake Chub (large minnows up to 7 inches long) you are probably in the weeds. These Lake Chub should be killed as they are also introduced pests that compete for trout food.

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 set up and adjust the bobber starting at 9 feet and alter the depth by 6 inches either direction until bites occur. In August – October I have caught perch with only 6 feet of leader below the bobber. 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 as you slowly retrieve up slope back to shore. 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.

In the winter you will need an ice auger or find an open hole and fish in the allowed fishing area. The 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. Small jigs work the best. Remember to fish just above the weed line at 6 inches to 2 feet off bottom. I like to try either a slow, short up and down jig or else a little wiggle motion on the hook. 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. 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 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 of these bites are almost imperceptible to someone used to catching trout. A bite by a perch can be so very, very, gentle and often fast meaning you must set the hook quick and be on your toes at all times.

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. With thousands upon thousand 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 are:

1. **Panic Feeder** - Every 5 minutes or so a perch 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 really 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 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 my jigging and the hordes of little fish. They go ballistic seeing a live minnow (illegal in public waters). A live leech should work really well also for larger Home Feeders.
3. **Feeding School** - This is most interesting and often overlaps Home Feeding. This is where a loose school of perch will swim 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. You can often keep a school around longer the quicker you get your hook back to the bottom. A light jigging behavior lures them in but still or relatively still with minor short jigging actions work best. While perch tend to school in somewhat similar class range, a school of 8 inch ones will often have some hogs with it.

TIMING:

Perch are spring spawners and just after ice out may be difficult to catch. 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 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 an 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!



