

FISHING UNDER THE ICE

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

When I first lived in Kotzebue in a little house that I had built, I used to weave my own fish nets. There was always a net hanging on a forked stick that I had nailed to a tall bedpost. Any time somebody came to visit or I had some spare time or wanted to rest, I'd be sitting there making netting, like an old lady with her knitting. Later on, when nylon mesh came in, I just bought the webbing. I didn't make any more nets after that.

When you fish under the ice, each end of the net is fastened to a fairly long, upright stick, held down by a good rock at the bottom. The net itself is held down by the sinker line. It sinks down right away as you are pulling the net through the hole into the water. The end rock is heavy enough that it drags it along the bottom, whether you're setting the net or checking it.^{1,2}

When I'm getting a net ready to put under the ice, I make floats out of blocks of spruce root, if I have any. The float sticks are maybe 8" or 10" long—8" is a little short. You can use a small-mesh salmon net to catch the big whitefish, 4-1/2" or even 5" mesh. Your floats have to be long enough and bulky enough that they won't tangle up in the net or pass through the holes in the mesh.

The cross section through the middle of each float is something like a pear, thin on one edge and bulky on the other edge. Each end is rounded off so that the bottom is a little longer than the top. There is a hole crossways through each end, near the bottom.

You tie the floats to the top line of the net, lying parallel to the net, every five or six feet. When the net is in the water, the floats are buoyant enough to hold the webbing up, but not enough to lift the lead line at the bottom of the net.

If you happen to get a big run of fish, the net will sometimes tend to float up, come in contact with the bottom of the ice, and freeze in. For that reason, you use light string to tie the floats to the top line, so that they would break free as you pull your net out of the water. If the float line were to freeze in, you'd lose the whole net.

Once you've picked the fish out of your net and it's ready to go back into the water, you go to the other hole and start pulling it back through. The whole thing will be kind of frozen up. You don't want anything to hang up on the ice at the other end, so you make your floats kind of streamlined.

Under the ice, when the *qausrilluk*³ are running, I like to catch the big ones and let the smaller ones go through, to be caught the next year. That's why I use a larger mesh net. I

use smaller mesh when I set a net in the mouth of a slough in the summertime, after the floodwater has started to run out. Those fish tend to be smaller, and have smaller heads.



Left to right: Ole Wik and Keith Jones checking a net in the big eddy above Ambler, early winter, 1975. Image: Sasha Wik

One fall there was a duck that for some reason hadn't taken off when the other ones left. I figured maybe was not getting enough to eat, and was too skinny. As soon as I'd load up my sled and leave after checking my net, the bird would come and pick up the fish eggs that were left on the ice, partly frozen down. It was just trying to survive.

I began cutting a fish into little pieces that the duck could eat. I'd throw them out on the top of the snow, away from the area where the water from the net had frozen everything solid. After two or three days of that, the duck had taken off.

One fall I saw a merganser in the last patch of swift, open water on the river near our place. I watched day by day as the hole froze up until it was about the size of a bathtub, and still the bird was there. Then a blizzard came and covered the hole. There was nothing I could do.

At Manley Hot Springs, there's a bridge across the river. A little ways downstream from the bridge there's a drain from the hot springs that comes in. No matter how cold the weather got, that water never froze over. Some years there would be two or three ducks that spent most of the winter in that open water. They made it through until spring.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) To get the net-pulling rope under the ice in the first place, you start by chopping a hole in the ice and lowering a rock or other weight to the bottom. Then you chop a second hole at such a distance that you can reach under the ice and snag the rope, using a long, slender pole with (say) a piece of caribou antler on it that acts as a hook. You pull the rock up through the second hole, hold the rope, lower the rock again, and repeat the process through as many holes as you need to accommodate the length of your net.

You end up with a rope going under the ice from the first hole to the last one. You can then tie the net to one end of the rope and pull it into the water.

3) Broad Whitefish (*Coregonus nasus*). This image shows the male above, and the female below. This photo and a discussion of the species can be found at <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=broadwhitefish.main>

