

Darkhouse spearfishing is 'God's television set' for the winter outdoors enthusiast

By Bria Barton

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For the winter outdoors enthusiast, a game of "Would You Rather" can pose a challenge when it comes to hunting or fishing.

Luckily, the best of both worlds can be found in darkhouse spearfishing, an activity that involves cutting a rectangular hole through the ice of a frozen lake, setting up a light-blocking shelter over the hole and spearing fish as they approach.

"The hole is what I call God's television set because you are staring into this flat screen of a world that almost no one ever sees because everything is covered in ice," said Hudson Cermak, a 24-year-old sportsman from Bemidji.

Cermak recognizes the draw of the sport as he's been doing it for the past six years, and his family has been spearing on Lake Bemidji since the 1960s.

"As soon as there was a few inches of ice out on the lake, my grandpa would take his little electric scooter and tie a clothesline in knots around the wheels like chains, and he'd take his ice house and be the first one out at a particular spot back in the day," Cermak said. "It is the best feeling in the world just to sit here, see nothing, and then all of a sudden – right between your legs – you see a fish nose peeking out."

Cermak said spearing is an engrossing alternative to regular ice fishing, however, it comes with more restrictions. It is generally limited to rough fish, such as sucker, but spearing on the ice for one of Minnesota's largest fish, the predatory northern pike, is allowed from mid-November to the last Sunday in February.

Pikes are a spearer's typical catch, as they are more aggressive and instinct draws them to one's dangling decoy in the water. But these fish, too, come with restrictions: Minnesota has three northern pike zones, and regulations vary depending on where you're spearing.

Even with the zones in place, some Minnesota waters still may have special regulations in place for pike, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources said.

Northern pike spearing usually occurs in more shallow water – around 6 to 10 feet – and Cermak said darkhouse spearfishing, as a whole, requires equipment different from standard ice fishing.

According to the Minnesota DNR, the basic tools needed for the activity include:

- ▶ Auger for drilling corners of the viewing hole
- ▶ Ice saw for carving viewing hole into the ice
- ▶ Ice chisel for pushing and prying ice slab out of the way
- ▶ Scoop, large strainer or shovel for removing ice and slush from the hole
- ▶ Dark house or roomy portable shelter
- ▶ Spear with an attached rope or cord
- ▶ Plastic bucket or chair to sit on
- ▶ Warm clothes and boots

Cermak added that decoys, ice tongs and plenty of snacks also help improve the experience.

"The thing about spearing is you kind of need all of the equipment before you can really start," Cermak said.



Above: Hudson Cermak, 24, has been spearfishing for many years and ice fishing since he was a child. **Below:** Hudson Cermak settles in for an afternoon of spearfishing on Lake Bemidji.



"You need all the pieces – it's like a mousetrap. You can't pull one piece out of the mousetrap without making it fail."

A brief history

Spearfishing is one of the oldest forms of fishing done by man – predating angling, especially angling as a sport, the Minnesota Darkhouse and Angling Association said.

No one person or place is credited with beginning darkhouse spearfishing, but it is said to be an evolved version of spearing techniques that Native Americans passed on to European settlers.

However, long before Europeans even reached North America, Native Americans were spearing fish through ice, the association said. Spearing decoys can be traced back to primitive tribes, with decoy artifacts being found to have

been carved from bone or tusk.

During the Great Depression, there was also a surge in the number of spear fishermen due to the need to forage for food in the harsh winters, the association said.

Now, while spearfishing has continued to gain traction with sportsmen, Cermak said it continues to create controversy among animal rights activists and some muskie anglers.

"I don't want to blame PETA for everything, but it's animal activists a lot of times that don't understand culture," Cermak said. "This isn't traditional for European settlers. This is what Native Americans had been doing for a very long time."

"A lot of people, especially muskie fishermen, want to ban this sport because sometimes you can mistake

HERE ARE SOME IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT DARKHOUSE SPEARFISHING FROM THE MINNESOTA DNR:

- ▶ Residents age 18 to 89 and nonresidents age 18 and older need a darkhouse spearing license and an angling license. Youth age 16 and 17 need an angling license but do not need a dark house spearing license.
- ▶ You cannot use artificial light to attract fish while spearing.
- ▶ Party fishing does not apply to spearing. Each person can only spear their own fish.
- ▶ Northern pike regulations vary throughout the state. Determine the number of fish you can spear and sizes that are legal to harvest using LakeFinder, LakeFinder Mobile or the DNR's fishing regulations booklet PDF.
- ▶ If you are in doubt about the size of the pike attracted to your

decoy, remember you do not have to spear it. Consider taking a photograph, or recording a video of the pike coming to the decoy.

▶ Size limit regulations mean you must have a good idea of how long a northern pike is before you attempt to spear it. This can be difficult without some type of guide. One approach is to use a large decoy, of known length, and base your estimate of the fish's total length on the length of your decoy.

▶ When cleaning your catch it is common to see small black spots on the filets. These pepper-like appearances – called neascus – are not harmful nor does it alter the health or flavor of the fish.

▶ Northern pike are very tasty but require an extra step to remove Y-bones during the filleting process. Another option is to simply pickle the northern pike you catch. The Y-bones dissolve in the acidic vinegar.

More information from the DNR is available on the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website.

northerns for muskies, and muskies are pretty protected. Inexperienced people can't really tell the difference between the two."

'God's television set'

During his college years at Bemidji State University, Cermak would keep his spearfishing house at the ready once wintertime rolled around.

He said he'd often spearfish between classes, enjoying lunch breaks while staring down into the depths of frozen Lake Bemidji and awaiting a northern pike to rear its iridescent head.

"There's nothing like eating Chinese food while spearfishing," Cermak said. "When I'm out here by myself, I'm listening to a podcast or audiobook and just hanging out and relaxing."

His three main rules of spearfishing are to keep decoys high, to not step on the rope attached to the spear, and to put the head of the spear in the water first to prevent scaring the fish.

But what does Cermak do with his catches?

While northern pike – especially smaller ones – are

notorious for being difficult to clean and filet, Cermak said he doesn't mind because he's discovered a tasty yet simple technique for preparing the fish: pickling.

"With pickling, you actually dissolve the bones on the inside of the meat, so they become boneless at that point and they're delicious that way," Cermak said.

Interestingly enough, however, neither the time spent alone or a day's bounty are what appeals the most to Cermak about spearfishing.

Instead, it's the human connections to be made.

"How often are you going to have four people in 25-square-feet of space having a good conversation, yet basically just looking at a hole?" Cermak said with a laugh. "It's those great conversations with people about life that can be had while enjoying the outdoors and catching food – with just enough action, too. A spearfishing hole is almost like a campfire in a sense that it brings people together to have great conversations."

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INTERESTED IN GETTING INVOLVED WITH SPEARFISHING?

Here are some basic steps from the Minnesota DNR to get started with spearfishing:

Cut a good-sized rectangular viewing hole. Typically, viewing holes are about three feet long and two feet wide. To make a viewing hole drill four holes where you want your four corners.

Next, use an ice saw or chisel to connect the four holes, thereby creating a rectangular slab of floating ice. When the ice is relatively thin you can push the slab under the ice and away from the hole with your chisel.

Later in the year, when slabs are thick and their buoyancy makes them difficult to push down, it is best to

pry them out of the water with your chisel. If you do this always return the slab to the water when you are done spearing. You don't want to leave large chunks of ice on the lake as they become safety hazards for snowmobilers and other motor vehicles. Also, when finished spearing mark your spear hole with a tree branch or brush. This is a traditional signal to others not to drive or walk over this spot as the ice may not be safe.

Clean the hole. Do this with an ice fishing scoop/strainer or even a shovel. The key is to get the slush and small ice chunks out of the hole so you can see perfectly into the water.

Get dark. The key to dark house spearing is being enveloped in

darkness. Darkness makes the fish and lake bottom visible. Darkness also prevents the fish from seeing you. Unlike most ice fishing houses, dark houses do not have windows or the windows are covered to seal out the light.

Drop a decoy. Fish decoys attract northern pike to your viewing hole. Artificial decoys come in a variety of shapes, lengths and colors. It's smart to buy decoys that mimic common prey in the lake you fish. A live decoy – typically a large sucker minnow trussed in a harness – is another option.

Decoys are typically tied to a short rod and reel, and jigged fairly frequently to attract curious and hungry fish. Larger jigging motions are best for attracting distant fish.

More subtle motions are best for keeping the fish's interest when it is in or near the hole. The decoy's purpose is to lure the fish into the center of the hole and relatively close to the surface so spearing success is higher.

Get ready to spear. Since you never know when a fish is going to swim into the hole, it is best to keep the spear tip in the water. This way you won't splash the water with your spear and scare the pike away when it arrives. When throwing a spear be sure to keep it perpendicular to the water. You want the fish to be directly beneath the spear.

Don't throw a spear at an angle because this most often results in a miss due to the light-bending properties of refraction. Though

anglers talk about "throwing" the spear, in reality, many spearers more or less drop the spear with a two-fingered motion akin to tossing a paper airplane. This type of release is effective because spears are heavy, sharp and gravity works.

Finally, when possible, it is best to drop the spear when the fish is facing away from you. Aim for the back of the head. Make sure your spear is tethered to the wall of your dark house or some other fixed object.

If you have speared a large pike, keep pressure on the fish until it stops moving by keeping the spear perpendicular, thereby essentially pinning it to the bottom. If you let the spear fall flat on the bottom there is a chance the fish will wiggle off, swim away and die elsewhere.