



LEADING EVOLUTION ON THE ICE

Ice Castle of Montevideo makes wheel fish houses in high demand

By Tom Cherveney
West Central Tribune

In the beginning, there were upturned buckets and jig sticks.

And it was good, but ice fishing has gotten a lot better thanks to innovations in everything from cold weather clothing and electronics to portable and wheel fish houses.

One of the biggest game changers in ice fishing continues to bring us in from the cold in style.

Ice Castle in Montevideo is turning out 32 to 36 of its popular RV/Fish house units each week, on pace to match or exceed the 1,600 units it produced last year.

"It's about our max right now, and I'm OK with that," said Brett Drexler, son of Ice Castle founder Jeff Drexler, and current president of the company. Ice Castle relies on a workforce of about 160 workers to produce its 50 different models.

Demand continues to grow, said Drexler. Everything from the COVID pandemic, which caused a nine-week suspension of work last year, to supply chain issues make things challenging.

There is currently a six-to-eight months wait for Ice Castle's models with hydraulics to hoist and drop the units, and a four-to-six weeks wait on the hand-crank models. It's the longest ever for the products.

Drexler said the waits are frustrating for Ice Castle and customers alike.

"Customers get excited when they order it," he said. "They want it and they want it fast."

Used by their owners as both ice fishing wheelhouse and summer RV camper, about 90 percent of the Ice Castles leave the Montevideo manufacturing facility with air conditioners installed.

Company founder Jeff Drexler said he debuted his first Ice Castle with an air conditioner years ago at the Minnesota State Fair and the reaction was uniform, "Everyone thought we were crazy. 'What do you want an air conditioner on a fish house for?'" he said, laughing.

Jeff Drexler built his first fish house in 1997. Drexler had been working for a company that produced manufactured homes. He



Photos by Tom Cherveney / West Central Tribune

Top: Ice Castle is producing at its maximum for its workforce and facilities, some 32 to 36 units a week through the entire year. Jeff Drexler, company president, is shown in a portion of the company's Montevideo manufacturing facility on Feb. 2. Above: Ice Castle produces 50 different models. This "Minnewaska" model Ice Castle was found on Lake Minnewaska on Jan. 30.



Ice Castle fish houses are popular for their comfortable and attractive interiors. Customers are able to customize their units when ordering.

started his own company, American Surplus, in 1993 to produce backyard storage sheds.

Drexler said he was selling many of his sheds through Milaca Unclaimed Freight in Mora. The owner there suggested he build a fish house.

He built a 6½-by-8-foot box on a trailer. "Nothing in it at all, basically carpeted floor and four holes," said Jeff Drexler.

They've come a long way since: Today's models range in size from 6½-feet by 8-feet all the way to 8-feet by 32-feet. They come customized with everything from private bedrooms to dinettes.

The models range in price from \$9,500 to \$64,000. The majority of sales are for models in the \$20,000 to \$40,000 price range, according to Brett Drexler.

The most popular model right now is the 8-foot by 21-foot hybrid RV Extreme 2. It's designed for a family of four or five, with sleeping quarters in the V nose and multiple sleep spaces in the rear.

No matter the model, Ice Castles have changed ice fishing in many ways. Families use them for weekend "ice camping" adventures in the winter. Surveys on some of the state's biggest lakes have shown an increase in winter and night time fishing pressure due to the growing popularity of wheelhouses.

Yet it's hard to know the impact of wheelhouses in terms of overall fishing pressure on the state's lakes during the winter, according to Jack Lauer, southern Minnesota regional fisheries manager with the Minnesota Department of Natural



Ice Castle workers are producing 32 to 36 units a week to keep up with the demand. A workforce of about 160 produce the company's 50 different models. Workers in Montevideo are shown on Feb. 2.

Resources. Wheelhouses are among a plethora of advances, from electronics to portable houses, that have expanded opportunities for anglers, he noted.

Wheelhouses have certainly opened up ice fishing for more people. Drexler said customers come from all ages. Many are purchased by families. He knows more moms and dads and their children are enjoying time together on the ice because of them.

There are private Facebook groups for Ice Castle owners who share information and ideas on how to enjoy their units.

There is also a growing after-market as well. Entrepreneurs are producing everything from mounts for rattle reels to magnetic fish catch "scoreboards" designed for use in Ice Castles.

Looking forward, Drexler said the company is looking to develop a bigger footprint in the summer camper market. It's producing some models without holes in the floor for sale in warmer weather states.

The ability of the units to be set flat on the surface makes them popular as RVs for many, especially seniors. No stairs are needed.

Drexler anticipates that demand for Ice Castles will continue to be strong, and not just because more people are discovering them. The lives of Ice Castle owners change, he noted. Some couples downsize to a smaller model when they become empty-nesters. Others will upsize as their family grows or they have more time for recreation.

Overall, he said the trend is towards larger units.