Cold as ice

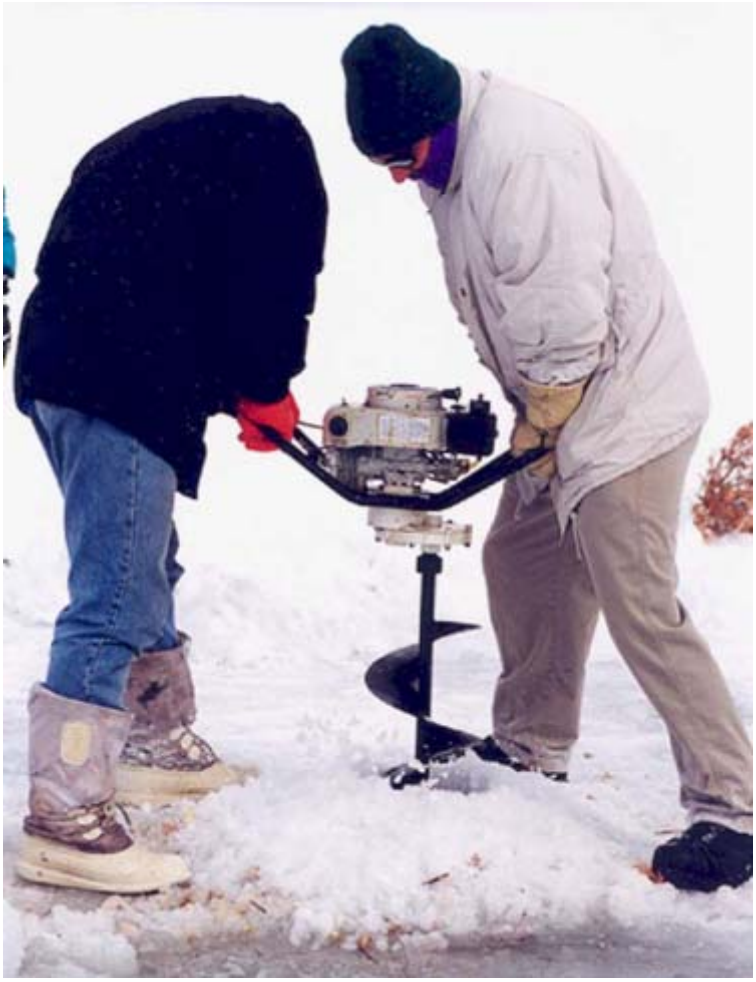
by Tom Wilson

Cold, dark and a little scary: while these words have likely been used to describe many an ex-spouse, we're here to talk about ice diving. For those of you in the tropics blessed with seemingly limitless visibility, myriad fish species, and water the temperature people bathe in, this is not your average day at the beach.

I'm sure there are many areas around the world where ice diving is as normal as any other form of diving, and the Southern Ontario region of Canada is one of them. Sure, most of the diving here is done during the summer when temperatures reach 30 degrees Celsius, but not everyone is blessed with having their own sled dog team around here (to be honest, I don't know anyone with one, despite what some people like to tell visiting American tourists) and ya hafta do SOMETHING in the winter, so why not ice dive?

Right behind "Are you insane?", the question we hear the most is "Isn't it cold?", and the answer is not as easy as you might think. We tell eager ice diving students, "It's not the cold, it's being cold which is uncomfortable." It seems to make them feel better about entering water which is as close to freezing as socks are to feet. What it means is that just like when you're above water on even the coldest winter day, if you dress appropriately for the conditions it's not a problem. Drysuits are common but most people do their first ice dives in a 6mm wetsuit, filled with warm water before their dive begins to

The Nikonos V is well suited to under-ice photography due to itís small size, exceptional optics and simplistic controls which can be manipulated even with chilled fingers. Threesome ice diving around here is performed using a safety line attached to each diver which makes navigation a snap for even the most directionally challenged. Nikon F4, 24-120 lens at f8 and 1/125 sec.

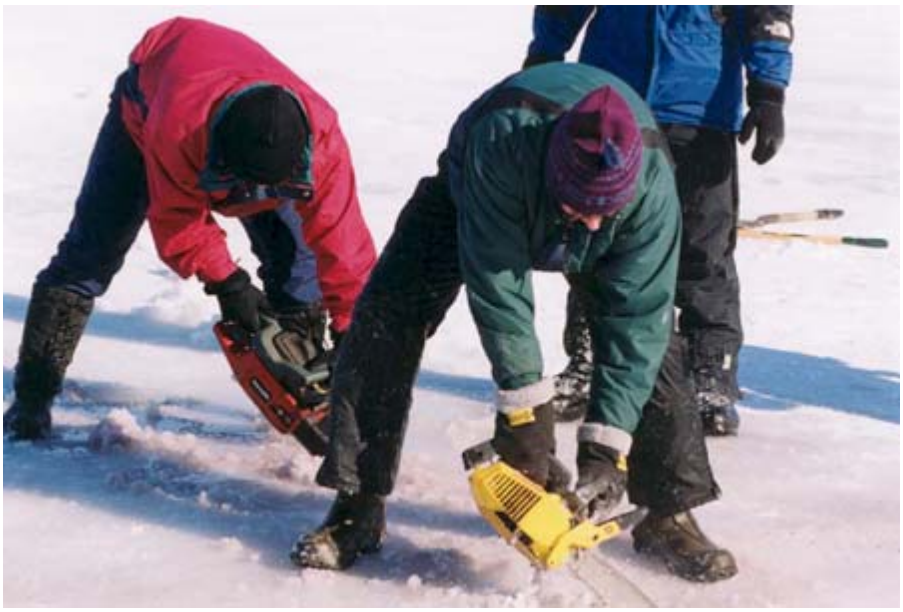


Using a motorized auger is the easiest way to start creating the hole for ice diving, which is cut in a triangle for strength, safety, and ease of access. Nikon F4, 80-200 lens at f4 and 1/250.

Green tinted water makes the blue sky stand out even more when you look up through the triangular hole. Patches of snow on the ice lead to dark areas which can cover miles. Nikonos V with 15 mm lens at f4 and 1/125 sec. on Fuji 400 print film.

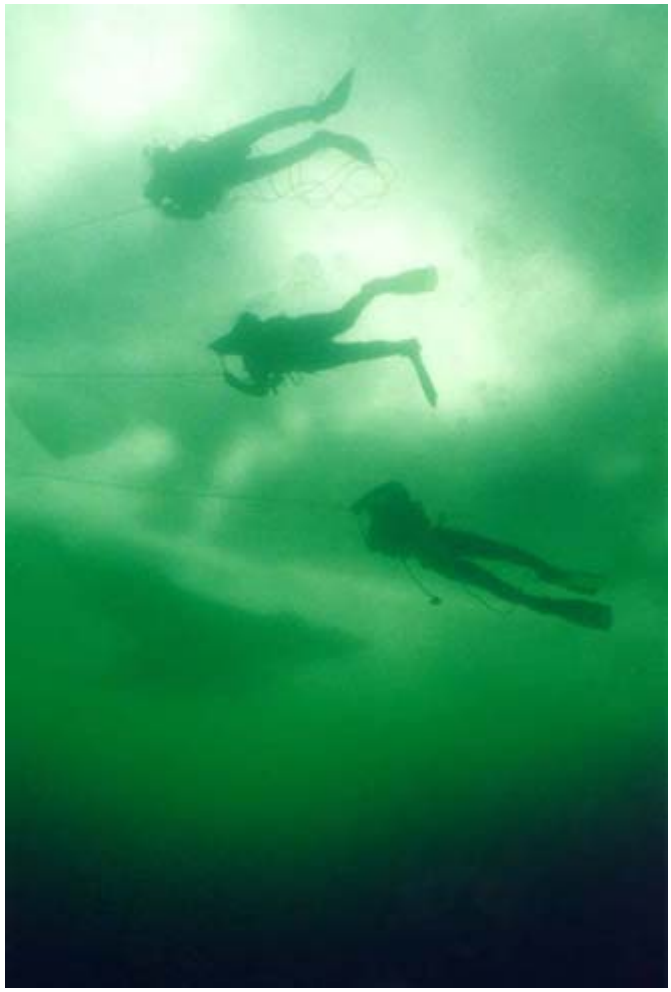
prevent that initial chill of frigid water trickling down your back. Usually people come out of the water after 30 minutes or so with only a chill to hands and feet (adrenalin works wonders). However, more than one person has emerged from an ice dive and moaned "It's better than sex!!" when having warm water poured into their gloves to ease the pain of frozen fingers. Research into that claim continues.

Safety precautions abound: harnesses, safety lines from divers to the surface, safety diver, line tenders, special courses, and around the hole procedures like shovelling circles and radial spokes to aid in navigation in the extremely unlikely event a tether breaks loose. People have died ice diving, but it is incredibly rare. There are stories of people who've disconnected the line to their harness or who used cotton-based rope which froze and broke, but when following

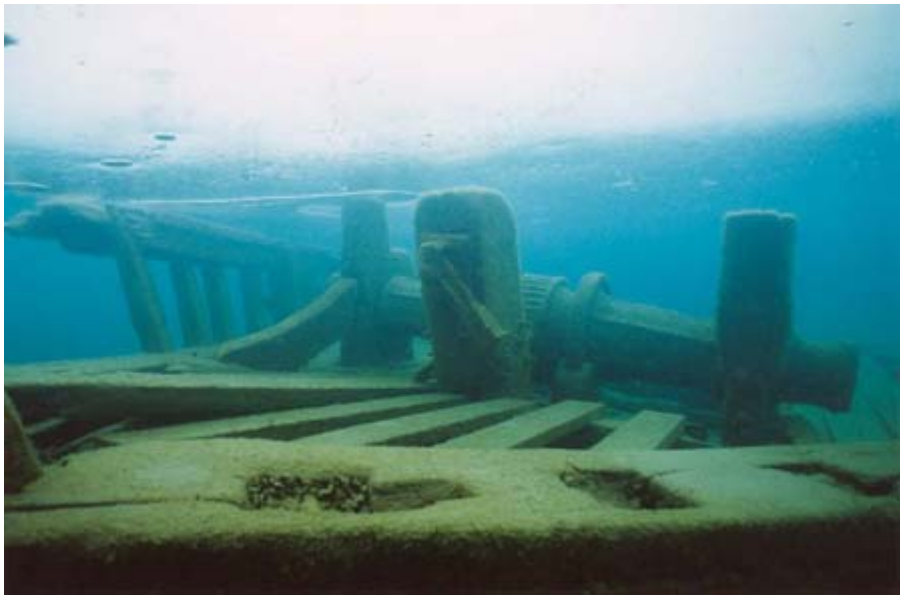


Chainsaws are the preferred method for cutting the hole in the ice, but if the ice is thicker than the chainsaw is long then you may have to get creative. Nikon F4, 80-200 lens at f8 and 1/250 sec.

Cutting a good hole for ice diving is time consuming, but critical. When things are rushed and the hole is too small, instant over-crowding can result. Nikonos V with 15mm lens, f4 at 1/125 sec. on Fuji 100 print film.



Ice diving around here is performed using a safety line attached to each diver which makes navigation a snap for even the most directionally challenged. Nikonos V, 15mm lens at f2.8 and 1/60 sec. on Fuji 400 print film.



Finding a site where you can combine ice diving with wreck diving, and get them in the same photo, are fairly rare. Nikonos V, 15mm lens at f4 and 1/60 sec. on Fuji 400 print film.

proper procedures problems other than entirely-manageable regulator free flows are incredibly uncommon.

A number of factors limit where you can ice dive: convenient proximity to shore for hauling gear back and forth, low current, good visibility (since the ice prevents wind from reaching the water, visibility is usually excellent, which around here means approximately 40feet). You also need decent ice thickness - six to eight inches is fine but it's nicer when there's enough to drive cars and trucks onto (12 inches) so you can circle-the-wagons and block the

Coulda been alive, coulda been dead, with the water temperature this low marine life slows to a drawl. Nikonos V, 35 mm lens at f22 and 1:2 macro framer, Fuji 100 print film.

This photo gives you a sense of the thickness of the ice. What she is holding onto is the triangular block that was cut to form the hole, then pushed down to move it out of the way. Nikonos V, 15mm lens, f4 and 1/125 sec. on Fuji 400 print film.

bone-chilling wind. Around here, ice not being thick enough is rarely a problem, but too much can be unless you have a particularly long chain saw to cut through it - around 22-inches by mid-February. We're fortunate to be able to measure ice in inches, a few hours north and they measure in feet (ok, so we're not entirely metric).

Photography under ice is not particularly difficult, right up to the point you lose feeling in your hands. Like your dive gear, it's best if you can keep camera equipment in the car until immediately before it will be used, and keep it dry before going into the water to prevent water from entering controls and freezing. Afterwards get your gear somewhere warm if possible for the same reason.

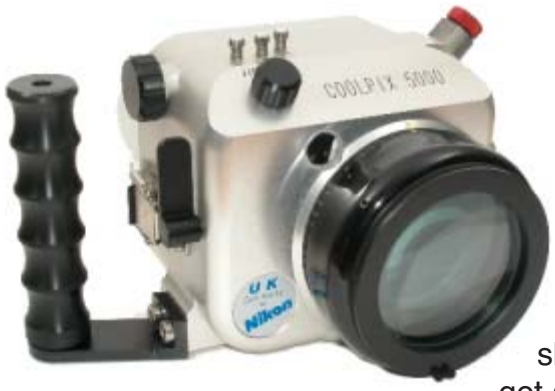
While it may be a blisteringly bright day above with the sunshine glaring off the snow, that same snow will keep the light levels low under the ice. Exposure presents something of a problem. The scene will be brightest directly above you, and the light falls off rapidly as the lateral distance increases so it is not uncommon to have the top of the frame overexposed and the bottom severely underexposed.

If you're really lucky and can find a wreck that meets all the criteria for a good ice diving location, it's a real accomplishment if you can get the wreck and ice in the same shot. I've checked, but none of Jim Church's books list ice-wreck photography, so you have to wing it. I prefer the look of available light, but you can also use strobe with it to bring out otherwise lost details which is a tough balancing act if you want to make it look natural.

There are actually some advantages to diving in winter: sites are less crowded, fish are more approachable (i.e.: nearly frozen), sites which are off limits due to summer boat traffic are finally free of those pesky jet skis which seem to like using dive flags as turning markers, and you can dive in the middle of the lake without worrying about getting seasick.

Tom Wilson

Big on Image, Small on Price



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