

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

Steady Eddy figures this would have been a great winter for icefishing if it hadn't been for the weather.

Or, to be specific, if it hadn't been for the way media reports the weather.

"On TV," he laments, "they use words like *bitter cold*, *cruel*, *painful* temperatures and *killer* storms. They make it sound like Siberia out there, so nobody goes out."

The weather has shut down the bait shop for three straight weekends in a row. Weekends are usually bonanzas in normal winters, when the sun is up, the air is calm and the heavy, strong perch coming out of the ice touch your very soul with their vibrations.

Only the hardest of souls fish when the winds are up, and if the winds are strong even the hardest of souls stop fishing. The winds sweeping the length of Mendota have all the sting of the Russian steppe.

The irony is that the winter started out so full of promise. We had ice early. We had snow early. The prognosis, as they say in the scrub room, was for great fishing.

But then, Steady says, the cold settled in, and the media kept reminding everybody that while this particular batch of frigid Arctic air was finally moving out, we had better enjoy the brief respite because an equally frigid batch of Arctic air was about to move in.

"It's not the weather that frosts me," Steady says. "It's the way media reports it. It's enough to scare you out of your Sores."

Calvin Rutstrum was saying the same thing when he wrote in *Paradise Below Zero*:

"At this writing, in an outer Minneapolis-St. Paul suburb on the St. Croix River, I am looking through an array of picture windows on the heaviest field of drifted snow that has fallen over the Midwest in memory...."

"Indoors, a battery of thermostats automatically control the desired temperature of each individual room. At hand are the amenities of modern life—good books, stereophonic music, radio, television, and a choice of fine food. Since my body from hours of indoor relaxation has temporarily been deprived of much nerve force and strength, a physically compelling desire obsesses me to remain within the warmth of my shelter—the list of attractive attributes and conveniences mentioned complementing this authority over the body...."

On the other hand, Rutstrum says, he knows from many winters' experience the value of physical activity in this season, so out he goes into the "frigid atmosphere" to enjoy the durable benefits of a natural winter environment.

"I meet the outdoors," he says, "on its own variable terms. Enjoying an unexplainable lust for the challenge of adverse weather—a sort of love for crisis all through life—I will venture outdoors on foot or on

snowshoes with proper clothing no matter how rugged the weather, a blizzard, in truth, being preferred."

The initial effect upon one's comfort, Calvin says, will be apparent: At first, the body suggests—though the mind tends to overrule—that a mistake has been made in even leaving the comfort of indoors at all.

Then, gradually, a change is sensed. The anatomical furnace, having been stoked with food before leaving, starts to generate natural heat—a physiological change from indoor torpor to outdoor animation that becomes surprisingly apparent.

"The Old Guy," Steady says in admiration, "has got that right."

One of the coziest places in all outdoors is an icefishing shack on the windswept ice—and if there's a blizzard blowing, all the better.

Plastic is okay, but we are talking character. We are talking poetry as well as practicality. We are talking what Sigurd Olson called "the dark house."

"Though it was twenty below," Sig wrote, "we took off for the old haunts.... A tiny tarpaper shack off the end of a long point was our goal. A friend had set it up weeks ago, told us where the spear was cached and the wooden decoy. For its use, we were to bring him a fish. That meant we had to take two. We shoveled the snow away from the door, fanned a flame to life in the little stove, and dug the spear and the decoy out of a drift. Six inches of ice had to be cut out of the hole. We filled the coffeepot, closed the door, and settled down to wait. Outside the wind howled, but the little shelter was cozy and warm...."

At first, Sigurd reports, they could see nothing but the green translucent water, but gradually their vision adjusted and they could see farther and farther into the depths, finally to the bottom itself. Liquid streamed through the snow and ice, and the bottom all but glowed.

As the coffee began to simmer they shed their outer jackets and mitts. Outside, it was still close to twenty below and the snow was whispering. After an hour they began to relax and talk quietly of many things.

If more people had a dark house to fish in, maybe more people would be fishing. Then again, it may not be the weather that spooked people. Maybe it was Steady Eddy himself when he was on "All Things Considered" with Susan Stamberg the other week discussing icefishing. When she asked him what a good bait was, he said: "Maggots." When she asked him how you kept the maggots from freezing, he said: "You keep them in your mouth until you use them."

Steady figured it was probably a put-on when she called. She likewise, when he answered.