



# Finding Nemo

## Underwater Camera Applications

**N**o question that the unmistakable blips sashaying across your electronics are a herd of big 'gills. You've been trying to catch them for hours, but no matter what you do, the fish seem entirely content to merely follow your bait up or down—even to just stare at it when you hold it steady. It's the strangest and most frustrating thing. Finally, a friend plops down an Aqua-Vu Camera and says, "Set the hook!"

So you set it just to humor your buddy. Fish on! Then, like a jolt, a revelation: The fish have been eating your bait all day long. You simply weren't detecting the bites. You now watch fish after fish ease up and inhale your bait without ever sending a signal back up the line.

This scenario haunts even the best ice anglers. And I suspect it's a recurring event as regular as a revolving door, for those who don't use an underwater camera. For people accustomed to using cameras, however, going fishing without one feels like entering a lab without a microscope. Underwater cameras lend many clues about what's going on under the ice, yielding real images that are nearly impossible to misinterpret.

South Dakota ice angler Dennis Kassube used his underwater camera to select for bigger fish during the 2005 North American Fishing Championship, on Lake Mary near Alexandria, Minnesota. "Our flashers revealed that we were on fish," says Kassube.

"Everybody fishing was catching fish. But we needed to catch bigger fish. The key was getting our bait in front of the right size bluegills and crappies—which is impossible with just sonar."

According to legendary iceman Dave Genz, "Cameras make it easier to quickly identify fish behavior and location. In fact, some ice-fishing tournament anglers may spend an entire day searching with cameras. With a two-man team, one guy drills while the other views. Some days these boys never wet a line, but they take notes and compare observations, which gives them a better understanding of the fish and how to catch them."

The search to pattern fish might take four holes or forty. Sooner or later, though, you see some fish. Continue employing the camera and ask yourself: What is it about the vegetation at this depth that's compelling fish to hold here? What is it about the depth? What's the temp?



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Often, the answers come after seeing the same scenario unfold over and over in a number of locations.

Before sonar, the scene on ice was often just a man holding a pole, standing over a hole in the ice. Using sonar was revolutionary and remains a vital ice-fishing tool today. Genz says that before underwater cameras, anglers had only the support of sonar to locate and understand fish behavior. "We used to search for pockets in the weeds, mainly so we still could differentiate our baits from fish and vegetation on the screen," he explains. "But the underwater camera reveals that the biggest 'gills were in the dense weeds, which taught us that we needed to get our baits right into the dense stalks. During the day, a panfish's main mission is to hide from pike. And if there's heavy cover available, you can bet panfish are going to be hanging deep in the cover."

To interact with 'gills burrowed deep in cover, downviewing is best. "Downviewing works great in heavy cover—it's like eavesdropping right in their living rooms. Position the camera lens so it's pointing at the lake bottom, then drop it down the same hole you're fishing. Downviewing allows you to get right into the weedy clusters in areas we could never really fish right before," Genz says. "A sonar just lights up from top to bottom and you have no idea what you're seeing. Cameras allow you to probe down between these dense stalks to find big panfish."

Underwater cameras also have enabled us to see pods of panfish suspending well above bottom, inside strange veils of milky-looking water surrounded by clearer water. Eventually we determined that these veils

were composed of massive densities of *Daphnia pulex*—a large zooplankton species common to northern natural lakes. Not coincidentally, *Daphnia* is the number-one food source for winter panfish.

Discovering water temperature zones—particularly warmer water zones—can lead to improved catches of many species, including walleyes.

Several underwater viewing systems, such as the Aqua-Vu DT, Scout SRT, and the Marcum VS560, provide on-screen display of water temperature at depth, a critical feature once you understand why knowing the water temperature is so important.

Last winter, friends and I fished a lake that we knew was home to a robust population of walleyes. On the first trip, we looked down nearly

50 holes with the camera without seeing a single fish. Finally, paydirt.

In addition to lots of walleyes, the big surprise was the water temperature: a balmy 43°F. We backtracked and found that nearly all of our other holes read 39°F. We also noted a definite increase in the density of Robbins pondweed in the area with warmer water.

Genz keeps a close eye on water temperatures. "Late in fall as water temps approach freezing, those notorious northwest winds push the cooler water to the south, leaving behind warmer water in the north and west corners of the lake," he says. "At first-ice, some of our best spots lie on this side of the lake. Fish definitely seek out the warmest water, especially in winter. We're always looking to find 38°F to 39°F water. In areas where we find it at 35°F to 36°F, it's just about a given that panfish won't be active."

## Search Cameras

For searching, an Aqua-Vu Quad 360 or a DT-100 are great tools. The Quad simultaneously displays a 4-way view of the surrounding terrain. With this unit, it's easy to quickly survey in all directions before moving on—no need to twist the cable to spin the camera. Similarly, the DT provides on-screen display of camera direction. An arrow appears on the monitor, showing you the exact direction the lens faces, no matter where you're standing. The magic here happens when you spin the camera to a direction that shows fish. The arrow points your way directly to the school, showing where to drill the next hole and begin fishing. It also displays depth at camera level, information that helps you immediately find your bait on the screen. A real time-saver.



Aqua-Vu DT-100

Aqua-Vu Quad 360

Marcum VS560

"Honestly, water temperature and relative fish location were big mysteries before I started using the camera," says Genz.

## OBSERVATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

We've learned from watching panfish, especially bluegills, that they often mouth the front of a jighead, not the hook-end. We've also noticed that combining baits that have contrasting colors, like an orange leadhead coupled with a white maggot, can actually decrease catch rates. The fish hone in on the colored leadhead, attacking the bait head-on, which prevents them from inhaling the hook-end. This explains how you can get hammered, strike back, and still miss.

The solution is to take a 1/80-ounce white or glow-white bare leadhead jig with a barbed collar (no body), the leadhead nearly the color of the live waxworm, which comes next. Select a single plump waxworm, nick off the head and thread the morsel onto the jighead, just as you would a plastic grub. Snug the waxworm tight to the leadhead over the barbed collar. You're now good to go.

The same thing can be done with a maggot, but select a jig without the barbed collar, which deflates and drains these delicate baits. Choose jigs with hook shanks a bit shorter than the length of the live-bait. You want a streamlined package that leaves just a tip of tail wriggling behind.

"Something I've done as a result of watching panfish feed on the Aqua-Vu is T-bone the bait (a waxworm or micro plastic), hooking it in the middle," Genz recounts. "T-boning forces the fish to commit to the hook because it doesn't show

them a definite head end—the portion fish prefer to key on."

We've also watched dozens of walleyes strike spoons near the head or line-tie. When they do, the hook and minnowhead dangle freely outside the fish's mouth. Anglers might also be surprised how often walleyes completely miss the bait. Most misses are walleyes swinging at fast-moving jiggling spoons. Anglers jig too fast and too frequently, without the



» Underwater cameras allow us to learn more about fish behavior than we ever thought possible.

necessary long pauses. Hyperactive jiggling might work for some situations, but given what our camera revealed, long pauses (10 to 20 seconds) are a better option.

It's captivating to see that things happening below aren't as we imagined. We've watched channel catfish swim absolutely vertical in the water, lightly brushing baits with their entire bodies, nose to tail. We've been shocked as muskies and pike have engulfed entire camera housings. Small pike have bullied an entire legion of bluegills away from our baits. The largest yellow perch in a school often refused to strike any bait.

But drop the spoon in the mud and the perch go crazy rooting in the silt to uncover and eat it. Every excursion with an underwater camera has the potential to reveal something extraordinary. ■



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