

Boat Care for Winter Fishing Enthusiasts

By Aaron Shirley

A fresh blanket of snow glistened along the banks of the mighty Niagara River under the warm January sun. The emerald green water meandered so peacefully around us as we made a drift down one of my favourite stretches of river. My mind wandered in the tranquility that surrounded us, as I witnessed a rare sight - a bald eagle swooping down from an overhanging branch to attack a seagull. Content can only begin to describe the way I was feeling on this mild winter day. I was quickly reminded as to the reason I was on this majestic river, when a fish jerked down my rod tip. After a short tussle, my fishing partner slipped the net under a beautifully coloured steelhead, and I couldn't help but think to myself just how lucky I was to experience such a tremendous winter fishery.



Although running a boat throughout the winter months can be enjoyable, some very necessary precautions must be taken to ensure you will minimize the obvious risks involved.

Pre-Winter Season Maintenance

Part of the preparations I take for operating a boat during the winter, is to make sure to change the gear lubricant in the lower end of my outboard engine in late fall. This is to ensure that there is no residual water in the lower end from summer use, apart from regular maintenance. Even a small amount of water in the gear case could freeze and crack the casing. Only the use of an outboard motor should be used in the winter, as an inboard/outboard engine is rather

difficult to drain all the water out of, and will more than likely cause costly repairs. I only use a tough riveted aluminum boat in the winter as well, as the riveted aluminum hull will flex a little in the extreme conditions, and you will hit a lot of ice on the river during a cold snap. I make sure to grease all my fittings, and change the oil in all four-stroke engines as well. I use a 5W 30 type of oil for winter use. Since the air is a little thinner during the winter (similar to higher altitudes on mountain lakes), a different mix of air into the engine can improve performance. If you notice that your outboard is stalling frequently at a low throttle in the winter, you may want to consult with your dealer to make changes to your air mixture.

I make sure to grease the tongue and ball, and lubricate all other moving parts on the trailer more frequently in the colder temps. Applying a little electrical paste on the trailer wire connections will help prevent corrosion from forming due to road salt. I also like to spray a lubricant on bunk trailers, such as silicone, to help prevent the aluminum hull of the boat from freezing to the trailer.

The Launching of the Boat

I always carry salt, a shovel and something to break up the ice to launch the boat, as there can be a lot of ice and snow built up in the launch ramp in the winter. I also drive a Ford Explorer, which has a four-wheel-drive, 'four wheel low' system, which is highly beneficial when launching in the often-icy conditions. Installing a front winch on two-wheel-drive trucks can save some aggravation, as I have seen some vehicles slip back into the drink with the weight of the boat and trailer. Some unlucky anglers haven't been able to make it back up the launch ramp at all, requiring assistance, and tying up the launch ramp for extended periods of time.

After I launch my boat, I let my engine soak in the water for a few minutes before starting it on really cold days (-6 Celsius or below). This is done to allow the lower end of the engine to match the temperature of the water, reducing wear and tear. When I start my engine, I watch for the telltale jet stream of water flowing out of the engine. If there is no out-flow of water, I use a piece of wire to free the ice in the hole. Sometimes it can take a few minutes to get going, just be sure not to run your engine very long if there is no out-flow of water. Start it up every few minutes until it starts flowing.

Mid-Winter Tricks

I normally fill up with an ethanol-based gasoline, or add a small amount of gas-line antifreeze when fueling up. I also make sure to fill the fuel tank completely full after every trip, to help prevent any condensation from building up in the fuel tank overnight.

I always carry a large flat-headed screwdriver in the boat to carefully scrape the buildup of ice that forms on the trolling motor. Actually, carrying a

good assortment of tools on board can be highly beneficial, as you never know what kind of trouble you may be faced with in the winter.

On the really cold days (like -10 Celsius or below), I keep my engine running while I am drifting. I would only do this with a quiet, fuel-efficient 4-stroke, as noisy 2-stroke engines running through a drift can shut the fishing down quite quickly. Trimming up and down your engine periodically will hamper the effects of ice building up around the engine. If you don't adjust your power trim once in a while on a brutally cold day, your engine may freeze in the current position with several inches of ice. This will cause you to put a lot of strain on your power trim, or possibly not allow you to trim up your engine at all. Individuals without power trim should also pull up their outboard once in a while throughout the day when it's really cold out, or you will not be able to pull up your engine whatsoever at the end of the day.

Post-Fishing Maintenance

At the end of the day when I pull the boat out of the water, I lower my engine all the way down immediately to drain the water from the lower end. You must do this right away in really cold temps, as it can only take minutes for the trapped water to freeze, potentially causing serious damage. I then turn my engine over, and leave the engine running for only a few seconds. This will help to get the trapped water out of the impeller and water pump. I then drain my live wells and take out the boat's main drain plug, to drain the hull of any water. If you forget, a buildup of water could freeze and cause damage, or at the very least, freeze up your bilge pump.

When I get home, I charge my deep cycles and main battery after every trip as preventative maintenance. I also try and wash the boat and trailer every chance I get on a semi-warm day to get the road salt off as well.

Winter Comfort

I would highly recommend wearing a floatation suit in cold weather. Not only will they keep you afloat should you fall overboard, but they will also help to keep you warm and dry (in the boat!). Layering up with thermal underwear, polypropylene socks, with thicker wool socks overtop, proper outerwear, gloves, mitts and hats will help keep you warm and dry all day, allowing the fishing experience to be much more enjoyable. On really cold days, I use the chemical reacting heat pads, and take a hot beverage in a thermos.

All this preventative maintenance will help you to run safely and problem-free throughout the sub-zero temperatures of winter, and your boat package will also be worth more when you go to sell it, if you take the time to properly

maintain your rig. A higher level of maintenance is definitely required when running a boat throughout the winter months, however; it only requires a little extra time and care when you get on a schedule.

As a side note, you should consult with your dealer about the precautions to take with the use of your particular rig in the winter, as every boat package is unique. These are only some basic guidelines.

As long as you exercise common sense, winter boat fishing can be an exciting adventure. Safe winter boating!