

Lake Simcoe ice hut operators still standing on shore

Ice hut operators on Lake Simcoe are playing a game they don't like.

It's one that has them waiting impatiently on shore.

The unseasonably mild winter engulfing southern Ontario has delayed the lake from freezing. That's keeping anglers on shore and hut operators from commencing their seasonal business.

It's a far cry from just a year ago when Old Man Winter arrived early and hardened the lake's surface in time for the season's traditional Jan. 1 kickoff.

A spokesman from Bonnie Boats on the shores of Jackson's Point, who wished to remain anonymous, noted the lake is ice-free from the shore out to the main body.

And this weekend's forecast isn't promising. It calls for temperatures to hit an unseasonable balmy 10 degrees Celsius on Sunday.

"The longer (the mild weather) goes, the less chance there will be of getting good ice.

"Right now it doesn't even look like its going to freeze."

While this year might seem like the warmest on record, the spokesman noted longtime area residents say the lake didn't freeze up during the winter of 1937.

Based on their own experiences, the Bonnie Boat operator recalled the latest he was able to start his ice-fishing business was on Jan. 28 in 1975 and '80.

While the southerly shores of Simcoe are void of ice, some angling has taken place on the eastern shore near Port Bolster, which is traditionally one of the first areas to freeze up, and in the southeast part of Cooks Bay.

Operators though, are being cautious.

"We're out now, but it's touch and go," warned Casey Creber, operator of Casey's Huts.

Now in his 39th year in catering to ice anglers, Creber has huts placed about a mile from shore and says catches of yellow perch have been good. He reported on Wednesday that ice thickness varied from nine to 13 inches.

"Right now we're using ATVs to get people out. And we're only taking two people at a time. If conditions get bad, we'll soon get our huts in."

Like other Lake Simcoe operators, Creber notes this year isn't the latest he's placed huts out. In the 1960s there was one year in which he didn't begin business until Feb. 1. And in that year, he had to get his huts off by



Mike Hayakawa

March 1.

Being a seasoned veteran of Simcoe, Creber speculates increased air pollution and the possibility of global warming has altered ice conditions to the point where it has to be closely monitored.

"These days the ice has a lot of dirt in it because our environment is so polluted. And the sun can do a lot of damage in one to two hours," he cited.

Wil Wegman, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Natural Resources' Aurora office, noted some huts were placed on the extreme

southeast part of Cooks Bay last weekend.

"It's a limited area where the huts were because you could see open water to the north and to the west," Wegman cited after being out on the ice last weekend.

A call to Keffer's Fish Hut Rental in Keswick confirmed the action in Cooks Bay is now on hold.

"Ice conditions aren't favourable, call back in four days," the voice message said.

When asked how much business has been lost so far with the late start, operators said it will only be known if and when the ice fishing season commences and concludes.

"Sometimes we get busier when there's a short season," cited the Bonnie Boats operator from his past experiences.

"More people will try to get out during the week and try to salvage what they can of the shortened season."

Despite the prolonged delay, operators remain optimistic this season can still be salvaged.

For that to happen, though, a prolonged spell of frigid weather and little

wind has to roll in. Such conditions would prevent whatever ice has formed from breaking off or shifting. Snow isn't welcome, because it can insulate the ice surface.

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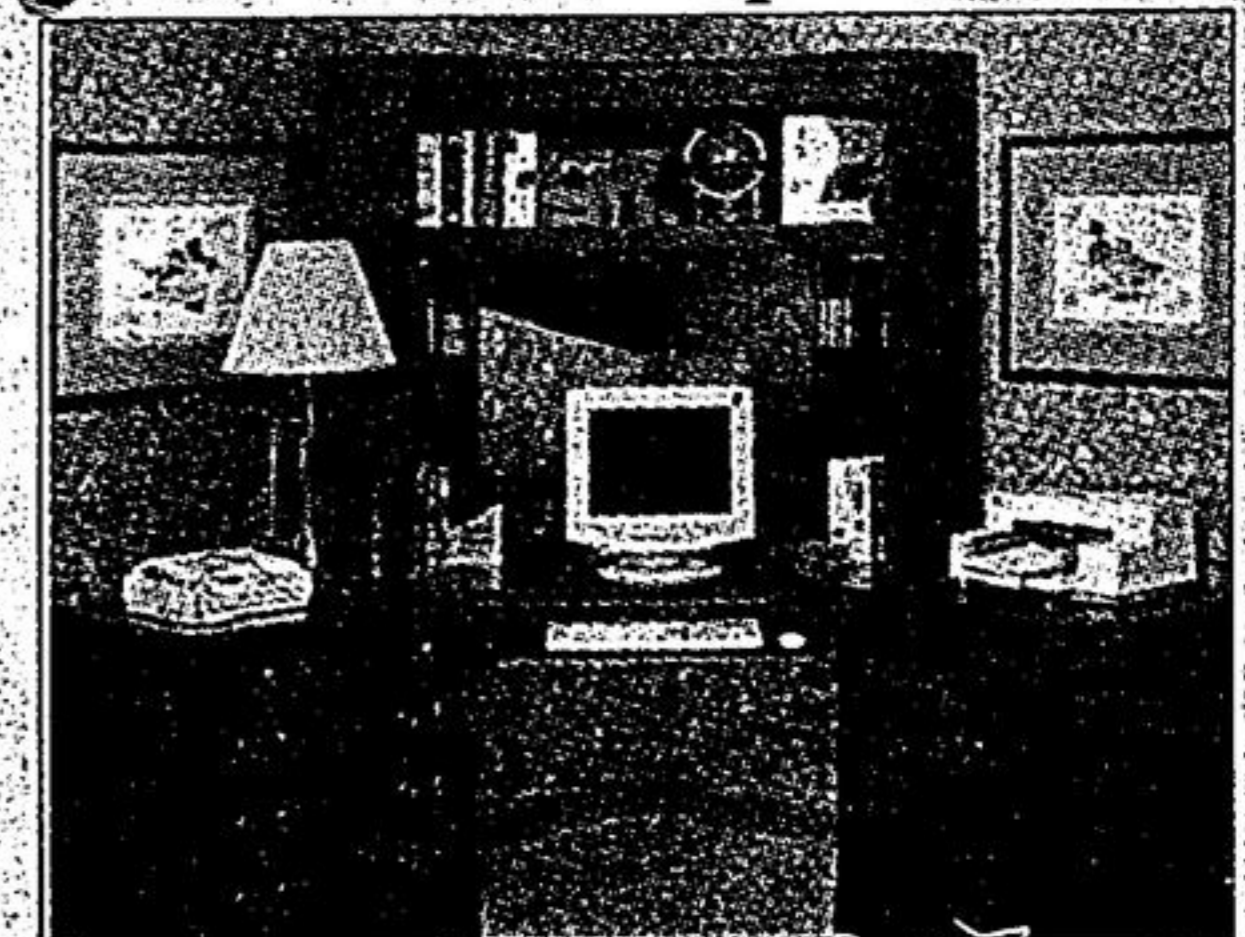
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