

Waiting and watching the ICE

Article by Cathy Kuntz

They are lake residents, resort owners, construction workers and recreation seekers. Some watch it because they're curious, others because it directly affects their day-to-day lives. They are ice watchers.

Watching the lake ice has been and still is a part of the culture of Muskoka. Ice out means that spring is right around the corner.

"Every year is different," says longtime resident Russ Black. He and his wife Audrey have summered on Eilean Gowan Island since the early 1970s, and for the past 20 years it has been their year-round home. "Sometimes, the first week of December, you can't get the boat in the water. Other years, I've put the canoe in the water and paddled around Wilson Island on New Year's Day. Two years ago I motored into Indianhead Harbour on March 24. Other years I was using a snowmobile until mid-April."

Black tests the ice with the precision of an engineer, which he is. He methodically chops a hole in the ice with an axe and marks his route with wooden stakes across the lake to the marina.

"Gone are the days when people would place an old car or truck on the frozen lake and see when it would disappear," says Black. For them, studying the lake ice is not just a hobby; they need to make sure they have enough food and supplies in case they

are stranded during ice in or ice out times. But not to worry: when conditions change quickly and they can't take a snowmobile or boat to the marina, they can call a neighbour, also a year-round island resident, who has an air boat.

"The ice went out of Haystack Bay on March 27 (2015)," says Brian Tapley, a third generation ice watcher on Lake of Bays. He is also the third generation of Tapleys to own and operate the Bondi Village Cottage Resort. His grandfather came to Muskoka in 1905.

"After buying a farm and discovering the only thing he could grow on the land was rock, he established a cottage and resort on 620 acres of land on Haystack Bay, Lake of Bays," Tapley says.

"My grandfather kept a diary of weather, including ice out. My dad was quite a character for writing down the weather. And now, I like to watch the weather. It has amazing power and controls our lives." His sister Nancy is now the keeper of the family weather diaries.

Tapley and other resort owners depend on consistently cold winter conditions in order to maintain their snowmobile trails, track set cross-country ski trails and provide safe ice fishing.

"I pay attention to the weather because I decide what I'm going to do by looking at the weather,"

Tapley says.

After studying his family's records, he has come to the conclusion that the ice is going out a day and a half earlier than 100 years ago.

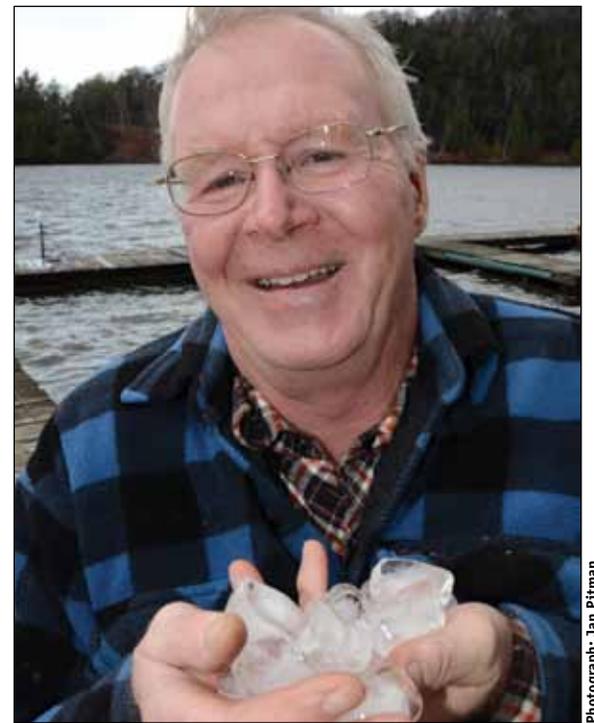
"It doesn't sound like much, but it's probably coming in later, too," he says. "We used to go over portions of the lake in December until mid-April. Now the snowmobile season doesn't start until New Year's and ends the second week in March. The season has shrunk from four months to two months. It doesn't stay cold, and a day of rain ruins the snow and ice."

For Tapley, the costs of battling the unpredictable winter have become too high.

"The winter has become a poor cousin to the summer and fall. For me, as a business person, running a resort through the winter is not a good business proposition anymore. If I was building a resort now, I'd close after Thanksgiving and open mid-May."

The Tapley family submits their collection of ice out dates to the Dorset Environmental Science Centre, an environmental monitoring and reporting branch of the Ontario Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. His information is also used by IceWatch.

IceWatch is a group of citizen scientist volunteers who are spread throughout Canada. They record freeze and thaw dates of lakes and rivers. The infor-



Across the district, people carefully watch the ice thawing on Muskoka's lakes and rivers. Large sheets can easily damage docks (left). Brian Tapley is a third generation ice watcher on Lake of Bays (right).

mation they gather allows scientists to monitor the effects of climate change on Canadian ecosystems.

Robert McLeman, Associate Professor of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, heads the program.

People across Muskoka have submitted ice off dates over the years as seen on IceWatch's map of observations. The reports are sporadic, only 26, but they still help scientists who are studying the effect of climate change over the years.

"We have Lake Muskoka observations from 1983 to 2005," McLeman says.

"We see that, beginning in 1996 to 2001, a five-year period, the lake seemed to be thawing a few weeks earlier."

In 1994, one observer on Lake of Bays reported ice off on April 25. In 2010, an Alport Bay (Lake Muskoka) observer reported ice off on March 3.

"It's a quick and easy indicator of winter warming trends. We're finding these trends vary from region to region. Some areas see bigger changes than others."

Overall, there is a slight warming trend. The ice is off the lakes earlier.

"Last year, the lake was still frozen solid on April 1. It was well below zero temperatures consistently and a lot of snow cover."

"The lakes tell an interesting story," McLeman says. "It's like making a quilt. We need to stitch together the pieces that give us a complete picture and understanding about climate change. Participants can talk to their fathers and grandfathers, who tell them the lake was frozen on Remembrance Day of a certain year."

"With IceWatch . . . we want to get people interested in and excited about environmental science," says McLeman. "It starts a conversation about what the weather has done over the years. We want to get people talking about it."

Those wanting to become a citizen scientist and help track changes in the natural environment are welcome to register on the NatureWatch website www.naturewatch.ca Then just submit your obser-

ventions to IceWatch, FrogWatch PlantWatch and WormWatch.

The Algonquin Park website shows Lake Opeongo's ice out history since 1964. It confirms what others have observed; that we are experiencing a warming trend, with spring coming about two weeks earlier. Their ice out dates range from as early as March 29 in 2012 to as late as May 15 in 1972. The average is April 23. Their official ice out date in 2015 was May 1, about a week later than average.

In 2013, the Muskoka Brewery posted an ice out contest on their Facebook page. They posted a photo of a keg on the lake with a rope tied to shore and asked followers to guess what date the keg would drop through the ice. Guesses ranged from April 16 to April 30. Three followers won with the guess of April 18.

Mary Ann Taylor has spent time on Muskoka lakes all of her life. She and her husband, Charles, purchased a lot on Wilson Island in 1986, where they spent their summers and have made many trips over the ice in winter. They became permanent residents in 1996.

"We owned many snow machines, boats and even owned two air boats or Scoots in order to safely cross ice and water," Taylor says. "Some Christmases we had to return from visiting our family by helicopter. In those days, for a price, Hydro One would drop us off on our dock."

Over the next 10 years, they loved the excitement of watching the ice go out. "We would sit on the west point of Wilson Island and watch the strange ice formations as it broke. It was different every year."

In 2003 they built a new home on Eilean Gowan Island. Their ice out contest has been taking place for more than 14 years.

"Our purpose in creating the contest was to get the eager islanders excited about the possibility of spring on its way. Our criteria for ice out is when we are able to get from our property to the marina at Indianhead Harbour."

The first person to submit the correct date gets

first prize: a hat with ICE OUT 2016 as well as a tee shirt with a picture of ice breaking up.

Taylor's records show ice out in 1997 as April 30. In contrast, in 2015 ice out was April 20 and April 3 in 2010.

"From memory, I believe the earliest ice out date is late March and the latest is May 5," says Taylor. "Every year is different, for sure. Also, in the past several years we had very severe flooding in the spring . . . In the 29 years that we have lived on the lake, the ice is getting less safe. Milder temperatures, more snow and moisture, which pushes down on the ice surface, forcing water up through the cracks and causing severe slush. Even in the past two years, the ice can be four feet thick and it still has no bearing on the melt."

Last spring they hired an air boat driver on April 17 to get them to the island. "Our driver suggested we should be prepared to be marooned for two weeks. To our surprise, the ice was gone in two days. It rained overnight and the ice was gone," says Taylor. "That just affirms that living on the lake gives us no advantage to guessing the date that the ice will melt. Guessing the day is surely a game of chance."

So year after year, people continue to record and watch the ice on Muskoka's lakes and rivers. 



Maryann and Charles Taylor live on Wilson Island year round (top). Audrey Black travels on the slippery ice (bottom).