

W I N T E R

CUSK

IT IS HARD TO MATCH THE ENERGY AND VALUE
OF CUSK AS A WINTER SPORT FISH

BY
ANDREW **SCHAFFERMEYER**

Walking on a frozen lake at night is a unique experience. Except for the crunching under your feet, it is quiet, serene, and, even at night, rarely too dark to see. Under the spell of this winter calm, cusk fishermen test their skills on New Hampshire's lakes.



Few fish in New Hampshire have as many names as the cusk. They are also known as burbot, ling, eelpout, and even lawyers. As the only freshwater member of the codfish family, cusk are native to New Hampshire and offer an exciting challenge for anglers willing to wander the night.

The biology of cusk creates unique fishing opportunities. Cusk are particularly active in the cold winter months, compared to warmer times of year, when their metabolism reduces considerably. They feed and spawn at night for most of the winter, although cusk do not fall under the typical definition of a nocturnal organism.

Understanding fish makes for a more successful angler, and cusk fishermen are no exception. Learn the special times, locations, baits and methods of taking this fish, and you'll see what makes cusk fishing such great sport.

SERPENTINE PREDATOR

It is difficult to misidentify a cusk in New Hampshire, as they don't look like any of our other fish. The cusk's serpent-like body is long and slender, with a long, soft fin on most of its upper and lower body. Coloration can vary, ranging from light to dark brown, with a marbled pattern on its back and sides. Very small scales make the fish feel smooth, especially along its white belly. On its broad, flat head, a large mouth is accentuated by a single barbell on the underside of the jaw.

Cusk are opportunistic feeders and prey on almost anything that moves or smells tempting. Because of their preference for rocky substrate, they encounter and make meals of many crayfish. Cusk are quick swimmers; their stealth and speed make them efficient predators of other fish. Young fish of any species, including trout, smelt and other baitfish, can be on the cusk's menu. Cusk are also aggressive enough to eat rougher, larger fish like yellow perch and bass. They seem to possess an endless appetite. This broad food selection makes them an intriguing target for anglers.

Although cusk are caught in open water, it is hard to match their energy and value as a sport fish during the winter. One of the most popular methods is an appropriately named device: the cusk

line. A stationary set or trap is created by spanning a wooden device across a hole in the ice. Attached to this is braided ice fishing line (also called squid line), which ends in a monofilament leader. Cusk line regulations require that a (non-lead) sinker weighing at least one ounce be attached to the leader no more than six inches from the hook to ensure that the bait will rest on the bottom, where cusk primarily feed. This also keeps the bait from attracting non-target fish, such as lake trout. Once set, the line cannot be moved – cusk lines are fixed, non-running devices and may not be actively fished or jigged.

Cusk lines must be checked once every 24 hours, but it is a good idea to check them more frequently. I often catch fish just after dark and am able to reset the lines before I leave for the night. This practice also helps keep bait fresh and guarantees that lines are fishing correctly. My most common bait is a minnow, either living or dead. I have also used chunks of any cut bait left after a day or two of lake trout fishing. I look for sand bars near the mouths of brooks or islands, where cusk may be prowling in search of food. The depths that provide me the most cusk opportunity vary from 30 to 50 feet.

JIGGING FOR CUSK

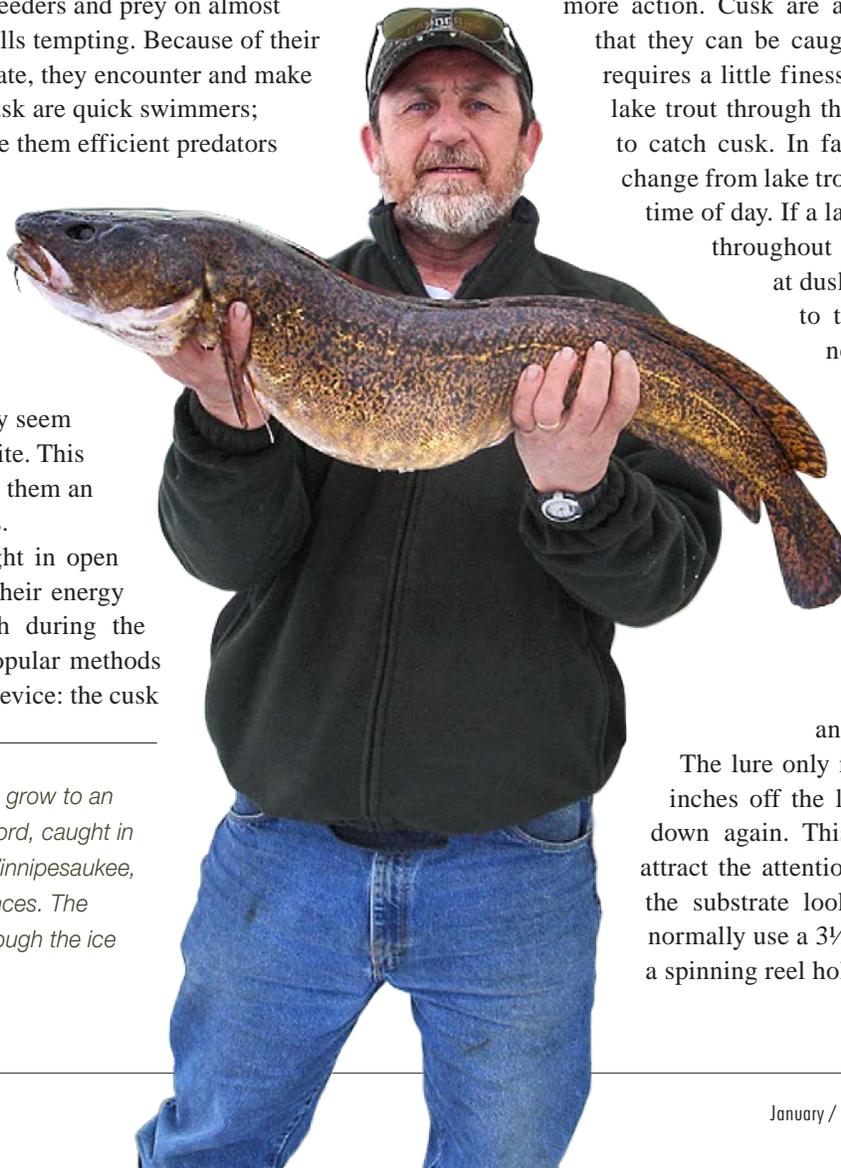
Setting cusk lines is effective, but may not satisfy the thrill seeker in some anglers. Other approaches, like jigging, offer more action. Cusk are an aggressive enough predator that they can be caught on a jigging rod, though it requires a little finesse. Anyone outfitted to fish for lake trout through the ice has everything necessary to catch cusk. In fact, the only variable that may change from lake trout fishing to cusk fishing is the time of day. If a lake trout set has been chummed throughout the day, crayfish may come in at dusk to feed and attract bigger fish to the site. Jigging at these sites near dusk will often result in successful catches of cusk.

Almost any jig will work for cusk, especially those tipped with cut bait. Every angler has a different approach.

I've seen fish caught on different styles, sizes and colors. I prefer a one-inch

Kastmaster with a single hook and a thin strip of sucker meat.

The lure only needs to be lifted three or four inches off the lake bottom, and then dropped down again. This flopping of the bait should attract the attention of any cusk cruising around the substrate looking for a nighttime snack. I normally use a 3½-foot graphite jigging rod with a spinning reel holding 8-10 pound test line.



A long-lived fish, the cusk can grow to an impressive size. The state record, caught in 2007 by Ken Cayer at Lake Winnepesaukee, weighed 12 pounds, 3.25 ounces. The 34.5-inch fish was caught through the ice in mid-March.

CHOWDAH FISH!

The meat of a cusk is white and surprisingly firm, and although they are great fried (what isn't?), they are best suited for chowder. The flavor of cusk is similar to lobster, and is best after a quick boil in salt water. Not only are cusk some of the best fish to eat in New Hampshire, with no closed season, no daily limit, and no size restrictions, it is possible to gather enough fish for a hearty meal.

There are many different places to search for winter cusk in New Hampshire. Our deep, cold lakes provide great opportunities for these

fish to thrive. Both the big lakes in the central part of the state and the Connecticut Lakes of the north are good destinations that routinely give up large fish. If you've never tried to outwit these fish through the ice, you may be missing out on a unique opportunity.



N.H. Fish and Game Fisheries Biologist Andrew Schafermeyer shares his angling expertise as a feature writer for the Journal and in Fish and Game's seasonal N.H. Fishing Report, available at fishnh.com/fishing/fishing-report.html.

CUSK FISHING BASICS



Cusk may be taken through the ice with a cusk fishing device or "cusk line." The illustration below shows one kind of cusk line – but gear can be as simple as line wrapped on a stick, so long as the line is not

free-running. Up to six cusk fishing lines may be used, in addition to the number of regular fishing lines allowed. Any species other than cusk caught on a cusk line must be released immediately by cutting the line without removing the fish from the water. The bait end of the cusk line must be inspected at least once every 24 hours. Bobbing, jigging or movement of the bait to attract fish is prohibited when using cusk lines.

Cusk fishing devices are not allowed everywhere. They can only be used on the First, Second and Third Connecticut Lakes; Lake Francis; Lovell Lake; Merrymeeting Lake; Newfound Lake; Ossipee Lake; Silver Lake; Big Squam Lake; Little Squam Lake; South Pond; Sunapee Lake; Wentworth Lake; Lake Winnepesaukee; and Winnisquam Lake.

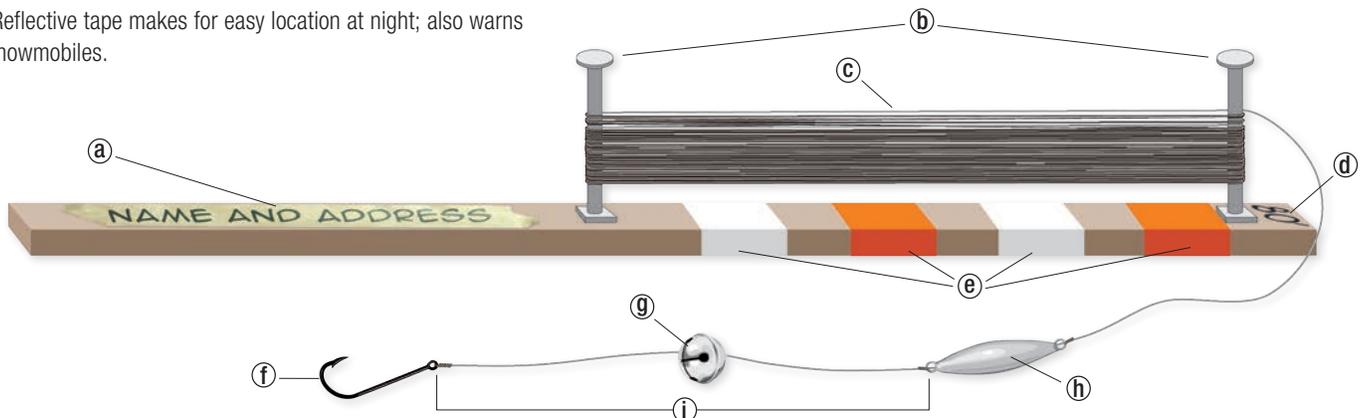
To read more about using a cusk line, visit:

fishnh.com/fishing/cusk-line.html

USING A CUSK LINE

- a) By law, name and address must be written on each cusk line.
- b) Long carriage bolts or other "pegs" work well for holding line; the "cap" prevents line from sliding off – spacing bolts one foot apart quickly tells you the depth, and makes for easy/quick winding (vs. wrapping around stick).
- c) Dacron/squidding line, 25+ lbs. test, handles well in cold weather and is plenty strong enough to hold the largest cusk.
- d) You may want to label amount of line on each rig; nothing is worse than trying a deep set only to realize you don't have quite enough line (sinker must rest on bottom by law).
- e) Reflective tape makes for easy location at night; also warns snowmobiles.

- f) Use a stout, large (3/0 or bigger) hook (bass plastic bait hooks are great); cusk have huge mouths and will completely swallow the bait.
- g) Try affixing a small bell or other attractor with large bait; as big bait struggles against the weight, the bell rings and bounces off the rocks, which helps cusk locate the bait in the darkness (vibrations are detected with their lateral line).
- h) One-ounce sinker or heavier required by law (must be lead-free).
- i) Distance from sinker to hook may not exceed six inches. Wire leaders can help prevent break-offs, especially in rocky areas.



New Hampshire Wildlife Journal is your best source for fishing, hunting, wildlife and conservation information in the state.

DID YOU ENJOY READING THIS ARTICLE?

Every issue of N.H. Wildlife Journal includes stunning wildlife photography, in-depth features and "how-to" articles – plus Naturalist's Notebook, Warden's Watch and no advertising.



So what are you
waiting for?
Subscribe today!

www.wildnh.com/pubs/wj-magazine.html