



Otsego Lake Association Winter Update

March 2021

When most of us think of the “Lake” portion of our Otsego Lake Association we picture images of summers in and on the water: swimming, kayaking, sailing, and/or paddle boarding. And many of us also think of hiking on quiet trails with beautiful scenery or participating with friends and family in special events like the Boat Parade or Fourth of July fireworks.



No swimming at Three Mile Point in February!

But a whole other world awaits on and around the lake in the winter months, especially when snowflakes fly and ice covers the lake. In fact, some folks claim that the fun only begins when “ice-on” or “ice-in” is declared. For many years the Freeman’s Journal tracked and published the ice-in and ice-out data every year, beginning in 1843. Now the dates are recorded by the Biological Field Station, as part of their information about the lake and its water quality.

Ice History

Looking back through the ice data is an interesting exercise, and certain patterns are readily seen. For example, in the **first 100 years of records, from 1842/43 to 1942/43:**

- There were **40 years** when ice closed the lake for **100 days or more**.
- **The longest period of ice-in was 131 days** in the winter of 1876-77, when the lake froze on December 17th, and did not clear until April 27th.
- Ice-in was often in December, and the earliest date of December 13th was recorded in 1917.
- The latest ice-out date, May 7, occurred in 1875.

However, in the ensuing 77 years of data collection—from 1943 to 2020--there have been only **12 years** in which the lake was iced-over for 100 days or more. That is far below the pace set in the first recorded 100 years. As noted in **Otsego Ice History**, compiled by Holly A. Waterfield, CLM, the last time that the lake sported ice for over one hundred days was in the 2000-2001 winter season, which saw 113 days of ice.

That same 2000-01 winter at the turn of this century was also significant for another fact: it was the end of 158 consecutive years of recording ice cover on the lake, for in the 2001-02 season we first saw the sad notation “**Lake did not freeze,**” replacing years of dates for ice-in and ice-out. Unfortunately, that notation was seen again in the winters of 2011-12 and in 2016-17. A chart graphically illustrating this trend towards less ice on Otsego Lake can be found at:

www.oneonta.edu/academics/biofld/PUBS/ANNUAL/2013/29-Otsego-Ice-History-2014.pdf

The chart clearly indicates that there is a trend towards much later ice-on and earlier ice-off, which is disturbing for those who care about the health of Otsego Lake and the continuation of the many recreational activities it affords everyone. There is evidence that the amount and duration of ice cover can impact the health of the lake, which is a concern to researchers, including Kiyoko Yokota, Technical Advisor to OLA and SUNY-Oneonta professor. Kiyoko, who also serves as Director of the Yokota Lab at SUNY, noted in the OLA 2017 Fall newsletter that “Most of the basic physical, chemical, and biological processes in lakes do not stop just because it is cold,” and reported that “an increasing number of researchers” are involved in winter limnology, “as what happens during winter often correlates with what happens in the following spring and summer (e.g. algal blooms.)”

Although the automated monitoring buoy, which is found in the lake during the warmer months, has been removed for the winter – for its own protection—some monitoring of the lake continues. Total profiles from top to bottom of temperature, pH, oxygen, alkalinity and Secchi transparency are taken periodically under the ice all winter by BFS staff. Lake surface level elevations are monitored every workday, as has been happening since 1974. In late February, a volunteer SUNY-Oneonta BFS dive team led by OLA Director Paul Lord completed an ice dive just north of Five Mile Point. Part of the mission was to install underwater monitoring devices designed to gather information about both our invasive zebra and quagga mussels. More information on the dive and results will be available in the Spring OLA Newsletter, available in early June.



*Ice diving by SUNY-
Oneonta BFS dive team*

Impact of ice cover on winter lake activities

This year the **allotsego.com** headline for February 23 was “Ice, Snow, Single Digits get Enthusiasts Outdoors!” In late January and early February, a perfect combination of prolonged cold temperatures and moderate amounts of snow allowed an ice cover of approximately nine inches to completely close the lake. The reported thickness of approximately nine inches was sufficient to safely support one of the lake’s most popular wintertime activities: ice fishing. Although old wooden ice huts have been replaced by easily- transported and quickly- assembled pop-up shelters, and hand drills have made way for battery and gas powered augers, the basics of the sport are still pretty much the same: drill hole in ice, catch fish! Catches this year seemed to be primarily yellow perch, walleye, and lake trout, with a couple of mentions of small-mouthed bass. Lake trout, normally fished in deeper water, seems to be a prized catch this season, with some measuring over two feet long!



Ice fishing huts and tip-ups near Glimmerglass State Park, February 2021

The presence of many, many huts and tip-ups on the lake this February is certainly an indicator of how popular ice fishing has become, but the



Power equipment and relatively thinner ice make drilling holes to fish an easier task— but warming trends and less ice definitely make for shorter winter seasons on the ice!

abundance of fishing activity also may come from a realization that

there may not be

too many days to really get out and enjoy the

sport. Days of two to three feet of ice covering the lake for as long as two to three months seems to be a thing of the past. The most common date for ice-out when records were kept by the Freeman’s Journal was April 17th, but it does not seem likely that ice only averaging 4 inches this year and 9 inches at the thickest area will last that long this

year. “Get out while you can” might be a good motto for ice activities 2021.



Day’s end: leaving the lake, pulling the sled loaded up with ice-fishing gear – and fish!

Outdoor Lake Activity for Winter AND Summer

This year we have a new Otsego challenge that can be enjoyed by active lake-lovers in multiple seasons. Publicized during the Cooperstown Winter Carnival from February 16-21, Otsego Outdoors began promoting a new program in February to encourage us to get enjoyably and safely outdoors in the winter time. Named the Otsego Octet



Winter Challenge, the objective is to hike, snow shoe, or cross country ski on eight of the twelve Otsego County trails



included in the program. Two of the trails are right off the lake at Glimmerglass State Park: the Sleeping Lion and Covered Bridge trails are both listed as options for the activities. The Sleeping Lion trail was accessible for walking and snow shoeing in February, and included some awesome views of the ice-covered lake from the northern to southern ends. The covered bridge trail looked to be more accessible by snow shoes or cross country skis, as the snow was relatively deep and the road and parking area at Beaver Pond were not open.

Besides great winter time exercise and terrific lake views, there is another incentive to complete the Octet Winter Challenge: a patch is available to anyone who completes eight of the trails by April 30th. (There is a requested \$5.00 contribution if you would like to be awarded the patch.) Further information, including details on where and how to access all of the twelve designated trails, can be found at otsegooutdoors.org.



*Covered Bridge at
Glimmerglass State Park*



"Waiting for Spring"

Since the winter challenge has been enthusiastically received, a summer program is now being planned. Summertime will feature some water sports: canoeing, kayaking, paddle boarding and swimming are being discussed as potential activities. Whatever the season, our wonderful Otsego Lake offers lots of ways to get outdoors—hope to see you there soon!