

Cold comfort ✕



Prior Lake Bait and Tackle store manager Kris Astorp bags a clump of squirming minnows for a customer. Luckily, with more ice on the lakes, merchandise is moving again. *At top* – For almost the entire month of December, local lakes resisted icing over. Even now, parts of Upper and Lower Prior Lake are unsafe to walk on.

January's frigid first days instill hope in businesses, anglers and snowmobilers

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There are a few things it's generally advised not to talk about in polite company: religion, politics and, sometimes, a snowless December. At the start of last month, that looked to be just what Prior Lake and Savage were getting. There wasn't a substantial, lasting snowfall until Dec. 28. That's also the day Upper Prior Lake finally froze. To give some perspective: the Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District keeps records of ice-overs on local bodies of water. Their measurements go back as far as 1966. In all that time, there has never been a later ice-over date recorded. The closest on record is the winter of 2001, when the lake finally crusted over on Christmas Eve.

On social media, perplexed locals reported that as far back as the 1950s, they never remembered open water surviving until Christmastime.

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There was some quiet rejoicing over safer driving conditions and less time spent shoveling, but for other individuals and groups in Prior Lake and Savage, a brown December was a much bigger problem than nostalgia for Bing Crosby's snowscapes.

On Dec. 4, the Prior Lake Bait and Tackle Facebook page sent out a jubilant message:

"Good morning, anglers!! The store is ready for ice fishing!!"

The store had almost everything already in stock, the post said. Followers were to stay tuned for updates on the ice conditions and get ready for a great fishing season. All they needed was ice. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources requires ice cover at least 4 inches thick before people can go out on the lakes on foot, and at least 1 foot thick before anyone goes out there with a truck.

About a week-and-a-half later, on Dec. 16, the Facebook page had a new update:

"While we are all waiting for the weather to cooperate and bring ice to the lakes....stop on in for all your Christmas shopping needs." It promised some great cheese products and gift certificates for holiday shoppers — but no ice. The wait continued.

On Christmas Eve, the excitement was back: finally, the weather was starting to "cooperate." A followup comment from Dec. 30 clarified: there was some fishing to be had on some of the smaller lakes in the area, but not yet on Prior Lake. This particular ice fishing season was turning out to be a big can of worms.

Prior Lake Bait and Tackle manager Kris Astorp, a longtime angler himself, has never seen an ice fishing season this late.

"We had a store full of stuff, and nobody was coming in," he said.

Was he concerned? In a word, "yes."

"It's picked up in the last week, finally," he said, during the first week of January. "We're just now starting to sell stuff."

They were indeed selling stuff, and with a vengeance. Anglers were rushing to get out on the ice and make up for lost time. All that day, Astorp had been answering the phone, handling the

Just the facts

Upper Prior Lake's ice-over date over the past decade:

Year	Date
2015	Dec. 28
2014	Nov. 15
2013	Nov. 27
2012	Dec. 11
2011	Dec. 8
2010	Dec. 2
2009	Dec. 10
2008	Nov. 26
2007	Dec. 1
2006	Dec. 5

Note: "Ice-over" is designated when 90 percent of the lake's surface is frozen.

Keep the clubs going

Snowmobile association meetings

The Prior Lake Snowmobile Association meets at 7:30 p.m. the second Wednesday of each month at the Prior Lake VFW, 16306 Main Ave.

The Savage Sno-Pacers meet at 7 p.m. the second Monday of each month at Davanni's, 14125 Highway 13, Savage.

bait and tending to one customer after another. Because the store had been so busy, he hadn't gotten time to get out and enjoy the fresh ice — which is a good thing, he said.

"We're looking for a really good January," he said.

Even now, the rush is only the tip of the iceberg. He estimated that Prior Lake itself probably had 4 or 5 inches of ice around the rim, and the center of the lake was still dangerous for anglers on foot, let alone snowmobiles and trucks.

Vehicles would hopefully get their chance in the third week of January, according to the Prior Lake American's weather columnist, Jonathan Cohen.

That being said, the late winter could have long-lasting consequences.

"The scary part is that the vendors get scared," Astorp said. Two of his major vendors just discontinued their buyback program on unsold merchandise. These situations, Astorp said, can tend to have a "snowball" effect into the spring.

"It is what it is," he said. "When you run a business like this, you're controlled by the weather. Usually, it works itself out."

The ice fishing

community is only one of the many experiencing adverse effects from the late winter. Take Minnesota Equipment in Savage, which, by early January, would normally have churned out more snowblowers than anything else. This season, manager David Turnberg said, snowblowers and other winter equipment are hurting.

"Snowblower sales, repairs and part sales are a lot slower," he said. Since that first snow of substance, it had been picking up a little, and they've been deploying what strategies they can to pick up the sales.

"We try to run service promotions and do a little bit more advertising," he said. But mostly, "Pray for snow."

It would take more snow than what they'd already gotten to compensate for the sales lost in December. Turnberg is hoping for a few really good snowfalls in rapid succession. But if that doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. He's been in this business 16 years — about 10 of them as an owner — and he's seen his share of milkshop winters. They plan ahead as best they can, and then they hope for the best.

"But if it stays like this for much longer, we might break out the spring equipment," he said.

Business owners aren't the only ones shaking their fists at the clouds. Probably the biggest losses can be attributed to local winter activity clubs. When the weather doesn't cooperate, they don't lose money — they lose people. Just ask the Prior Lake Snowmobile Association.

The key problem: no snow means no snowmobiling. Before the club can get out there and ride, they need a good foot of the stuff. Tom Schutz of the Snowmobile Association said.

"The lakes aren't safe, the trails aren't open — people are using them, but they're not supposed to," he said.

It's been a demoralizing few weeks. One of the few plaintive comments on the Prior Lake Snowmobile Association Facebook page read: "Make them weather modification ppl stop! We will not get to ride at this rate."

To make matters worse, the last two years have pretty much been the same way. Normally, at this time



PHOTO BY HANNAH JONES

A "no snowmobiling" sign stands at Lakefront Park in Prior Lake. Riders are supposed to stick to the trails, and they aren't quite ready for use yet.

of year, they'd be taking group rides and running educational sessions out on the trails — getting people really excited about snowmobiling. This year, they're mostly restricted to meetings and maintenance.

The 27 members of the youth branch of the Snowmobile Association were even getting together to go bowling rather than riding.

Like slow sales at the bait shop rolling into spring totals, a month of doldrums can have consequences for a winter activity club.

"People don't think about clubs if they're not out riding," Schutz said. "They're more reluctant to join." Right now, the association includes 65 members, which is down from last season. Numbers are important to the

Snowmobile Association. The group is solely responsible for trail upkeep and maintaining good relationships with local landowners. When the club loses numbers, it loses valuable assets to the sport.

"Once we lose it, it's hard to come back," Schutz said. Turnberg added: "It's par for the course. We just roll with the weather."

"It is what it is. When you run a business like this, you're controlled by the weather. Usually, it works itself out."

Kris Astorp

Prior Lake Bait and Tackle manager