

PROCESSED PERCH

By TubeDude

There are lots of proven baits for ice fishing...night crawlers, wax worms, meal worms, minnows...whole or pieces, perch eyes and bits of perch meat or white bass where legal. Some guys buy fancy colored maggots (Euro larvae) or spikes. Still others fish with leeches, aquatic insect larvae and a whole host of other real and manufactured baits.

Some of these baits are fished on bare hooks, with no jig or lure to help attract fish to the bait. Generally they are used to “tip” various lures as “sweetener”...to get the fish more interested in eating the lure and getting caught. When fish are finicky it often requires a bit of extra flavoring to “seal the deal”.

A lot of “perch jerkers” have found that one of the best baits for perch is a strip of perch meat...either fished alone on a bare hook or added to a jig. Perch are cannibals and eat a lot of their own young. They also eat the young of other fish and will eat minnows or cut bait made from many other species. Perch like meat.

Being able to use perch meat for bait requires that you first catch a perch on something else. When there are plenty of perch and they are active and aggressive that is not a problem. But when they are seemingly not interested in anything you offer you might need to bring your own perch meat on the trip in order to get things started.

Some anglers keep a few small perch on trips when they are catching a bunch of dinks. They take them home and freeze them to take with them on their next trip. But, unless they properly prepare them before freezing they find that it is tough to cut them and/or to put them on their hooks...especially if the perch have been frozen without first removing the scales from the skin. Those scales become like armor plating when they dry out...especially after being frozen for days, weeks or months.



Ideal bait-size perch are from 6” to 8” long

For many years I have been making “processed perch”. Whenever I am catching a lot of small perch I save a few for future bait. I prefer them at least six to eight inches long. I try to keep them wet. As mentioned, it is tougher to scale them after their skin dries out.

Scaling is the first step in making processed perch. When cutting strips or putting them on a hook, any residual scales are tough and resist cutting and penetrating.



Next, use a good sharp knife (electric preferred) and slice off the fillets...leaving the descaled skin intact. You can remove the skin if you want, and just fish with bits of skinless perch meat, but the skin helps it hold on the hook better.



Slicing out the rib bones is optional. You can leave them in the fish strips without seriously affecting the attractiveness of the bait. Or you can leave that step for the final processing...when you cut the fillets into bait strips. I prefer to remove the rib bones before wrapping in plastic and freezing. It lessens the chance of them poking a hole in the plastic.



Avoid rinsing the fillets during the preparation process to leave more natural "flavor".



Now you put together little "trip bags" of the scaled fillets. Use small sandwich size plastic baggies. Put two to four of the fillets into each bag...depending upon how much you plan to use on each trip. (Hint: better to have too much than too little) Dribble a tiny bit of water into the bag and squeeze it to force out all the air bubbles and to make sure the water fills all the gaps between the fillets. This helps keep them from getting little freezer burn spots. That creates rancidity and does not help the flavor appeal. Don't use any more water than needed and squeeze out all the excess. Now twist the top closed, excluding any other bubbles, and put a small rubber band around the package. Freeze your packages in a small protective hard-sided container...plastic or cardboard...to protect them against being damaged in the freezer.



Four plastic bags, each with 3 to 4 scaleless, boneless perch fillets.

Now you add a couple of tablespoons of cold water and squeeze out all the air and excess water. This prevents freezer burn.



After squeezing out all of the excess water and air you can twist the top of the bag to seal it before placing the rubber band around it.



Put a small rubber band around each bag to hold down the twisted top...to seal everything in air tight until you plan to use it for bait.



Before putting the sealed bags in the freezer it is a good idea to arrange them loosely in a plastic or cardboard container. This helps prevent the bags from being damaged from being compressed or impacted by other larger items in the freezer.

PART B. FINAL TRIP PREPARATION:

The day before a planned trip, take a package of the frozen perch fillets from the freezer and allow it to begin thawing at room temperature. Do not microwave or thaw in warm water. When the package begins to soften, put it into the refrigerator for final thawing.

When the thawing fillets still have some ice crystals, but are pliable, lay them flesh side down on a small cutting board. Using a sharp knife, make cuts across the fillet to create strips from 1/4" to 1/2" wide...depending on how big you want them for fishing the spot you are going. For bigger strips you can cut the fillets into lengthwise strips and then cut those into the desired lengths. Sometimes long thin strips work better than small chunks or bits.



Place the newly cut pieces into a small bowl. Sprinkle them with non-iodized salt...sea salt is best. No exact recipe. Just enough to make them a bit salty without curing and dehydrating them. Next, squirt on a few drops of crawdad oil. I prefer the Fish Formula product but almost any will do. Again, just enough to flavor them. No need to waste a lot of product.



Stir the flavored pieces together in the small bowl, to mix the salt and oil in with the perch meat. Then put it all back in your plastic bag and then back into the refrigerator until you are ready to go fishing.



Don't forget it and leave it in the refrigerator when you head out the door.

It is a good idea to store your package of prepared processed perch in the same container you will be carrying it in while using it for bait. That not only saves messing up other containers but makes it easier to just grab and go when you are headed out the door.

One suggestion is to keep it in a small insulated container...like a “soup-sized” model pictured below. That not only keeps the “flavor” from getting all over everything else but also prevents it from overheating on warm days and from freezing when you take it ice fishing.



And, at the end of the day you can refreeze any processed perch that has not been used. The salt helps preserve it...and if you have kept it cold it will refreeze and still work for a couple more trips if needed. Just squeeze out as much air as possible, rubber band it again and freeze it for future use.

