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Leightons smelt camps

BOWDOINHAM, Maine - The morning is sunny; the river is frozen. Snowmobiles and four-wheelers whisk us over the smooth ice and snow a couple of cold miles to Jim McPherson's secluded shanty on the Cathance River, a tidal tributary of Merrymeeting Bay.The shack looks like a kindergartener's drawing of a house. It is about 10 feet square with a front door, a peaked roof, a few windows, and a pipe chimney blowing wood smoke. McPherson, who lighted the stove, has already come and gone. Inside it is warm as a sauna.Open the door and step up from the ice onto a plywood floor that stops short of the side walls to make room for rectangular holes that have been slashed out of the frozen river with a chainsaw. Above these gaps hang a dozen or so lines attached to a 2-inch-by-2-inch beam. Nudge the beam, and it jigs the hooks.We bait the lines with pieces of sandworm and lower them into the river where they hang, weighted with lead sinkers, some closer to the surface, some closer to the bottom.Maine's coastal rivers usually freeze just after Christmas. Sportsmen drag their handmade shanties onto the ice. The fish to catch are smelts - tiny, sharp-toothed, silver-sided relations to salmon and trout. Fresh out of the water they smell like cucumber. Breaded with cornmeal, fried in butter, dipped in tartar sauce, and eaten off the bone, they are a superlative snack - fish to gush over.In the winter smelt come with the tides day and night. They summer along the coast in shallow water close to shore. In fall they move up into the estuaries and winter under the ice. In spring, when the ice melts, they wiggle up the brooks to spawn - but for now all is frozen and the fishermen are waiting, lines ready, tall tales in the air.Around Bowdoinham there are a handful of smelt camps that can be hooked by the tide - little smelt villages, where for less than \$50 each group gets a shack complete with wood stove, fishing lines, folding chairs, and newspaper-wrapped packets of bait. Bring your own beer.McPherson, 54, big and bearded, has made a living from the bay and its rivers all his life. He has fished for eels, hunted ducks, and rented houseboats. For about 20 years he has maintained Jim's Smelt Camps, a cluster of ice shacks just upriver from the little Brooklyn Bridge on Route 24 in Bowdoinham.Until sometime in March McPherson and his crew will work the camps 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In and around a shack by the road they cut firewood, watch television, cook at the snack bar (griddled hamburgers and fried potatoes), smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, plow, pack bait, stoke the stoves. Shack renters come at all hours: old men in the morning to fill five-gallon buckets with fish; college kids during the day to gawk, drink beer, and make cellphone videos to post on Facebook; rockers at night with giggly women and boom boxes.McPherson also keeps an upriver camp at what is known as town farm turn. "I'm the smelt chaser," he says. "That means I go where the smelt are." The camp, "for serious fishermen only," is more secluded, more expensive, and offers better fishing. After some slow fishing in the cluster by the bridge we pony up for the champagne lounge - \$25 a person instead of \$15.It's worth the extra dough. Our lines start twitching a minute after they hit the water. We bend down and tug the lines out of the water. Smelt! The fish are a few inches long - shiny and squirmy, bright eyed and iridescent. To honor local tradition we bite heads off the first fish and spit them out. The still wriggling bodies go into a bucket.For nearly four hours the lines do not stop moving. The haul is mostly smelt, big females and small males, but toward the end of the tide we pull in some white perch as well. We work the lines like puppeteers, pull fish off hooks, throw fish in buckets, and empty full buckets into a giant trash bag on the snow outside.We fry fish for lunch in a cast-iron pan on top of the woodstove. We drink beer. We eat chips. Thick steamy vapor comes up from the cold water. The floor is wet from flapping fish. We step outside the shack, wearing T-shirts, squinting in the glare of the sun, hearing nothing but the groaning of ice, seeing just crows, and trees, and ice.About 2 p.m. the tide turns, and McPherson arrives to pick us up. We pull the lines, squeeze the floor, and shut down the stove. The trash bag is full of fish, probably 50 pounds of perfect little silver icicles. Again, we bomb over the frozen ice. The sky above is blue, the wind burns our faces and feels so good.Later, we fry fish for supper.Jonathan Levitt can be reached at www.jonathanlevitt.com. © Copyright 2009 Globe Newspaper Company. It may currently be very cold in the northern United States, but most of the winter was a little too warm for ice fishing. Scientists are just now able to study the 2021 population of a small fish popular in ice fishing. They are called rainbow smelts. People catch them through small holes dug through the ice surface of a frozen body of water. About 15 years ago, the rainbow smelt population began to drop in the U.S. The government declared them "a species of special concern," and began researching the fish. Scientists want to find out why there are many fewer smelt today than in the 1970s and 1980s. Thirty years ago, fishermen caught millions of kilograms of the fish each year. In 2018, they only caught about 22,000 kilograms. Researchers think climate change, loss of habitat and overfishing are all involved in the decreasing numbers. Wintry weather came late this year in Maine, where some smelts live. Scientists there could not catch them until early February when the thick ice finally formed. The lack of ice also stopped sport fishing for smelts. And that hurt businesses linked to the activity. Steve Leighton owns Leighton Smelt Camps in Maine. He had trouble making money this winter. "(I'm) just going to try to pay for expenses right now," he said. In Ohio, Tony Muscioni helps people catch a type of fish called walleye in Lake Erie each winter. He said he had thought the lake would not ice over this year at all. Now, there finally is some thick ice. "You've just got to watch where you're going now," he said. Wildlife departments around the Northern U.S have warned fishermen to be careful on the ice. Tom Hawley studies water with the National Weather Service. In Maine, he said, there has been about half the usual amount of ice. Normally, there are about 50 centimeters. That is because January was about 3 degrees Celsius warmer than usual. I'm Dan Friedell. Patrick Whittle wrote this story for The Associated Press. Dan Friedell adapted it for Learning English. Caty Weaver was the editor. Do you have ice fishing where you live? We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section and visit our Facebook page. Words in 'This Story' habitat - n, the place or type of place where a plant or animal naturally or normally lives or grows Photos by Michael CevoliThe moon rose, the wind dropped off and the sharp sound of fracturing ice reverberated through the evening as the tide pushed up the brackish Cathance River in Bowdoinham, Maine, smelt capital of the Pine Tree State. Somewhere out there, schools of rainbow smelt were pushing toward their spawning grounds about seven miles upriver.The temperature was in the low teens, but the four of us sat comfortably in our camp, tending our lines, sipping brandy and Scotch, and dining on fresh lobster rolls as the wood stove tossed off plenty of warmth, with 16 solid inches of ice below the wood floor of our shanty. Snug as slightly tipsy bears.The camps are wood-stove warm on the coldest days.We'd come to Jim's Camps to catch a mess of these small, silvery, anadromous fish, which have a mild flavor and are delicious when rolled in flour and spices and then fried in a cast-iron skillet on the camp's flat-top stoves; you can eat them heads and all, if you're so inclined.But as much as we'd traveled north for the fish, the truth is we'd really driven into the frozen reaches of Maine in late February in search of an authentic smelt camp experience — the camaraderie that comes with hunkering down in a toasty 8-by-10-foot plywood shanty, passing the time and a bottle while waiting for small fish to move the lines.Smelt have mostly disappeared from southern New England coastal waters, where I caught them as a boy; they are canaries in the coal mine for estuarine waters, with their stocks likely in decline across their historical range.Jim McPherson is a veteran smelt-camp operator who runs fish shanties in Bowdoinham, Maine.Photographer Michael Cevoli and I were in fine company on this trip. Old-school New England woodsman Stu Bristol, a master Maine guide and former Vermont game warden, was our host. Dressed in wool pants, a wool shirt and a rabbit fur bomber hat, Bristol dragged a small sled loaded with food, grog, a butane stove for cooking, extra lightbulbs, nails and more down the gangway to the ice."I adjust the camp to my liking," says the 73-year-old MacGyver of the North, who has chased everything from tuna, trout and salmon to turkey, moose and deer. "It's kind of like having a house party. It's not so much the fish. It's the food. It's the stories. You're warm. You eat good. Fish is third on the list."We also broke bread with Barry Gibson, 67, a Boothbay Harbor, Maine, charter captain for 49 years who has caught just about everything under the surface. I've known Gibson, a former editor who writes occasionally for this magazine, for many years. Master Maine guide Stu Bristol is well-versed in the state's various outdoor pursuits, from fly-fishing and hunting to smelting and gourmet camp cooking."It's mostly social," he says. "There's not a lot to do in the winter up here. It's an excuse to get out of the house and act up a bit."Food is a big part of the scene, and we ate well during our evening tide. A crack campfire cook and storyteller, Bristol fulfilled his promise of showing us a good cross-section of Maine tailgate food. We began with red hot dogs, followed by lobster rolls and, finally, venison tenderloin sautéed in a cast-iron skillet with red and green peppers, olive oil, garlic salt, mushrooms and sweet onions.Imbibing is as much a part of the tableau as all the rest. "I've done a lot of smelt trips, and they all involve Allen's Coffee Flavored Brandy," Gibson says. We sipped the liqueur du jour and drank some local brew, and I broke out a flask of single malt. Bristol finished things off by offering everyone a whoopie pie."It's all part of the Maine smelt experience," says Bristol, a freelance writer from Lyman, Maine, and a director emeritus of the New England Outdoor Writers Association.The camp is owned by the affable Jim McPherson, 64, who started working smelt camps when he was 15 and has been running his own business with his daughter Katie for 30 years. He says he's seen a change from the hard-partying crews of yesterday to a more family-oriented clientele. A decade or more back, it was not unusual for sporting clubs in southern New England to charter a bus and roll up to the camp with 30 or 40 men well on their way to getting soused.(Above): Charter skipper Barry Gibson (left) and Stu Bristol enjoy the traditions of a good smelt camp, which include red hot dogs, fried smelt and lobster rolls. "I've seen some awful things," McPherson says with a laugh. Of the blitzed bus visitors of yore, he says, "They were a little hard to handle. Left some damage here and there. They weren't here to do much fishing; they were here to party."McPherson grew nostalgic. "Some of these old camps could tell a story," he says wistfully. He says he had his first romantic tryst in a smelt camp. "It was a little chilly on the floor, but I didn't care," says McPherson, who rents slips, sets moorings and does custom dock work in the warm months.Other than our salty language, which would have given our evening a PG-13 rating, we were model citizens. You fish through two long "race holes," or trenches, (8 feet long by 14 inches wide) in the ice that run from the front to the back of the shanty. You can bring your own tackle, jigs and bait (sea worms), or you can fish the house lines: a wooden jig pole, positioned about 5 feet over the race hole, that runs the length of each trench. Ten lines with a weight and a small hook attached to each are lowered from the pole. In a party of four, each angler would have five lines to fish.If the ice is thick enough, smelt fishing in Maine usually starts just after Christmas and runs through February. The busy nights at Jim's Camps are Friday and Saturday, when a shanty rents for \$60 for a six-hour tide and four people. Otherwise, the rate is \$15 a person and \$5 for bait.Getting skunked is unusual, but when it happens you don't lose sleep over it. "There's been trips where I haven't caught a smelt because I've been so busy with everything else," Gibson says. "I'm more concerned about burning the steak. The fish don't seem to make a whole lot of difference."Although we wound up with nary a smelt in our bucket, the night and the company were pleasant, the camp was warm, and we left the frozen Cathance River with full stomachs.It was quiet outside. The ice creaked under the rising tide. Somewhere, a dog barked. Smoke puffed out of the stovepipes from a few camps. A light reflected off the ice between the rows of shanties. "It's like a little village, like walking down a residential street," Gibson muses. "It's one of those wonderful Maine traditions that I hope never goes away."

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