Water sports make quite a splash in Illinois—even when temperatures plummet and water turns hard.

"Hard" Sports for the Hardy

Word that Starved Rock State Park's waterfalls are open to ice climbing spreads fast, drawing nearly 100 weekend climbers.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

Not one to let a little snow or ice keep you from venturing outdoors? You'll try almost anything just to get out of the house? Even more so if the activity is considered a little "extreme?" Here are three winter sports that you may not have considered before.

Ice Climbing

For an average of three to four weeks a year—if adequate rainfall has occurred and the thermometer has consistently registered at the freezing mark—gear-laden adventurers can be found tackling frozen waterfalls at Starved Rock State Park.

When conditions are appropriate, park managers open five canyons (Ottawa, LaSalle, Tonty, Wildcat and French) within the LaSalle County park to ice climbers. Regardless of the season, the picturesque canyons attract hikers and photographers.

Tom Destri has been ice climbing since 1990, and, like most, made the transition from rock climbing and rappelling.

"Ice climbing is fun in a bizarre way," Destri explained. "You have the option to hop on something easy and well-suited to your skill level or take a route that tests your skills, requires intense focus and gives your body a beating. Regardless, you have to prepare yourself psychologically to scale a fall, forgetting about the height and potential to fall. On the ice, you remain focused on your next move and plan a couple of moves ahead."

Climbers watch anxiously as water trickles over the canyon wall, turning to ice at the top and on the canyon floor. Most usually, two or more weeks pass before the ice meets and forms a complete fall. But things can change in the blink of an eye.

"If a warm front comes through, everything comes crashing down," Destri remarked. "Climbers learn to grab days as they come. You never know if your next chance will occur this year, next year or sometime down the road."

Scaling an ice fall requires having the correct equipment and preparing yourself psychologically.

(Photo by Jason Martin.)

Frozen water draws outdoor enthusiasts. Some choose to plunge beneath the ice while others sit atop it.

Ice Diving

First a word of warning: Ice diving is an advanced form of scuba diving and requires completion of a course conducted by a qualified instructor.

On the appointed dive day, a team of divers arrives at the location, vehicles loaded with dive equipment (and back-up gear), exposure protection (dry suit or heavy wetsuit, gloves and hood), a shelter (often-times heated), lines, warm clothing and very likely a camp stove, coffee pot and cans of soup.

Before thinking of entering the water, snow shovels come out to clear the ice and a hole is cut. Ice diving is a team diving activity and those in the water wear a harness connected to the surface by a line. At the other end of the line, a line tender manages the line to prevent tangling underwater. Review of communication signals (rope tugs) is essential prior to any diver entering the water. Standing ready to provide assistance should a problem occur are a safety diver and a line tender.

It's a lot of work, but many deem it worth the effort.

"It is such a thrill to get under the ice and see visibility that is three times what I see in the summer," said Pat Hammer, PADI course director and avid ice diver. "I also love how close I can get to the fish. Moving very slowly, I have been able to lift fish off the bottom where they were resting. I then put them back and they hardly move."

Ice Fishing

And finally, a perennial favorite among many and a sport that requires little to no training is ice fishing. Grab an ice auger, skimmer, ice fishing rod (you can make your own), tip-up and terminal tackle and you're set. Throw everything in a 5-gallon bucket and not only is it easy to transport but you can pass the time sitting in comfort. If you decide to spend a considerable amount of time on the ice, a sled and portable ice shelter will greatly enhance your comfort.

There's nothing like sitting around the dinner table, watching the snow fly while dining on a meal of fresh fish—bluegill, yellow perch, crappie, walleye and northern pike are typically the fish of choice of ice anglers.

Regardless of how extreme you choose to take your wintertime activities—camping, hiking, biking or birding or perhaps ice climbing, diving or fishing—dress appropriately for the weather and remember: Safety first.

Safety First

Regardless of the activity, take a buddy with you so you have someone to share the day with, and someone to notify authorities if you run into trouble. Let someone know where you are going and when you anticipate returning home.

Ice climbing: At Starved Rock State Park, ice climbing is permitted in Ottawa, LaSalle, Tonty, Wildcat and French canyons only when enough ice is present to prevent damage to the soft sandstone canyon walls. Climbers must sign in and out at the park headquarters. No solo climbing is allowed. Climbers must remove their crampons before walking on wooden bridges/walkways. The season ranges from early December through late February or early March. When conditions allow climbing, the status is included and updated on the automated attendant under the "Updated News" section at (815) 667-4726.

Ice diving: Any type of penetration dive where only one entry/exit point exists (ice, cave, wreck), is considered an advanced type of diving that requires special training above and beyond the basic dive certification. Contact your local dive shop to learn about courses available on how to safely undertake any of these dives.

Ice fishing: Know the thickness of the ice before venturing out. Ice should be at least 4 inches thick to support your weight. Clear-blue, lake ice is the strongest. River ice and cloudy ice support less weight. Once the ice turns slushy, it supports half the weight of clear-blue ice. Wear a PFD. Having with you a 50-foot rope with attached throwing float and a whistle are good safety measures, and always carry an ice awl/pick (screwdriver or nail in a dowel rod will do). The awl provides a means to grip the ice should you accidentally break through.