

Freshwater Society founder Dick Gray wrote about the long history of ice-out records on Lake Minnetonka and his method for determining ice-out in this 2003 column in “Facets of Freshwater,” the society’s newsletter.

A springtime ritual in northern climates is guessing when the wintertime ice cover on lakes, rivers, streams and marshes will give way to warmer weather. An anticipated local event is the day when the ice goes out on Lake Minnetonka, one of the largest and most complex lakes of the 15,291 lakes in Minnesota.

The Freshwater Society has researched, compiled and verified ice-out dates for Lake Minnetonka spanning a period of 149 years – from 1855 to 2003. Prior to 1968, consistent means of determining the ice-out did not exist. Some of the past criteria included when the ice appeared to be 90% gone, when an old car placed on the ice fell through, when a boat could travel around Big Island, and when a boat could travel from Excelsior to Wayzata. Ice-out dates prior to 1968 were gleaned from letters, diaries, journals, personal memories and even restaurant table mats.

In 1968, a new method was established to determine when the ice was out of a large lake such as Lake Minnetonka. The ice is considered out when it is possible to travel by small boat from any one shore to any other shore through any passage on the lake. Using this method, the Freshwater Society has determined ice-out dates for every year since 1968, and these dates are regarded by most as the “official” ice-out dates.

March 11, 1878, is the earliest ice-out date in the past 149 years. This date is accurate, coming from extensive field notes by renowned naturalist Dr. Thomas Roberts. The latest ice-out date of May 8, 1856, was found in a letter written by a Lake Minnetonka mother to her daughter. The most frequent ice-out dates are from April 11 to April 19 (54 times in 149 years), yet the ice has never gone out on the average date of April 15.

Ice-out dates for the years 1861 through 1876 and 1879 through 1886 are unknown. Anyone having information on ice-out dates on Lake Minnetonka, or any body of water in Minnesota, for the missing years should send the data to the Freshwater Society, c/o Dick Gray, 2500 Shadywood Road, Excelsior, MN 55331.