



Taking the plunge: Alan Knowles rescues himself from Lake Camp with the help of ice spikes from a device worn around his neck.

Photos: RACHEL REID

Saved by ice claws

Nordic skater ALAN KNOWLES threw himself into an icy Mid-Canterbury lake to test his self-rescue equipment.

After the July 24 snowfall, skaters on Lake Clearwater in South Canterbury slid silently through three centimetres of light powder falling on thick black ice. It was as near to perfection as a skater could wish, except for the ever-present bogy of falling through, with its imagined horrors of being unable to escape.

We skated 4.6 kilometres from the eastern end of Lake Clearwater into the swamp at the western end and back again, exploring the island on the way.

Most skaters confine their turns, spins and power stops to small areas near the shore, but some, like me, want to explore far and wide, and I insist that those who accompany me wear ice claws – two sharp metal spikes with handles – around their necks to escape from a hole in the ice.

A week earlier, a fellow tour skater with decades of uneventful experience fell through thin ice on a high country lake. We saw his feet kicking and splashing from 300 metres away and sprinted to help. He knew the theory: keep your body horizontal in the water,

kick hard and slide out like a seal. But when we arrived he was still sliding back into the lake.

A quick reminder that he was wearing ice claws had him self-rescued in a twinkling, before I had time to release my throw-rope.

We all carry a full set of dry clothes in case of a dunking, but seldom need them as we constantly monitor thickness and retreat quickly from hazardous ice. That is unless we deliberately skate into trouble.

I announced to a handful of skaters at Lake Clearwater Huts that I intended to test my self-

rescue capabilities by skating into Lake Camp. With the glee and apprehension of ghouls at a hanging they gathered on the shore, cameras ready. I skated tentatively to where the ice meets open water, stood until I nearly lost my nerve, then pushed off.

The expected thermal shock did not eventuate because of the insulating effect of my clothes, but the immediate heaviness of them became apparent when I reached for the ice shelf. With just my hands and arms I wasn't going to escape, and when I deployed my claws nothing happened either.

Then I remembered to kick to raise my legs from vertical to horizontal, and with both hands hauling on the spikes of my ice claws I slid out with ease.

Not only had I forgotten to kick, I also forgot to undo my throw-rope and hurl it to my "rescuers". But that's why we practise. Subsequent viewing of the video showed that I vanished under the surface then popped up like a ping-pong ball buoyed by my skating backpack containing a drybag with a full set of dry clothes. The air in my clothing would also have helped.