



CHAPTER

25





Fishing

“Ours is the grandest sport. It is an intriguing battle of wits between an angler and a trout; and in addition to appreciating the tradition and grace of the game, we play it in the magnificent out-of-doors.”

—Ernest G. Schwiebert Jr. (American author, architect, and lifelong fisherman), *Matching the Hatch*, 1955



When it comes to fishing, it's good to accept the fact that fish are a lot smarter than you are, at least when it comes to being fish. To become fish of much size, they have learned to find enough to eat. They also have figured out how to avoid predators, including the likes of you. If catching fish were easy, you would quickly tire of it. As it is, though, the challenge of matching your wits with those smarter-than-you fish can last a lifetime.

Fishing is many things to many people. It can fill a quiet hour on a summer afternoon. It can be the reason for a week-long backpacking trip to reach remote mountain trout streams. It can be enjoyed with any tackle, from a simple pole with a line, hook, and worm to a fly-casting outfit with homemade lures keyed to the season, the weather, the water, and the species of fish. The larger experience of fishing—enjoying the scenery, appreciating natural surroundings, finding an escape from otherwise busy lifestyles—is heightened when your fishing takes you far from the beaten path.

Every angler has opinions about the best ways to fish, advice on the most effective lures, and sweet memories of favorite fishing holes. And everyone who fishes has a few fish tales. You will, too. As for the size of your fish tales, that's up to you.



Catch-and-release fishing allows you to enjoy the experience of fishing without depleting the species population. Follow the principles of **Leave No Trace** while you are fishing, and you can be sure that you are reducing your impact on the environment, too.

For more, see the “**Leaving No Trace**” section of this book.

First Things First

Lakes and streams far from roads often are prime fishing spots that are far less crowded than bodies of water accessible by motor vehicle. Wherever you intend to fish, take care of a few preliminary responsibilities before you bait your hook.

Licenses and Permits

Check with your state’s fish and game department to find out if you need a fishing license. If most of your fishing will be near your home, you probably can get an annual license to cover all of your trips. Before traveling to other waters to fish, especially in other states, inquire about any legalities you must follow. A search of Internet Web sites should turn up the licensing requirements for an area, as well as lead you to lots of local information about fishing spots, lures, and seasons.

Keeping or Releasing?

Decide ahead of time whether you will be keeping the fish you catch or releasing them. Many parks and forests permit only catch-and-release fishing, thus making the choice for you. Consider using barbless hooks on your lures to reduce the chances of injuring the fish you will

release. (You can permanently disarm a barbed hook by flattening the barb against the hook with a pair of needle-nose pliers.)

Another factor in your decision to release or keep fish may be the presence of bears in the area where you intend to camp. Bears are attracted to aromas, and if there is anything standard about fish, especially those being cooked, it's the fact that they smell. Check with the local land manager, or toss fish remains and entrails in flowing water or carry them out. When bedding down at night, wear clean clothing that is free from any fish smell. If that will be a difficult challenge, you would be wise to practice catch-and-release fishing, or to save your fishing for trips in places where you are not competing with bears.

Finding Fish

Fish like to dwell where there is an abundance of food and an absence of danger. That often means water with a current that will keep a fresh supply of potential food flowing past. Fish also want shelter of some sort—an eddy, the quiet water behind a big rock in a stream, the darkness below a submerged log, or a bed of underwater grasses.

A fish is equipped with a sensory organ running the length of its body, called the *lateral line*, that picks up vibrations from its surroundings. That can be good for an angler using lures that give off vibrations resembling those of an injured minnow or some other enticing morsel. It can be bad, though, when the vibrations come from footsteps, unintended splashes in the water, and other noises that fish perceive as threatening rather than inviting. Fish are wary of predators on land and in the air as well as in the water, and will dart away from shadows suddenly cast on a pond or stream.

It's highly unlikely that the fish you want to catch will come looking for you. To find them, you'll need to figure out what a fish needs.



Mastering Fishing Skills

Fishing involves these steps:

- 1 Choose a lure or bait that will attract fish.
- 2 Cast effectively and persuade a fish to strike.
- 3 Set the hook and play the fish close enough to land it.
- 4 Gently release the fish, or clean and cook it.

Pole Fishing

One of the simplest ways to catch fish requires little more than some tackle and a lightweight pole—a cane pole is ideal, though fish won't mind if you use a straight stick. Tie one end of a fishing line to the pole; to the other end of the line attach a bobber, a sinker, and a hook baited with a



worm, grasshopper, grub, or other natural food of the fish you're after. You might be able to gather the bait you need from grass and bushes along the shore. Toss your line into the water, make yourself comfortable, and wait for the bobber to jiggle.

Casting Systems

Fishing with a pole and bobber consists of brief moments of excitement interrupted by long periods of patient waiting, appreciating the scenery, and napping in the shade. Anglers eager for a more active role in the outcome of their efforts can graduate to one of several casting systems, using rods and reels to cast and retrieve lures that simulate the shape and motion of a fish's natural food. Fishing becomes a game of wits as anglers try to guess which lures to use, where to cast them to attract fish, and how to retrieve them to entice a fish to strike.

A casting system, or *tackle*, is made up of a rod, a reel, some line, and a lure or bait. Figure on several lures, since you might occasionally lose one. When your fishing adventures will take you far from the trailhead, your choices of tackle will depend in part on how you plan to travel. The rod will be the most critical; it's an awkward item to carry in any case, and particularly so as you make your way through brush or along a trail.

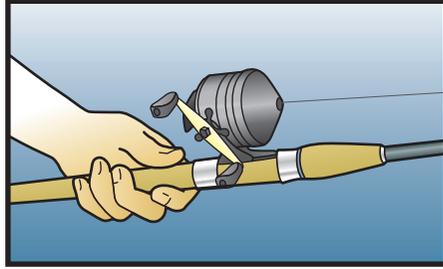
A collapsible rod can be dismantled, stored in a lightweight plastic tube, and strapped to the outside of a backpack. Rods of modest length that don't come apart can be lashed under the gunwales of canoes and along the decks of kayaks. Reels can be removed from rods for ease of packing. A small lure box will round out your carrying gear by providing a secure place to stow lures and prevent the hooks from finding their way into your other gear or into you.

Whatever tackle you choose, casting is simply a means of getting a lure or bait onto or into the water where fish are likely to strike it. Each of the four types of casting systems—*spin-casting*, *spinning*, *bait-casting*, and *fly-casting*—is suited to particular kinds of lures, baits, and methods of fooling fish.

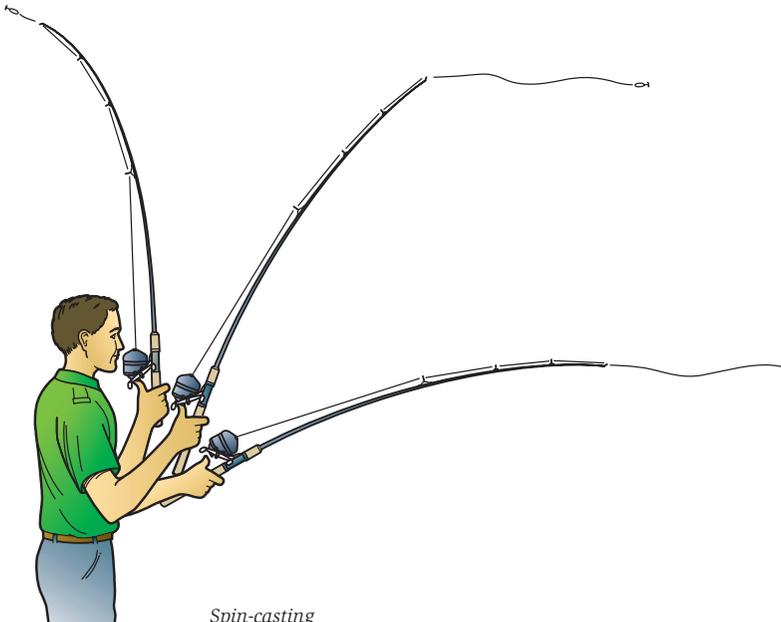
Spin-Casting

The easiest casting system to master is the closed-faced *spin-casting* rig. The equipment you'll need includes a rod (often made of fiberglass) and a reel with the line spool enclosed in a cone-shaped housing. The line comes out of a hole in the point of the cone, and its release is controlled by a push button mounted on the back of the reel. Because the spool is enclosed, the system is difficult to tangle—a great advantage for beginning anglers.

To cast with spin-casting gear, thread the line from the reel through the line guides of the rod and tie on a lure or a hook with bait. (For practice on dry land, use a hookless rubber casting weight instead and a bucket or a circle drawn on the ground as a target.)



Hold the rod in front of you with the reel up, the tip of the rod pointed toward the target. Reel the lure or bait to about 6 inches from the rod tip and depress the button beneath the thumb of your rod hand. While holding the button in, swing the rod back and up until it is nearly vertical, then smoothly snap it forward. When the tip of the rod is about halfway back to its starting position, lift your thumb from the button to release the line and send the lure or bait flying. If it goes too high, your release was early; if it goes low, the release was late. It will take you a few casts to get a feel for the instant to release the line and for the right amount of power needed to arc the lure or bait into the center of your target.



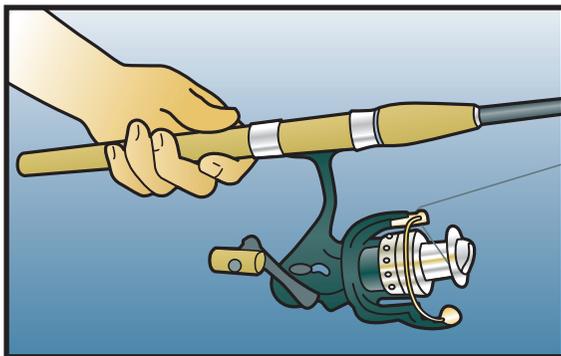
Spin-casting

Spinning

An open-faced *spinning* reel has no cone covering the spool, relying instead on a wire bail to control the line. The reel hangs below the rod handle, and the line feeds out through guides on the underside of the rod.

Reel the lure or bait to about 6 inches from the tip of the rod. Use the index finger of your rod hand to press the line against the rod handle, then move the bail to the open position.

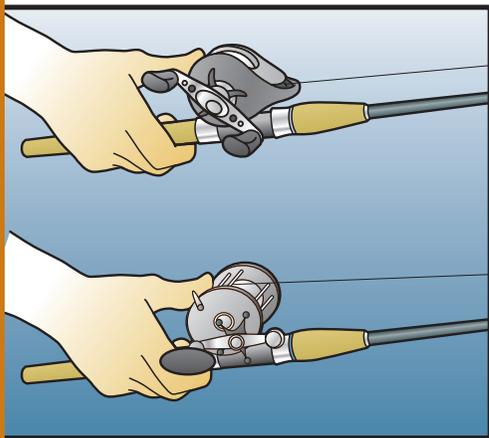
Make a cast by moving the rod as you would with a spin-casting outfit, moving your index finger to release the line and send the lure or bait on its way. As the lure or bait approaches its target, you can bring your finger close to the rod handle so that the moving line brushes against it and slows (called *feathering*), causing the lure or bait to drop gently into the water. Turning the reel crank after each cast will return the bail to its closed position and allow you to wind the line back onto the spool.



Bait-Casting

In spin-casting and in spinning, the line peels over the rim of the reel spool but the spool itself does not turn. In *bait-casting*, the spool rotates during the cast, allowing the line to unwind. Anglers often choose bait-casting for fishing with live baits such as minnows, as well as with artificial lures.

To use bait-casting gear, wind the lure or bait to within a few inches of the rod tip. Most bait-casting reels have a button that disengages the crank and allows the spool to turn freely, or *freespool*. Grasp the rod and place your thumb against the back of the spool to secure the line. Depress the freespool button and you're ready to cast.

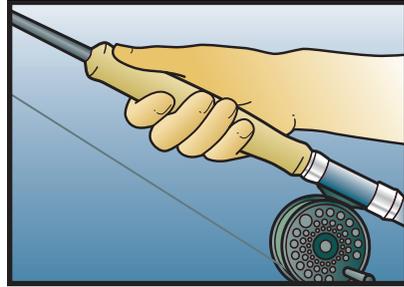


The casting motion is basically the same as with spin-casting and spinning rigs. Let the line go by lifting your thumb just enough to reduce tension on the spool, keeping your thumb in light contact with the spool to control the distance of the cast and to prevent the tangling overrun, or *backlash*, that can occur if the reel releases line faster than the lure or bait can pull it away.

Fly-Casting

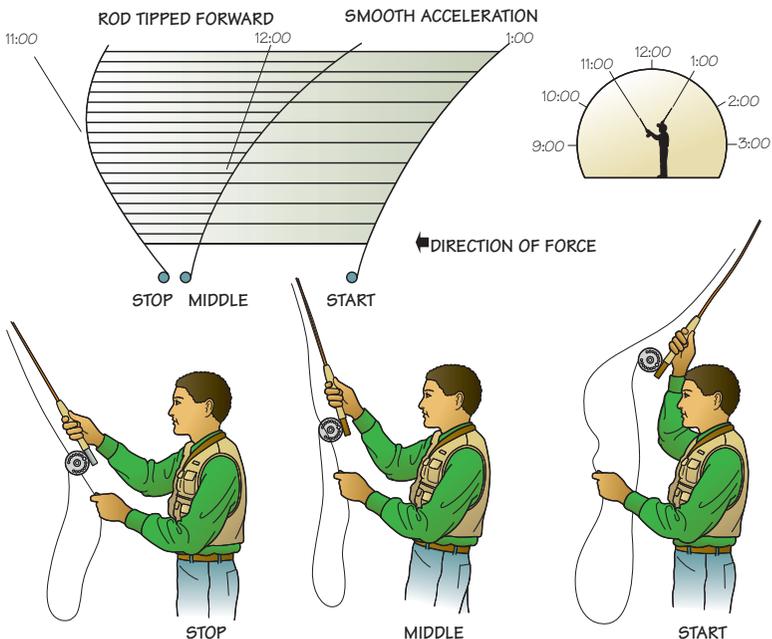
The fourth casting system is the oldest and, with good equipment and instruction, not very difficult to use. While other systems rely on the weight of the lure or bait to pull line from the reel, fly-casters use nearly weightless lures made of bits of feather, fur, hair, and thread. The line itself provides the weight that carries a lure through the air.

Fly rods are long—6 to 10 feet. The reel, located below the rod, is a simple winch to wind line in and out. The line is relatively thick and is made especially for fly-fishing. Some lines will float when they reach the water, while others are designed to sink. Several feet of thin, transparent *leader* is attached to the end of the line, and the



lure, usually in the form of an artificial *fly*, is tied to the end of the leader.

Fly-casting is a skill you can learn in a few minutes, then spend the rest of your life trying to perfect. Slowly arc the rod back and forth over your head, each time feeling the loading energy being transferred from the line to the rod and back to the line again. Control the line with your free hand as you feed out line from the reel. When you've got enough line looping through the air, swing the tip of the rod toward your target. Let the line curl out over the water and lightly place the fly just where you want it. In still water, drop the fly directly over the fish. If the water is moving, cast upstream and let the lure drift near feeding fish where they lie in wait.



Fly-casting technique



“When you catch your fish do as I do—only keep those you specially want for food or as specimens, put back the others the moment you have landed them.”

—Robert S. S. Baden-Powell
(1857–1941), founder of the
worldwide Scouting movement

Fishing Lures

Knowing how to cast will help make you a good angler. Knowing what lures to use can bring you success, since you will be casting lures that will appeal to fish.

Spinners

Spinners are shiny metal lures that, as their name implies, spin through the water as you reel them in. Steadily retrieve a spinner to make the lure twirl, or reel and stop, reel and stop, allowing the lure to sink a little with each pause.



Spinner

Spoon

Spoons

Spoons essentially are spinners that flutter rather than spin. Many are painted red with diagonal white stripes. Spoons with hooks shielded to discourage entanglement in weeds will reach fish that hide in underwater beds of grass and beneath lily pads.

Plugs

Plugs are intended to look like little fish, crawdads, frogs, or other aquatic prey. Some always float; others dive as they are retrieved. Some wobble and gurgle, some make a popping sound, and some wiggle slowly through the water. The goal of using a plug is to manipulate it so that it attracts the attention of hungry fish.



Plug

*Floater/diver*

Floater/Diver Lures

Lures that both float and dive typically have the appearance of small fish or frogs. Retrieve them slowly and they'll stay near the surface. Reel them in quickly and they will swim a few feet underwater.

*Injured minnow*

Injured Minnows

Another effective lure is shaped like a minnow and outfitted with shiny propellers on one or both ends. Retrieve it in fits and starts, causing the lure to struggle along like a hurt minnow trying to escape.

Crank Baits

A *crank bait* dives deeply as you reel it in. It vibrates and rattles to attract fish far below the water's surface.

*Crank bait*

Jigs

A *jig* has a heavy, blunt body embellished with skirts made of hair, feathers, rubber, or plastic. It will sink to the bottom of a stream or lake and bounce as you raise and lower, or *jig*, your rod, reeling in line whenever there is slack. Jig lures come in many sizes and styles, and are effective for catching everything from small panfish to big trout, bass, walleyes, pike, and many saltwater species.

*Jig*

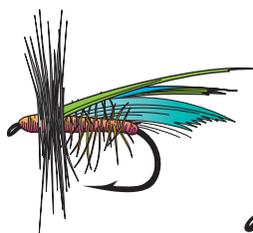
Soft Plastic Lures

While some *soft plastic lures* are molded to mimic insects, grubs, and small aquatic animals, the most popular type looks like an earthworm. Hooks embedded in the worm and attached to a leader provide the bite of the bait, and a small lead sinker provides extra weight to increase casting distance. A good way to fish with a plastic worm is to cast it near a submerged log or stump, or into the shallows close to shore, then jig the rod to drag the worm along.



Flies

There was a time when a lure called a *fly* looked much like what its name implied—an insect called a mayfly, one of the primary food sources of trout. Many fishing flies still match the appearance of insects near trout streams, but variations abound. *Dry flies* are designed to float on the surface of the water; *wet flies* and *nymphs* are meant to sink. *Streamers* look like small minnows. Bass and some saltwater fish also can be taken with fly-fishing tackle, often by using flies you have made yourself.



Dry fly (henryville)



Wet fly (wooly worm)

Live Bait

Live bait, including minnows, earthworms, and leeches, should never be released. It can cause undesirable environmental impacts.

Rigging Your Tackle

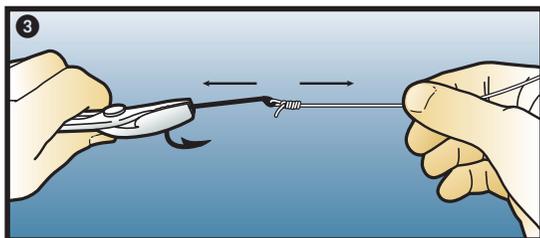
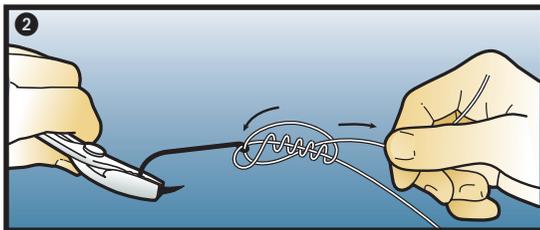
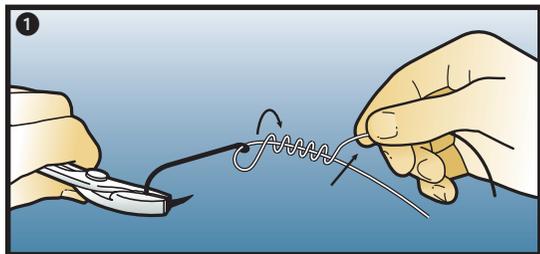
Successful fishing relies on well-tied knots. The most important knots are those used for tying lines to lures, hooks, and leaders.

Improved Clinch Knot

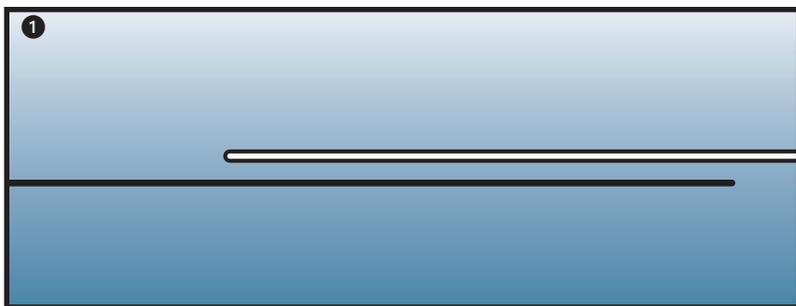
Use the *improved clinch knot* to secure a line directly to a hook or to the eye of a lure:

- 1 Pass the end of the line (the *running end*) through the eye of the hook or lure. (Holding the hook with needle-nose pliers will shield your hand from possible injury.) Pull through about 8 inches of line. Bend it back away from the lure or hook, and wind it five or six times around the body of the line (the *standing end*).
- 2 Pass the running end through the loop closest to the eye of the hook or lure, then pass the running end through the newly created large loop.
- 3 Gently pull the lure or hook in one direction, the standing end and running end of the line in the other. Apply varying pressure to portions of the knot so that it is neatly *dressed*—that is, all the loops are in place and tightened equally to all other portions of the knot. Moistening the knot as you tighten it can lubricate the line and enable you to pull out the slack more easily.

With a knife blade or fingernail clippers, snip off nearly all of the remaining running end.



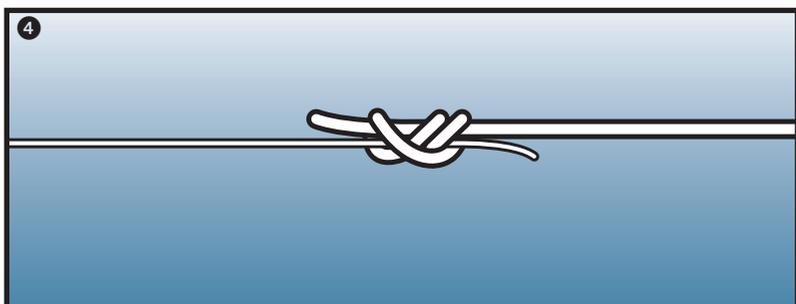
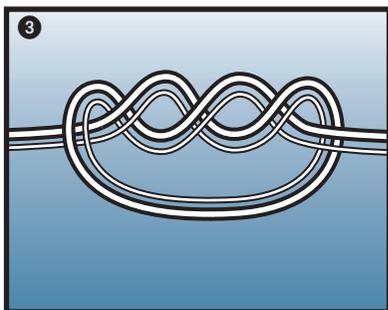
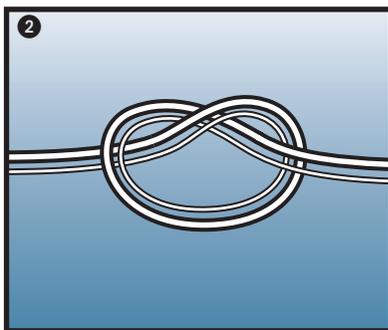
Improved clinch knot



Surgeon's Knot

To join a leader to a line, rely on the *surgeon's knot*:

- 1 Lay the line and leader side by side, overlapping the ends 6 to 8 inches.
- 2 Lift the line and leader together, form a loop, and tie a loose overhand knot by passing the entire leader and the end of the line through the loop.
- 3 Pass the leader and end of the line through the loop a second time.
- 4 Tighten the knot by gradually pulling slack out of the leader and line. Snip off excess ends of the line and leader.



Surgeon's knot



Playing a Fish

You've picked the right lure, cast it in a promising location, and felt the line suddenly jump as a fish strikes. The game of playing a fish has just begun.

A strong fish can snap a light line with a twist of its body. It can dive beneath sunken logs, or tangle your tackle in a bed of weeds. To prevent that from happening, draw the tip of the rod upward and then reel in line as you dip the rod back toward the water. Do what you can with the line to steer the fish away from underwater obstructions, and keep pressure on the line. Don't waste time. The longer it fights, the greater the chance a fish will free itself from the hook, break your line, or become ensnared in obstructions.

A speedy retrieval is especially important when you intend to release a fish. Its chances of recovery will be higher than if it had been played to the point of exhaustion.

Releasing a Fish

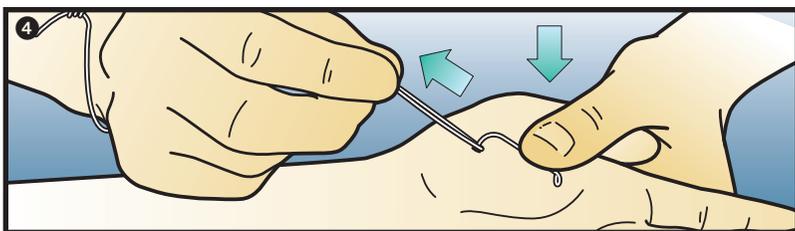
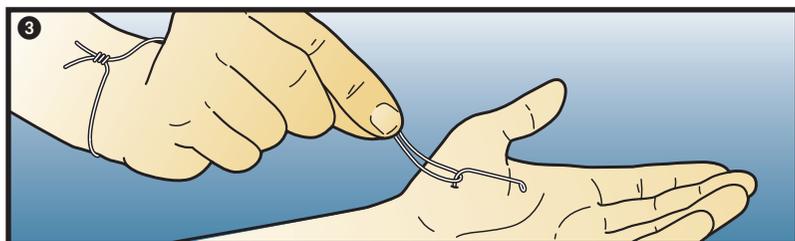
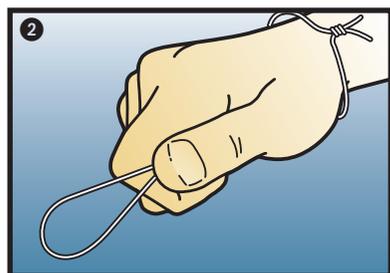
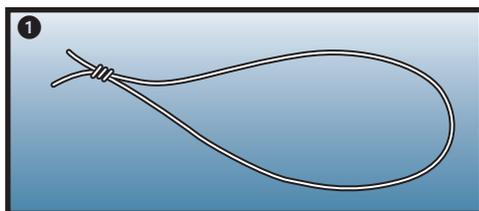
Try to leave a fish in the water if you are planning to set it loose. You might be able to release it simply by running your hand down the line to the lure and twisting the hook free. If you must lift the fish, wet your hands first to protect the mucus on the fish's skin. Continue to support the fish when you have returned it to the water. Position it with its head upstream so that water will flow through its gills until it seems to have regained its energy and can swim away on its own.

Releasing a Hooked Angler

If you fish long enough, there will come a time when you put a hook in yourself rather than in a fish. Catch-and-release takes on new meaning when it is you (or one of your companions) in need of being released. If possible, let a physician or medic remove the hook from the flesh. On a long fishing trip, you might have to do the job yourself.

When the hook is embedded in flesh where the barb cannot be pushed through, a quick way to extract the hook is to use a length of fishing line.

- 1 Tie the ends of a piece of sturdy fishing line together to form a loop.
- 2 Place the loop around your wrist and grip the line between your thumb and index finger.
- 3 Slip the loop over the hook.
- 4 Press the hook's eye against the skin, then remove the hook with a quick jerk of the loop.



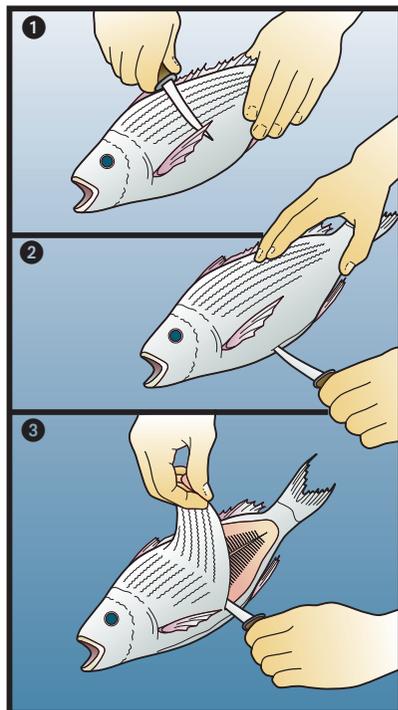
Thoroughly wash the wound and treat it with antibiotic ointment. Bandage the wound to help prevent it from getting dirty.



Cleaning Your Catch

Trout and some other species of fish have scales so small they don't need to be removed before cooking; nor do catfish and similar species that can be skinned. For other fish, begin preparing them for the kitchen by scaling.

- ❶ Remove the scales by scraping the skin from tail to head with a knife blade or fish scaler.
- ❷ Gut the fish by making a slit from vent to throat. Strip the entrails from the body cavity with your fingers, then thoroughly wash the fish inside and out.
- ❸ You can fillet a fish by slicing along each side close to the spine. The result should be two boneless pieces of fish.





Fishing Tips

Every angler has a creel full of tricks for making fishing easier and more fun. Here are a few:

- Sunglasses with polarized lenses can enable you to see beneath the surface of the water even when the sun is bright.
- Fish swimming in a swift stream usually face into the current. They aren't as likely to see you if you approach from downstream. Cast over them and let your lures drift toward them.
- Reeling in a lure very slowly might bring it through submerged vegetation without snagging.
- Make short casts first, then cast farther out into the water. That way, fish farther away will still be around after you've given those closer in a chance to attach themselves to your lure.
- Fish early in the day and at dusk when fish are more likely to be feeding. Overcast days also can be good.
- For beginning anglers, it's hard to beat worms, grasshoppers, grubs, and other live bait collected near a fishing spot.



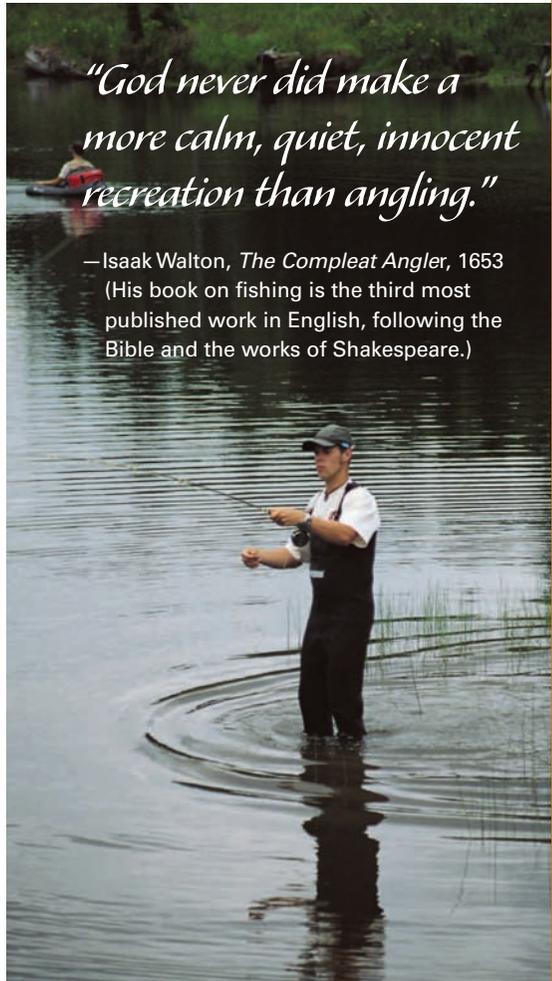


The Why of Fishing

This chapter has explored the *how* of fishing—how to prepare a bait or lure, how to rig a rod and reel, how to approach a body of water where fish are likely to lurk. As to the *why* of fishing, well, that’s going to be answered every time you take your tackle and make your way to the edge of a pond, a lake, a stream, or the pounding surf. You know that fish are there, and that nothing stands between you and them but your skill, cunning, and luck.

The adventure of fishing is also a terrific way to appreciate the environment. Your awareness of your surroundings is heightened by an eagerness to understand the habits and habitat of the fish you want to catch. You have a wonderful excuse to slow down, to spend plenty of time in one spot, and to notice everything going on around you. If you do catch a fish, that’s a bonus to an otherwise fine day, but if not, the experience is never wasted.

Fishing is as varied and interesting an outdoor activity as you can find. Every kind of fish, every body of water, every sort of tackle, and each season of the year brings its own variety and challenge for anglers. Sometimes you’ll have terrific luck; other days the fish will win. The bottom line, though, is that any time you spend with a fishing rod in your hand is quality time—time for having fun, time for making memories, and time simply to realize how great it is to be alive.



“God never did make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling.”

—Isaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler*, 1653
(His book on fishing is the third most published work in English, following the Bible and the works of Shakespeare.)