

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO SEA FISHING BAITS



Introduction:

This has been extracted from www.sea-angling-ireland.org and has its origins in pieces placed on the site in 1999, with significant additions, corrections and tips coming from the members of the site's many sea-angling forums.

We hope that it offers any angler, young or old, new or experienced, a simple but practical guide to the use of native and imported baits in sea angling.

Finally if you would like to see additions, corrections or amendments, please feel free to drop us a line by email, and full credit will be given for any changes made.

Tight Lines!



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Lugworm

Lugworms are marine worms that live in "U" shaped burrows in sand or sand and mud mixtures. You rarely find them in shingle, broken shell or other locations where ragworm are sought, but you will find some smaller ragworm in lugworm beds. You may also find other baits such as clams and even the odd shrimp left behind by the tide. The fresh 'squiggles' of sand deposited above the burrows indicates their presence on a beach or mudflat, and the more and/or greater density the squiggles; the more worms there are in the target area.



Common also known as "blow" lugworm typically grow to 8 inches long (20 cms) and the larger worms are found in the richer marine habitats. Black lugworm - the preferred lugworm bait - is only available at low water on most marks and in some locations only on spring tides, when the water is farthest from the shore. Blow lugworms have very soft bodies, with a hard "tail" that is filled with this sand. Black lugworm are bigger and tougher hence the angler's preference for using them. They also freeze down better than blow lugworm.

Collection

For blow lugworm, the simplest method is to dig a long trench along a line with lots of squiggles. The best implement for this is a short handled fork, and not a spade. Gloves will keep wet sand off your hand and minimise blisters - they also help reduce the smell in the car afterwards and they are useful for hygiene purposes. Flatten the tines on the fork with a lump hammer to give it better grip if the sand is fine and/or relatively dry. Typically it is oozy and wet. Spades are not advisable in trenching for lugworm, as they will cut the worms. A broken or halved lugworm is poor bait, but can be used effectively if you are fishing immediately after the bait collection. If not it can still be used – see the section on freezing lugworms. Wellington boots are useful especially in the mud flats. Instead of digging, you can use a bait pump. The secret to pumping is to use long pumps, but even with the best method in the world, it will still produce lots of broken worms. Hawkish eyesight is good and a fellow angler is useful - one digs, one looks and you change roles regularly... or you can both dig at the same time and keep any eye on each other's trenches! In my experience the bigger worms live deepest down and on some mudflats you have to be very careful not to get stuck. Never dig alone. If you

must dig alone, bring your mobile phone, check the coverage and the battery, and tell people where you are going and when you will return. Always safety first.



When seeking black lugworm you will find that there is a distinct pattern to the marks on the sand or mud. A squiggle marks one end of the burrow and the other end is marked by a small circular depression in the sand or mud. These identify the ends of the "U" shaped burrow. Digging for black lugworm involves seeking out individual worms. Select a single pair of marks, squiggle and depression and make sure they look fresh. Nothing worse than digging up an empty burrow! Take a "sod" out at the depression end first. Take the next one out at the squiggle. Take one or two loads out at the piece in between these points. Most worms are found in this last piece. Dig at an angle rather than straight down and you may be able to follow the track of the burrow. It may need a second spade load to get at the worms, although most tend to be within a foot (30 cms) of the surface. As indicated, some will be within an inch of the surface if there is water on the surface nearby. Otherwise you will find them at or just above the water table. Drop the spade load of sand from hip height or higher so that it fractures along the burrows made by the worms, making them easier to find in the debris. It is amazing how well camouflaged blow lugworm are given their varied hues - ranging from black to green to red. Each beach or mud flat has its own unique characteristics - on the Cockle Beach behind Bertra Strand in Mayo the best spot is in the shingle, shells and loose stones at the high water mark, where they are only an inch or two underground. In Duncannon in Wexford the best spot for black lugworm is the highest point on the sandbanks at low water (at the southern end of the beach) and the worms are always very deep down. If you cannot be bothered or you have no lugworm beds near you, most fishing tackle shops will supply them for you. It is best to book your supplies well in advance. Frozen black lugworm are now commonly available from tackle shops, and there are even mail order companies ready to deliver them anywhere in the UK and Ireland.

Storage & Presentation

Most lugworm will keep alive for a day or two if kept cold and out of the sun / drafts. You can keep them in a bucket of salt water for a few hours, where they will swim away and largely empty themselves of excess sand. If you want to store them for longer, the best option is to wrap no more than a dozen worms - having checked them for damage and discarded any dodgy ones - in newspapers with a bit of weed thrown in to keep them damp / apart. Finally some people recommend that you put them into a bucket of coarse sand and a little bit of sea water, the latter there only to keep them cool and damp. It is possible to freeze lugworm. The method used depends on whether they are blow lugworm or black lugworm. Most people do not freeze lugworm for the simple reason that they are so plentiful but if you have some left over from a session, here are the best options:

For fresh black lugworm, remove the tail, thread them onto the hooks without puncturing them, whip on shirring elastic as required, wrap them in newspaper and put them and the traces into the freezer. Alternatively you can wrap them individually having removed the sand and guts, although this is a less scented bait when it gets returned to the sea. When you go to use them from the freezer, drop them into a large thermos flask, thermos bag or cooler box. They stay frozen until you get fishing, but will 'degrade' quickly once cast into even very cold seawater. Rapid freezing retains the all-important juices in the worms. Gutted worms are sticky black strips when thawed but still work well.

For blow lugworm bring them home, cover them in salt for a few hours to draw out all the water, and then freeze them individually wrapped in paper. They never go fully "hard" for the lack of water and get rubbery and tougher, but they will work and tend to stay on the hooks longer than fresh lugworm. They re-hydrate to a degree once cast into the sea. Dipping them in a fish oil like Pilchard or Ultrabite (some people spray it with WD40) also helps especially if you are going to freeze them, since the oil releases as they thaw.

This said, fresh lugworm is a far superior bait since it is the scent trail that is the vital ingredient.

A final tip concerns the busted worms that are inevitable in any digging – one excellent use for them is to stuff them into the cavity created by emptying a squid of its innards and tentacles. Whip the "pocket" shut and freeze up for a supreme cod bait, one that resists crabs, offers a cocktail of scents and visual stimulus, and finds a useful for otherwise useless busted lugworms.

Bait Presentation

Blow or common lugworm with soft bodies are inferior as fresh baits to Black Lugworm, which is

big, not as soft and preferred by most fish. Blow lugworms are difficult to present effectively due to their very soft bodies. They tend to fly off hooks, fall apart and make a nasty mess. Black lugworm is also known (especially in parts of the UK) as yellowtail lugworm. Shirring elastic is used a lot in good bait presentation, and crucial in shore fishing where long distance casting is required. Regardless of which worm you are using, remove the sand filled tail by pinching it off between thumb and forefinger, taking care not to take all of it off otherwise the guts will spill out and the bait will be useless. This latter point relates solely to fresh as opposed to frozen lugworm baits.

Crabs are a common problem when "bottom" fishing with lugworm. Put a small float like a pierced cork (big enough to lift the bait clear of the seabed or at least impart movement in the current or tide) on the trace a few inches (5 cms) above the hook(s). Large pierced polystyrene beads will perform the same trick and that bit of movement to the bait in any currents on the seabed will help attract fish. Tip each hook point with a small piece of squid as well - small fish and crabs will have a hard time removing it and it has the added advantage of ensuring the hook point is available to any hungry fish.

Lugworm will not wriggle on the hook but those big fat bodies do give off an excellent scent trail. In turbulent conditions keep the snoods closer together to maximise the scent trail, in calmer conditions distribute them farther apart to generate a wide scent trail.

Hooks, Rigs or Traces

Nowadays there are specialist hooks for presenting marine worms, and most will feature a long shank, up which the worm is threaded. The Aberdeen design is well suited to this type of fishing. Avoid cheap hooks that have the barb turned in or with tiny mini-hooks along the shank - in my experience they do not hook properly at all, although this is a matter for debate! Presentation typically demands that one or more lugworms are threaded up through the hook shank from head to toe, or vice versa, with shirring elastic holding them in place. An alternative is to put several lugworms onto the hook by their heads, and bring their tails up past the hook eye and tie them into place with shirring elastic to produce a large lugworm sausage, with a hook on the end. You can use several worms on a two hook pannel rig for better presentation, the more so if you are going after fish like Cod or Pollack. Lugworm work as a bait in just about every condition, but surprisingly they work best where they are not common. They are used a lot in "cocktails" - mixtures of baits such as lugworm and squid, or in "kebabs" with mackerel and squid. These cocktails will often catch 'fussy' fish when other baits fail.

Another option is the squid pocket – mentioned earlier in the freezing section - where you stuff the body of a squid with broken worms tying it up with

shirring elastic. Make sure to skin the squid, removing the dark membrane on the outside as this increases its visibility. This stuffed squid makes an excellent big, streamlined and crab defeating bait. Finally consider using a pennel rig (two hooks), which allows for better presentation of larger multiple worm baits. If you have to cast any distance, use an impact shield and clip down the baits otherwise they will fly to bits in a power cast and/or smash up when they hit the water. You can incorporate a swimfeeder full of bran, processed fish oil and bits of lugworm into most shore rigs as well to boost the scent trail and bring fish towards the baits. Some people tie bits of old bait and mackerel to the leads for the same purpose, often using elastic bands around the grip wires to hold this additional attractor in place during the cast.

Fish Species

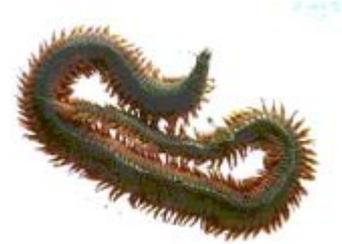
All flatfish (Flounder, small Turbot, Brill, Dabs, Megrim and Plaice) love lugworm, indeed most fish will happily take lugworm. It is very good bait for Wrasse fishing, and will account for most fish off the bottom including Cod, Haddock, Pollack, Coalfish, smaller Ling, Whiting, and all the Gurnards. Locally in Mayo I have had Mullet and Sea Trout on lugworm that was cast in search of flatfish. Bass find a big lugworm bait very attractive in the right conditions. Lugworm is effective bait from shore and from boats on inshore marks. The bigger the fish the bigger the bait, and quite often lugworm have to be used in combination with one or more other baits such as squid, mackerel strip, sandeel etc.

Finally and quite bizarrely whilst Dabs like fresh lugworm, they prefer half rotten five-day-old lugworm, dead and messy. It draws them like nothing else!

Ragworm

The first thing to know about the ragworm is that they are predators and can give very sharp nips! The king ragworm can grow to over 12 inches long (30 cms) and you do not want to get a nip off one of those 'snakes'! There used to be an amazing supply of them in terribly oozy mud and sand right outside my brother's house in Baldoyle, in the estuary behind Sutton Golf Club before they laid the new sewerage pipes. We have taken lots of monster king rag out of that estuary but boy did we stink horribly afterwards!

By far the most common ragworm is the red ragworm, far smaller, unlikely to grow to more than a few inches (10 cms), but don't turn your nose up at this excellent bait. Known locally as "maddies" or harbour ragworm, they are very effective bait when used in bundles.



The herringbone rag is smaller still and uniquely coloured, but it is usually too small to use as bait.

The white rag or "silvers" is the most prized sea fishing bait of all. They are only found at carefully guarded locations and at extremely low water, i.e. on spring tides, and apparently for some reason next to masonry worms beds (which are useless as bait). They can show up in small quantities in lugworm beds but tend to be of a very small size and not worth the effort.

Collection

Ragworm are dug up in exactly the same manner as lugworm, however they move like lightning! King rag are remarkably powerful - you have to dig out the whole body - no use in pulling at them... so it is down to the mud flat in the Wellington boots and the potato fork and a bucket with a bundle of wet seaweed. Mussel beds are a favourite spot for digging ragworm and shingle and shale beds rather than mud itself is a better option. Ragworm like the relatively dryness and ease of movement afforded them by the shingle and shale or broken shells. Heavy cloying mud will rarely hold ragworm although in many locations like the Back Strand in Tramore in Waterford, or behind the church in Baldoyle in Dublin, you will find ragworm alongside lugworm and other baits like clams. Digging in this kind of substrate is done with a fork rather than a spade. You will often find rocks mixed in with the sand, shingle, shells etc. and a fork gets around this problem. A spade will only leave your cursing... if it is a relatively dry substance like shingle, batter the tines on the fork flatter with a lump hammer. A pair of gloves are essential - (a) the sand or shale or grit will rip even tough hands apart in a long digging session and (b) the best ragworm are often found at the end of a sewage pipe.

Storage & Presentation

King rag can be split into several pieces, and since their main feature is the electric wriggling they do on a hook, a big king rag represents several baits. A big king ragworm on its own is a spectacularly effective bait. If you break one, and you are fishing immediately afterwards, keep it but if you are not fishing within the hour, discard it. Ragworm are predators so it is not a good idea to store them with small lugworm or ragworm. If you are keeping them overnight give them plenty of room and lots of wet seaweed and coarse sand as cover. Ensure that

bucket has a tight lid. A cold dark spot is essential. No pets!

Ragworm cannot be frozen. It kills them and since they will not wriggle after that, they are largely useless as bait. If you need to keep them for some time, try coal dust and slack or coarse sand with some sea water added and keep them cool and in the dark. They can be stored in this manner for several days but you will have to check them regularly and throw out dead worms. Some people will store them in their fridges - but it could cost you a divorce! George (*thanks*) recommends using an atomiser (old window cleaner) full of seawater and stored in the fridge to keep your worms in tip-top condition. If you store it outside the fridge, the seawater will be far warmer than the worms...

Ragworm is sold in most tackle shops and from mail order bait companies. It is now farmed commercially and often arrives stored in vermiculite (a water absorbing material). If you have vermiculite, mix it with peat and sand for an ideal holding material for ragworm, then spread it on the garden afterwards!

Bait Presentation

To recap, there are four species of ragworm in Ireland - mostly on the east and south coasts - red, king, herringbone and white or silver. If you want to fish in the west of Ireland, bring them with you. They are very rare, in fact they're like gold dust out here! King Rag and Silver or large white ragworm are a superb bait and one is more than enough. Clearly they work best in calm conditions and in clear water - lots of sand or mud flying about and/or casting them into strong currents is not ideal. Since ragworm have nippers I prefer to thread the worm on head first, and if you squeeze them just behind the head - apart from avoiding a nip by holding them there - it will open the jaws and allow the hook be threaded easily. This lets the tail wriggle. Do not leave too much of a tail on - an inch (2 cms) is fine - you are not feeding the fish, just teasing them into taking the bait! The problem with ragworm is that small fish will nip off bits, the wriggling bits, so you must change baits more often than with lugworm.

Rigs or Traces

Again standard long shank hooks are the preferred hooks and an Aberdeen design like the Kamasan B940 is ideal. Hook size is defined by the size of the rag bait and the target species. We have threaded king rag onto 6/0 hooks, but red ragworm require a small hook, even down as far as size 4. Ragworm work in most conditions from shore and estuary to off rocks to deep-water reef or wreck marks.

They work best in calmer conditions and clearer water - if there is a lot of sediment thrown up by the surf or waves, a scent trail is better so try lugworm instead. They are particularly effective on a float rig for mackerel, mullet, wrasse, garfish and other

species available in/about harbours or off rocky marks fronting deep water.

Fish Species

Everything that swims loves ragworm. If you have to bring one bait with you, for any location, with any rig, bring king rag or a variety of ragworm. You would think that as a worm they would work well on the bottom, but I've found them to be more effective off the bottom, e.g. on the topmost hook in a paternoster or on a corked / pop-up hook, and even on the float.

An exciting and simple method is to thread one onto a leadhead or simply rig a small boom and bare hook. In fact you may not even need the boom, just add a lighter lead a few feet above the leadhead to give it the kink needed to get the leadhead fishing in a diagonal rather than vertical pattern.

Crabs



Standard position for a hermit crab!



Common Spider Crab.
Photo: Dr Keith Hiscock.



Common Shore Crab (Green Crab). Photo: Sue Daly.

Crabs are not difficult to collect or use, if you know what you are doing.

People new to sea angling are often put off by an initial unsuccessful attempt with crab bait, and that is an unfortunate mistake. They produce a remarkable scent trail and superb results. Quite often they will catch fish where no other bait will succeed. Several

well-known venues, and I'm thinking particularly of flatfish and bass marks of Wexford and Waterford – are exclusively crab bait marks. Anything else will not do – the fish like their crab down south!

Crab is mostly used from the shore. I have not heard of anyone using it from boats in Ireland although it is a common enough tactic in the big estuaries like the Thames in the UK, so if you do use it from a boat, let us know how...

The first crab you will encounter is the **Hermit Crab**, so called because it lives in discarded periwinkle, whelk and other seashells. They are easily collected - just look for shells that are moving quite fast in the inter-tidal rock pools, but they are very small crabs and as such not great as bait. They are collected easily from baited drop nets hung over baits, especially in deep estuaries, a technique pioneered in the UK but not used in Ireland. This can be done off a pier or rocks and can even produce small fish and shrimps as bait as well. In tidal estuaries hermit crabs grow quite big, several times the standard size of the small ones found in rock pools. You can usually hook them out (akin to eating periwinkles) alternatively they can be par boiled at which point they drop out of the shells however watch out for the lodger, a ragworm that makes it home in the shell and feeds off the crabs faeces! Boiling will kill this bonus.

The most common crab is the **Common Shore Crab**. In the deeper tidal pools out nearest the sea you will find a **Common Spider Crab**, after a bit of searching. There are plenty of other varieties, but crabs are pretty much the same... in terms of bait! **Edible Crabs** if found should be relished or returned if they are under-sized, but either way they are not used for fish bait! From a legal perspective you should have a licence before you collect them.

Peeler Crab

This is not a species of crab, but rather a crab that has recently shed or one in the process of shedding its hard outer shell. In order to grow, crabs' outer shells split and are shed, leaving a skin-like new shell exposed. This new shell will harden in a few days, but until this happens this 'soft' crab is large defenceless and a superb bait. Twisting the last segment off the second to last leg (with our thanks to the lads on the TSF website in the UK) to reveal the red new skin beneath identifies a true peeler crab - you peel off the harder outer shell to reveal supremely effective bait. Alternatively you will find a hard-shelled crab that had small cracks underneath the carapace, near the leg joints. Known as "crackers", these can be stored in shallow trays in salt water and allowed progress through the moult to become full peeler crabs. It pays to have lids on those trays and you should check them every day. Crabs are territorial so don't stock them too many to a (cat litter) tray of there will be legs, pincers and dead crabs everywhere! Crabs will peel all year round but mostly it is from April to August or

September when the ready supply of food makes them feed and become too big for their shells.

Hardback Crabs

These are crabs that are not peeling or cracking and are used in rock fishing, particularly for big Ballan Wrasse although most fish will not pass them up. In this case you twist off a leg and insert the hook through the hole, taking it out through the carapace. A wide gape or circle hook is ideal for this and VMC make excellent ones down to 1/0 in size. Ideally you should secure the crab bait further with a tiny piece of elastic band over the barb of the hook.

The hardback crab is then served to the fish either under a float or freelined, and typically you will not have to wait long for a thundering bite and *thanks to Donagh off the forum for an excellent explanation of this technique*. Hardback crabs can be taken from rock pools or from baited drop nets but the smaller the better, whereas with peeler crabs, you often use two decent sized ones together to make a bass bait. The ideal size for hardbacks is a 2 Euro coin.

Velvet or Swimming Crabs

Several companies now offer these imported frozen baits. It is imperative that they are flash frozen to ensure quality and it is not always the case. The difficulty with imported baits is that you do not know how far they have travelled and given they are not destined for human consumption, it is possible people will be less careful in preserving their icy condition. We have had mixed reports, some people swear by them, others at them!

Collection

Crabs are found in the foreshore, mostly in small tidal rock pools and along groynes, harbour walls, and along the base of well-worn sea defences. A liberal covering of seaweed or similar cover is a good sign. They have to be searched for or tempted out of hiding with bait - I have found that half a dozen oozing crushed limpets do the trick... Toss them into the rock pool and just wait. Old bait from the bottom of your bucket will tempt them into the shallows on most marks. A word of warning: crabs can give a nasty nip - so learn to hold them between thumb and index finger just behind their shell's widest point, in behind the pincers to avoid those nips! Children make excellent and very dextrous crab collectors, which saves on the backache... one final point, if you are lifting rocks, make sure to replace them exactly as you found them.

People will often half sink tyres and pipes in order to give crabs additional hiding places in which to rest when the tide ebbs. The problem with this are twofold – firstly there is no doubting that a collection of tyres on the foreshore is damn ugly and environmentally unfriendly (despite the protestations about creating a viable eco-system!) and secondly

and more practically other people will raid your crab holding tyres and pipes if you're not down there each dawn. I think tyres and other methods are a lazy mans way of avoiding backache – I prefer to pay the local kids for crabs whilst checking they return the stones and material to its original position, if only to protect their own revenue stream!

Most tackle shops will stock frozen crabs, either peelers or swimming crabs. A few will hold fresh peelers during the main season described above but you will need to book your allocation well in advance to ensure a supply.

Storage

Crabs can be kept alive in damp seaweed for some time, especially if stored in the dark and kept cold. A plastic box with a tight lid is an excellent prison. A little seawater can be added to help maintain the crabs in prime condition. Do not store them in the same box as other baits e.g. ragworm or lugworms. If you have any pets around the house, it is essential to keep them away from any fresh baits... Peeler crabs can be frozen. The legs and claws should not be discarded, rather retained as excellent flounder bait. The main bodies can be wrapped individually in silver foil and thrown in the freezer for months. When needed, keep them in a cool box until you need them. Frozen peelers have the added advantage of only thawing out once cast into the sea, thus all the essential scent trail juices are retained in the body... in that respect they are easily to use than fresh peeler crabs, which are a mucky messy business! Frozen crabs are easily manipulated, e.g. split in two to make two flounder baits or wrapped together for bass. That said, fresh always outfishes frozen.

Bait Presentation

Fresh crabs are not easy to present properly on a hook. Firstly you need to kill the crab - a hard belt on the top normally does the trick. Remove the legs and pincers by twisting them off where they are attached to the body. Do not be surprised to find some already missing - crabs will grow back any legs and pincers lost in combat to other crabs or to predators. Leaving legs attached only feeds the target fish without encouraging a proper bite. Split the crab in two, up the middle with a strong scissors. Thread the hook through one side / section, avoiding as many shell fragments as possible, moving this onto the shank before twisting the other section onto the same hook (near the barb). Shirring elastic is essential to keeping the bait in place on the hook. Ensure that the barb lies free. Tip with squid or mackerel to achieve this. Frozen peeler crabs need not be split in two, but simply hooked up as you would any standard bait if you are using large hooks (3/0 upwards) and targeting bigger fish like bass. "Soft" crab will need some shirring elastic wrapped around it to keep it on a hook. Very large crabs can be split into pieces, but avoid shell fragments. The

meat is yellow or brown. If used properly the shirring elastic will keep the crab bait on a hook. If unsure, freeze it first to make it easier to manipulate. Most people will snip out the gills, feathery brown filaments found under the shell above the legs on both sides – this is recommended if you intend to freeze the crabs as they can apparently reduce their effectiveness.

Rigs or Traces

We have never heard of anyone using crab from a boat, so most of the fishing rigs associated with crab baits is variations on the standard paternoster rig. Peeler crabs have a superb scent trail, soft crabs to a lesser extent, so the benefits are to the fore on storm surf beaches or in disturbed a.k.a. low-visibility water. They work best where crabs are resident all year long and thus where fish have become accustomed to hunting them, so along rocky margins and in weedy estuaries, crab is the ultimate bait for shore fishing.

Fish Species

Short of covering every known species of fish in Ireland, *crab is the ultimate shore bait*, especially in the autumn when other standard baits like sand eel and mackerel have disappeared. It is the ultimate bass bait. Bass fishing is closed from 15th May to 15th June each year, and a minimum size of 14" (40 cms) applies, as does a bag limit of 2 per angler per day. In some locations, there are local byelaws, which may further restrict catches. Catch & release is strongly advised given bass are at the northern limit of their range in Irish waters. It is a very slow growing species that needs decades if its population is to recover fully. I have moved to using circle hooks when fishing for flatfish, especially flounders are they often give very light bites and gulp down baits. A circle hook has the advantage of lip hooking most fish.

Shellfish

A wide variety of shellfish are used as baits around Ireland. Chief amongst these are razorfish (pictured), clams, limpets, mussels, cockles and winkles. The razorfish and clams have to be dug out - although there are a few tricks - whereas the others are collected from around tidal rock pools.

Let's look at them in turn...

Collection

Razorfish are found on sandy beaches. The key item is a washing-up liquid bottle filled with heavily salted water. Find the keyhole shaped depression in the sand, squeeze in a fair splash of the salt water, keep going and then run back to the start. A few minutes later up they pop, ready to feed on the new

tide... They slip down fast, and are quite muscular so be ready to collect them quickly!



Razorfish photo:
courtesy of Dr Keith Hiscock

Clams are found in muddy estuaries and mudflats. Their depth depends on the conditions in each individual location. They are dug up with a fork using the traditional trench digging technique described for lugworm.

Cockles also grow along our shore and are routinely collected after a big blow on most beaches. They are very small and thus not commonly used.

Mussels grow in large rafts or beds, tacked onto the rocks by incredibly strong stringy threads. Most tidal rock pools will have some mussels but the largest are closest to the sea or totally submerged irrespective of the tide. They are difficult to collect and small relative to the size of the shells, but on occasion they will work where all else has failed. This is particularly true of the beaches on the Irish Sea where there are large mussel beds offshore, e.g. Wicklow. After a large storm, the loose mussels will have collected on the foreshore and the fish will feed voraciously on them and on nothing else.

Limpets are easily collected with a strong penknife from off the rocks around and in tidal pools. You can kick them off with stout boots. If they are exposed to the air, dribble some water over them and this will make them relax, again like the razorfish, fooling them by mimicking an incoming tide.

Storage

The beauty about all shellfish is that they come in their own airtight containers and as such storage for a day or two is easy. To freeze them you need to boil them in water for a minute or two, remove the shells, and freeze them individually on a plate of glass, before bagging them in small packets for longer storage. Freezing them on the glass makes them easy to remove and bag; otherwise it's a mess!

Bait Presentation

Bait presentation with any shellfish is not easy. Razorfish have a muscular foot but soft innards. The same holds for all of the shellfish listed here, to a greater or lesser extent, and in the case of limpets,

the muscular foot on its own is useless bait. In all cases, you need to use the muscular foot to secure the bait to the hook(s), and use shirring elastic to whip the softer parts (with the scent trail) to the hook and foot. Wide gape hooks tend to work best for bulkier baits, akin to crab, but I have seen people whip razorfish in particular onto long-shanked hooks. The trick is to keep the innards on the hook, with lots of shirring elastic! Another trick is to freeze the parboiled shellfish into tube like lengths and simply cut to size when baiting up. An alternative is to use ice cube trays to store these soft baits and to place the hook snood into the bait in each cube before you freeze them down (thanks to IDPearl).

Rigs or Traces

There is no particular rig to use for these baits, albeit most utilise a legering design.

Fish Species

Since the baits are typically found on the shoreline, they are used primarily for fish species caught from the shore. Flatfish, bass, dogfish, whiting, pouting, coalfish, pollock, codling and wrasse will all succumb to these scented baits.

Mackerel

Fresh mackerel is fabulous bait. Flash frozen mackerel will do the trick but it is not as effective a bait. Mackerel is presented in several ways to entice everything from Dabs to Cod to Blue Shark. It is incredibly versatile. On boat trips, it will be free in that you can catch a box of it heading out or at marks.

Collection

Collecting mackerel as bait is simple on a boat. Mackerel are pulled out six at a time on a set of feathers (Hokkai are good but keep the hook size down to 2/0) if you hit a shoal. Six mackerel is the "full house" - when jigging with feathers for mackerel, keep jigging after you feel the first thump... so that you fill all the available hooks. Shoals of jellyfish, trails of tiny bubbles on the water surface, oily patches, whitebait skipping out of the water, fast moving porpoises, birds feeding feverishly, gannets diving into the sea (guaranteed!), and even current lines of flotsam and seaweed are all good signals. You don't need a fish finder! Mackerel can be caught on the surface, at midwater, and at depth. Bad weather will often break up the shoals and scatter them all over the place. In these conditions it can be a case of "gold is where you find it" and scent trails are a key tactic. The first fish cut in stripes can catch you a boxload. Mackerel will move inshore as early as April in good weather, although it may be later the further east/north you travel in Ireland. The biggest fish arrive in the autumn and can still be caught from the shore in

November and December provided the storms have not driven them offshore.

Storage

Mackerel will go off very quickly if exposed to the air, never mind direct sunlight. The cooler box is ideal for freshly caught fish. Failing this, some wet sacking thrown over them in a fish box is a good alternative. Mackerel freeze well, however if you want to keep them in prime condition, get them into the freezer fast and never gut them. This also applies to mackerel stored for the table, although there is just nothing as wonderful as a barbequed fresh mackerel - clean it, drop in a slice of lemon, salt and pepper, wrap it in silver foil and salivate! I am told that wrapping it in brown paper and keeping it in a cold dark place also works for just - one - day if you have no freezer locally. The local guesthouse, hotel or neighbour will often store fish for you.

Bait Presentation

Mackerel will catch everything. Small half-inch (1 cm) wide strips cut from a fillet, maybe one or two inches (2-3 cms) long will hook lots of smaller fish, down to dabs, blennies and lesser weaver fish. Some anglers swear by using the silver belly for small strip baits; - others use the full strip from back to belly. Make sure there is skin on strip bait - as the skin gives the hook its purchase. The hook must protrude from the skin, not from the flesh. If bait is limited, consider using the thin silver belly strips for small fish baits. This leaves you the option of using the rest of the fish for legering for big fish like conger. A large strip or half a fillet will attract ray, bull huss, turbot, bass, smoothhounds, dogfish and tope, depending on the mark. Moving up to a bigger size bait, half a mackerel (cut at a slant across the middle to give you two equal baits, head and tail with equal portions of the guts in each section) will attract larger fish to bite... Make sure to remove the tail from all fish to ensure the bait do not spin like a top! A "flapper" is a whole mackerel with the backbone removed, where the fillets flap around in the current generating a strong scent trail and a moving target. Slicing these up again, to create four flappers will generate a bigger scent trail (*thanks to Luke Scully off the forum for that tip*). This will attract really big fish. It's wire trace time! Finally for big skate, porbeagle and blue shark, tope, and other large critters, a full mackerel, with a few punctures to release the scent trail or aided by chumming, will bring on big fish. Remember to snip the tails off the baits! Mackerel cut in strips, fillets and even as flappers are often added to lure baits, and they prove an irresistible combination.

It has become popular to add WD40 oil as an attractor to fish baits, and although I have never tried it myself, it does work... apparently. It appears to allow the scent trail disperse more rapidly. To be honest I have never seen the need to add attractors to fresh or frozen mackerel. There are regional

variations however and it should be noted that whilst it will catch everything that swims on the west coast, the Irish Sea is another matter entirely.

Other Fish



Frozen shrimp is good bait. Fresh shrimp is even better...



The European Eel:
photo courtesy of Thorke Østergaard.



The Poor Cod:
photo courtesy of Thorke Østergaard.

The key feature about mackerel is that it is an **oily** fish and that its flesh alone, leaving aside the innards, will generate a scent trail in the water to bring fish to the hook. Most other fish in Irish waters do not share this trait - pilchard, sand eel and herring are great, but rarely available. Pouting, long the curse of the angler in these parts, can be used as a deadbait, in whole or in part, but it is plainly not that successful a bait! Fish, used as bait, need to be selected carefully to match up to the eating habits, available food items and to the preferences of the target species. Bits of **river eels** are used all along the Thames Estuary by anglers seeking the big tope!

Collection

By happy accident one day, on a river, I discovered that slugs were absolutely superb bait. Having run out of worms, I picked one out of the damp grass, and not sooner had it hit the water than a big roach was rammed it down with relish! Using fish baits other than mackerel or sand eel is a bit like this. You have to check on local conditions - by trial and error - and find out what the target species is interested in. In Wexford, tiny two inch flatfish captured by children with nets in the local pools are cherished by local anglers are a sure fire bet for bass, in particular the larger bass! I am not mad keen on this as you have to wonder as to the impact this will have on the fish stocks - as you should when using all small fish baits. regardless of source. If you are seeking to use **small flatfish**, then clearly you need excellent eyesight, a net and fast hands! You shuffle your feet on the sand in the water in tidal pools, ideally near an estuary, and watch for the speedy darts and flurries of sand. It is just a matter of tracking them

down, cornering them and when catching them, put the net's front lip into the sand and approach them head on - flatfish find it difficult to turn quickly and can not swim in reverse! In the west of Ireland I have found that the **shrimp** caught in nets in local rock pools using a few crushed limpets as bait are very effective, especially - and this bit I do not understand - when used over sand or in estuaries (far from their natural habitat). Being soft, you cannot cast them far mind unless you use lots and lots of shirring elastic. Par boiling them the night before hardens the flesh.

Storage

The clear plastic containers with lids used for storing food in kitchens are ideal - a little water and seaweed will give you fresh bait when you tool up at your selected mark. In my experience there is no need to live bait - shrimp and flatfish work wonders on the top hook of a paternoster rig. Almost all fish baits react well to a freezer. I now suspect that the small flatfish we used to scoop up in nets as children 'fishing' in the rock pools adjoining the beach in Lahinch Co. Clare were small turbot, rather than plaice or flounder. The **European Eel**, *Anguilla anguilla*, is a handy bait, in the sense that they can be cut into several sections or lengths so that one eel makes a large number of baits. Before we leave this topic, you can try to use a pouting or poor cod, or several of smaller species caught inshore. The **Poor Cod** is a small fish species, *Trisopterus minutus*, common in Irish coastal waters and resident all year.

Bait Presentation

Fish bait presentation usually involves presenting the whole fish as bait. For small shrimp you can thread them onto a standard 2/0 hook, but my preference has always been to use a two hook pannel rig, whether legering or spinning a small fish. Wobbling a fish bait works wonders for bass, provided they are around (!) and you snip the tails off to stop the bait spinning in the water. Several people will freeline live baits with the hook typically placed in the shoulder region or just under the dorsal fin. Personally I don't advocate live baiting, for whilst it is legal in sea fishing, it is illegal in our fresh waters, and it gives anti-fishing activists ammunition to fire at us. It's your call.

Rigs or Traces

Coarse fishermen have been using wobbled deadbaits to take pike for years, using a double treble with a wire trace. The same rig works well at sea, however trolling using wobbling deadbaits is not common. Most fish baits are used in legering rigs, such as common paternosters, pulleys and wishbones. Distance casting will require that you clip them down to prevent the angler cursing 'helicoptering' baits that fly off into (and as often all over) the sea!

Fish Species

Fish baits are used to attract predators. Whilst all fish will eat fish baits, whole small fish deadbaits are used to target the bigger toothier species, like conger, bull huss, ray, etc. Local knowledge as to what species are available is the key to your bait selection, especially in the use of small fish baits.

Sandeels



The Greater Sandeel or Launce, photo courtesy of R Svenson.

Having come to using sandeels only recently with the arrival of packets of flash frozen sandeels (three inches long - 8cms) in the local angling shop, I am told that the blue marked frozen Ammo brand are the business. Alas the quality of frozen baits can vary dramatically. Finding fresh sandeel in the west of Ireland is like finding gold in a rainbow... and the frozen packaged sandeels are not cheap even if they seem to be a very effective bait. There are two species here and the Greater Sandeel - also known as Launce - can reach a foot in length (30 cms) and swim with shoaling mackerel or garfish. Most sandeels however are smaller, almost impossible to catch by hand with a vingler without years of practice, and as such the flash frozen sandeels are what we will discuss here.

Collection

If you do fancy a go catching them yourself, they do bury themselves in sand, often in estuaries and typically they are only around at low water. You will need a lidded bucket with water in it, and ideally a blunt thin billhook called a vingler. A very keen eye and lightning fast reactions will help you a deal! The idea (!) is that you trap the sandeel in the blunt "eye" of the vingler with one of your fingers, often gloved. It works, honest!

Storage

Sandeels can be kept in the bucket of seawater for a short period of time, and longer if you aerate the water with a fish tank air pump. I know one angler with a two-foot long salt-water aquarium set up in his garage, just for keeping bait alive. Most people however tap them on the head, and freeze them on a glass plate. From this they can be removed and bagged in groups of a dozen for freezing. Wrapping

them individually in cling film means that they will defrost quickly on the mark. *Donagh* recommends storing them in a thermos flask so that you only thaw out one at a time, to stop them spoiling. Lumping them together or using paper in freezing is a bad idea - you end up with awful rubbish.

Bait Presentation

If you have fresh sandeel, lucky you! The flesh is firm and will take the hook well, however as with all thawed frozen baits, sandeels can split and fall apart. Shirring elastic is important in presenting sandeels, and essential if using frozen baits. Half a sandeel is often enough. If you want to use a whole one, thread them on tail first so that the hook is close to the head. The eyes are a know fish attractor for all predatory fish. Snip off the tail to stop the bait spinning and *our thanks to Jakes on the forums for this tip*, snip off the top of the snout to get the juices out of the head section. This practice is not advised when using it for Bass fishing according to *Donagh* off the forum. He also recommends a baiting needle as vitally important for improving your bait presentation. Finally – if you are using a whole sand eel – the hook should be inserted at the head and brought out either at the side or at the back but not from the belly as it will rupture and kink or even break apart at this point.

Rigs or Traces

The rig you use will depend on the target species and the local mark. A common use for sandeel is to put them on a 3/0 hook at the end of a long flowing trace for pollock or other big wreck haunting fish. They also work for bass, spinning from the shore (in fact most bass and wreck lures mimic sand eels). Some people advocate simply hooking it around the head and tying it on with elastic, leaving the entire body "swimming" behind the hook. Others will tell you to thread the hook in from the head down towards the middle, and use elastic. Finally I have seen some anglers hook several of them through the tail, and tie them on up along the shank of the hook, akin to a sausage of lugworms. Given their cost around these parts, we don't do that!

Fish Species

All predatory fish love sandeels, however a large sandeel is too big a bait for some smaller species. Bass have a particular liking for them and they are effective from the shore for a wide variety of fish, but mainly big predators. Common catches would include Pollack, Bass, Mackerel, Garfish, large Wrasse, and on the bottom, Rays, Flatfish including Turbot and Dogfish.

Squid



Squid is not as commonly used as bait in Ireland as it is elsewhere in the British Isles. Perhaps this is down to its limited availability, but since it freezes so well, it is surprising that it has taken this long to catch on... personally the only thing I have seen caught on a squid-only bait was a lesser weaver fish, not something that you would recommend but it was awful weather to be fair.

Collection

Aha! Squid is 'collected' in the local fish shop or fishmongers, and is usually of the frozen variety. Chinese markets will often have large quantities for sale at very low prices relative to the fishmonger. On summer days, and especially at night, you can encounter them when jigging for mackerel, but they are rare enough. That said we have taken plenty of octopus out of Clew Bay, but off the bottom in very deep waters, especially around Clare Island. We never used it as bait though... impossible to keep in the box never mind use as bait!

Storage

Squid is possibly the best bait to freeze, in that even after defrosting it still retains its structure, that tough rubbery consistency that ensures that your hooks will stay put.

Bait Presentation

This really depends on how much squid you intend using on the rig or hook. You can cut it into strips or if available use the head and tentacles. You can use larger chunks for big cod baits, perhaps teamed up with lug (for scent) or rag (for movement). You can even use entire small squid, tentacles and all for really big bait, ideally on a pennel rig and with shirring elastic for support. *Donagh* from the forum reports that whole calamari squid is an excellent rough ground bait for Conger and Bull Huss, especially in heavy or dirty water conditions. He uses a pair of 3/0s in pennel formation with the top hook holding the squid body and the bottom hook holding the head, leaving the tentacles trailing, with a few turns of shirring elastic to hold it all in place.

Rigs or Traces

As always, the rig or trace depends on the target species. Small strip baits work well on a float rig during the summer, and also well on a long flowing trace from something like a standard three hook competition rig from a boat, with the squid strip put on the final hook. Squid is often used in combination with other baits to make up really big baits for big cod, coalfish, pollock and other wreck residing fish. In the north of England they now use a "kebab", with several different baits all skewered onto a hook, and by all accounts it works very well. Perhaps it is the wild combination of varying scents.

Fish Species

Squid can account for almost any type of fish in the sea, depending on what size of bait is used, but I would have difficulty in recommending its use as a "standalone" bait, as I have never had any success with it solo, although it has worked well for me in combination with lugworm.

Odds & Ends & Tips

Believe it or not the following can be used very effectively in sea fishing.

- Chicken fillet (cut into strips, raw not cooked)
- Rasher (raw, not cooked)
- Liver (raw, often 'mounted' in the muslin tubing used to treat cut fingers and mainly used when seeking mullet)
- Cheese and Bread (for mullet, and white cotton wool for that matter)
- Lard (also known as animal fat)
- Banana skins (attached to pirks on deep-sea and wreck fishing)
- WD40 motor oil

And there is the famous old and very dodgy story about a Southampton man who swears he caught a 9 lb bass on the last piece of his Mars bar.

Squid is cheaper bought from oriental food wholesalers than fishmongers, as it is a prime ingredient in many forms of eastern cooking. You can buy it in bulk and frozen, just make sure you have enough space in your freezer and make sure to break it down into smaller packages to bring fishing!

Chumming

Chumming is to sea anglers what ground baiting is to coarse fishermen. In the past it was a messy, smelly and unpleasant business, demanding the fine chopping of the heads, tails, bones, guts and offal from oily fish like mackerel and herring, and hand mixing this lot into large buckets of bran. This was

then be filled into onion bags and the bags trailed over the boat's gunnels, so that the oil and bits would be swept into the water, slowly drifting down and carried off in the current with each passing swell. Often blood and other attractors would be added to the mix, including bizarrely WD40! Bran and sawdust are used as they disperse finely when in the water, not feeding the fish... but acting superbly as a scent trail. The whole purpose is to generate a huge wide oily slick, a massive scent trail that will bring big predators like sharks into the ambit of trolled whole mackerel baits or from anchored boats, it would bring skate 'upwind' towards your bottom legered baits. Chumming can also be used in shore angling, especially for mullet.

Anything can end up in a chumming bag, but typically it is confined to the remains of oily fish, added attractors like blood and processed fish oil, and some form of dispersant like bran. You can add small bits of mackerel or fish bait to it, to let this drop out, and/or occasionally throw a handful of fish scraps overboard. There are problems with this - a) it feeds the target fish you want to keep hungry, and b) it retains nuisance fish like dogfish in the bait area. You will also likely end up with bird droppings from all the sea gulls it attracts!

Chumming bags can be prepared well in advance. If you do freeze them, do allow sufficient time for them to defrost thoroughly, otherwise they will not give off much of a scent trail! You can buy ready-made chumming bags and/or chumming ground bait(s), often developed specifically for target species. This is an American innovation and as a consequence, you have to buy it online.

It makes sense to think about how you present your bait i.e. a chumming technique. Skippers, uptiding for ray, might tie the chumming bag onto the anchor. Most skippers will tie the bags out over the gunnels and let the tide sweep out the bran and bits... but one bag or two? Do you throw in a few bits of fresh fish bait? What about a few live and wriggling ragworm left into the chumming mix to be swept out...? Chumming need not be done in big onion bags. Another innovative angler swears by using a whole frozen mackerel as a lead when distance casting! He says that it is particularly effective when casting over foul ground and works wonders for bull huss and big cod!

The rig you use will depend on the target species. It is usual to use a fish bait when chumming, often mackerel as this is the main ingredient in most chumming mixes, but it does not have to be just mackerel. In fact it need not even be a fish bait as chumming attracts predators, big or small.