

TROUT SEASON

Casting Bait for Trout

-Dan Neuland, The Frederick News-Post

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TROUT FISHERMEN THROUGHOUT MARYLAND are anxiously awaiting the opening of the official trout season on the last Saturday of March this year. The recent memories of winter's cold temperatures and accompanying ice have a way of making the opening day of trout season all the more desirable to spring-minded fishermen.

Early spring is the best time of year for the bait fisherman and put-and-take trout fishing. At this time, fishing pressure is never heavier, bad weather can keep fish from biting and the streams can be high and muddy from early season rains. But opening day expectations are always high as many of Maryland's inland waters are generously stocked with thousands of hatchery rainbow, brook and brown trout. Many streams, lakes and ponds will be closed to all fishing in the weeks before opening day. The trout are stocked during the closure dates in order for the fish to acclimate to their new surroundings and, hopefully, disperse throughout the streams and lakes.

2007 stocking rates reduced

Unfortunately, stocking rates will be reduced this year due to a recent outbreak of whirling disease at two trout-rearing facilities in Garrett County. Whirling disease has been known to devastate trout fisheries in other states and the Department of Fisheries was not taking any chances when they destroyed all infected fish at both sites. Whirling disease is caused by a parasite that can be fatal to trout but is harmless to humans. As a result, stocking rates have been reduced by approximately 20 percent across Maryland for the 2007 season.

Opening day of trout fishing is often associated with full stringers and some of the largest fish of the season. However, if you are looking for a peaceful and relaxing fishing experience, opening-day trout fishing is not for you. The typical opening-day experience can be very frustrating, mainly because of the sheer numbers of fishermen vying for the best positions along stream banks and shorelines. For some anglers, this is part of the challenge, for others it is good reason to sleep in.

When stream and weather conditions are normal on the first day, or should I say on the first hours of the opening day, the fish are the easiest to catch. A properly prepared angler who arrives before sunrise will often catch his limit of five trout within the first hours of

daylight. It doesn't take long before the survival instincts of even hatchery trout kick in and the fishing becomes more challenging.

The right gear

The right gear will help make your early-season trout fishing successful even after the "easy biters" are on the stringers. Although, almost any standard spinning rod will work for the early-season trout fisherman, I recommend a long, light-action spinning rod for drifting bait. I use a 7-foot spinning rod that is designed to handle 2-to 8-pound line. For casting and retrieving small (1/16 to 1/4 ounce) lures, spinners and spoons, short ultralight spinning rods are popular gear on local streams and ponds.

A light line is a necessity when trying to catch spooky trout. Each season, I add fresh 4-pound monofilament to my open-faced spinning reel. Closed-faced spinning reels are an excellent choice for young fishermen, after you replace the cheap, heavy line that is often preloaded in these reels. If your rod is long and limber enough, 2-pound line can be used very effectively by more experienced anglers.

Light terminal tackle is also an important ingredient for success. My terminal rig for drifting bait begins with 18-24 inches of 3X trout tippet attached to a small black barrel swivel. I attach several small split-shot to the tag end of the tippet off the barrel swivel. Short-shanked bait hooks in sizes 10 and 12 will work best for most trout bait. I do not use pre-packaged snelled hooks for trout because the line attached to the hooks is usually too heavy.

For bottom fishing with bait for trout, the terminal tackle is the same but with one important difference. Instead of using split-shot attached to the tag end of the tippet, slide a small barrel sinker or bell sinker onto the main line above the barrel swivel. The weight should slide freely above the barrel swivel. The barrel swivel keeps the weight from sliding onto the tippet. This setup allows a trout to take the bait without feeling the weight of the sinker.

The bait

Using a variety of baits is a clever way to entice more bites from sore-mouthed trout. Some of the best trout baits are available from your local supermarket. Canned corn, cocktail marshmallows and soft cheese are effective, particularly for rainbow trout. Convenience stores are the easiest place to find natural baits such as earthworms, wax worms and salted minnows. Commercial baits such as Berkley Powerbait, Mike's Salmon Eggs and Yum Troutkrilla are extremely popular for put-and-take trout fishing. Be prepared with at least three different baits on any given day.

The drift

The right gear and a variety of bait won't be totally effective until the angler learns to drift the bait drag-free. Cast the bait upstream and across the current. Keep very light

tension on the bait as it bounces along the bottom. Add just enough split-shot to keep the bait moving along the bottom without snagging every cast. Gently lift the rod tip to keep the bait moving and follow the drift with the tip of your rod. Allow the bait to drift as naturally as possible. A longer rod allows for longer, more natural drifts.

When a trout grabs the bait, you should have enough tension on the line to feel the "rap, rap, rap." Drop your tip for about three seconds to allow the trout to take the bait and then strike to set the hook. Trout will often jump when hooked and thrash wildly on the surface. To avoid breaking the fish off or having the fish throw the hook, always keep the trout's head in the water. Most trout are lost when the fish is on a short line and close to the fisherman. A small landing net can prove to be a very valuable tool for most fishermen.

When fishing with bait, fishermen need to be prepared to keep fish. A significant problem with bait fishing is the tendency for the fish to swallow the hook. A fish that swallows the hook will almost certainly be fatally injured if the fisherman tries to remove the hook. This is not a problem if the fish is headed for the frying pan anyway. If you do not plan on keeping a fish that has swallowed the hook, simply cut the line instead of trying to remove the hook. This will give the fish a chance to survive, because the hook will eventually rust away.

Trout in your possession on the lake or stream should be kept in the shade and cool. Bring a cooler with ice on a warm day, as trout need to be kept cool to keep their flesh firm. Bait fishermen should always carry a plastic bag to carry out any empty bait containers and fish innards. Never throw fish guts into a lake or stream because fish will not eat it.