

What Makes Good Fish Bait?

With some background on area baits, this is Calhoun County Game Warden Mike Mitchell.

Sometimes a first-time fisherman catches the biggest fish, while other times an old timer gets skunked day after day. Maybe fishing is luck, or maybe it's closely observing success factors.

Regardless of your belief, it should stand to reason that scrutinizing factors such as tide, temperature, underwater structure and bait choice will likely increase chances of catching fish. Since one cannot control tide, temperature or structure, perhaps it is worthwhile to focus upon bait. That we can control.

So what makes a fish want to bite something that is made of plastic, or something that is twice the size of its mouth? This may be attributed to opportunistic eating, an attribute these creatures have to give them an advantage. We cannot know why a fish bites on a particular type of bait, or what makes one more effective than the other, but hopefully we can shed light on what works best in our listening area.

Bait may be divided into two categories, natural and artificial. There are several examples of each.

As Texas Parks and Wildlife's Outreach Specialist Art Morris points out, natural baits are often thought of as the number one type of bait. Live shrimp is the traditional choice for targeting area sportfish. Spotted seatrout, red drum, black drum, southern flounder and many others find it extremely difficult to pass up a live shrimp. Most recent numbers indicate that one in four fish landed from Texas inshore waters by private boat anglers are caught on live shrimp. Readily available almost year round, inexpensive and easy to use, live shrimp are the bait most anglers choose. It should be no surprise that shrimp are so effective, because most sportfish grow up eating shrimp and never lose their appetite for it.

Some people really like the fast-growing choice of live baitfish. Baitfish, including croakers, can be especially effective when catching spotted seatrout, since they become piscivorous or fish-eating when they reach about 20 inches long. Flounder also have a habit of striking mudminnows.

Mullet is another perennial favorite. One of the reasons is their ease of use, since anglers do not have to worry much about retrieval techniques when using a live baitfish. The smell also comes to be a natural attractant for the gamefish.

Dead fish are another option, sometimes dictated by the angler's ability or time of day in acquiring bait. Dead fish are available year round, either fresh or frozen, whole or cut

up. This bait will tempt most anything that swims, particularly when used to target bottom feeders such as red drum and catfish.

Some folks do not like to get their hands dirty or believe that Mother Nature can be improved upon. For those folks, soft plastics are the top artificial lure and second-most effective bait type overall. Shrimp tails, shad tails, paddle tails, whip tails, no tails — it doesn't matter. They work. Some even impersonate natural baits so well that it takes a marine biologist to tell the difference.

Plastics may resemble something completely unlike what you'd expect. Most anglers own a wide variety of styles, and suffice it to say that most anglers have strong opinions about what works best. Overall, these are simple to use, may be presented in a variety of ways, and have a good track record of success.

Lures are yet another example of artificial baits. Lure developers make dozens of kinds, in various styles and colors. Some are weighted, some rattle, some are curved; leading to many choices. If you believed all the manufacturers, you would simply catch a fish every time you cast!

And finally there are the rest of the baits: dead shrimp, sea lice, fish-like lures, crab, squid, floating baits, suspending baits, sinking baits, chuggers, sprayers, cut baits, shallow divers, spinner baits, buzz baits, crabs, squid and more.

Today the angler also finds dips, sprays, and drops to apply to bait, all in hope to increase its attractiveness to fish. The end goal is to make it work on your target species at your time of fishing.

There are very common traditional views regarding specific baits. For example, silver and gold spoons are known for attracting redfish. Dead shrimp can be terrific for black drum. But some redfish will strike at dead shrimp, and some black drum will strike at spoons. Chartreuse soft plastics are one very popular choice for many anglers.

So the choices abound. Maybe it is the fun of collecting lures. Perhaps it is the intrigue of developing your own combination based upon your own environmental observations.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department encourages you to enjoy the great outdoors and all the opportunities it has to offer. For more information, see its website at www.tpwd.state.tx.us. With some background on area baits, this has been Calhoun County Game Warden Mike Mitchell.

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