

Back to Basics with soft plastics

Tim Morgan | August 2004 » Feature Articles /

RIGGING and fishing soft plastics correctly will definitely catch you more fish. A single-tail grub or stick bait that circles on the retrieve will still catch fish, but it won't catch as many, nor as big.

Following is a brief run-through of how I rig soft plastics. I rig the plastics the same whether I'm fishing for bass or bream and, if the situation warrants, I upsize jigheads and plastics to suit – like fishing in tropical creeks for barramundi.

Jighead Rigging

The most common way to rig soft plastics is with a jighead. Jighead-rigged plastics are the easiest and most versatile way to target fish, allowing you to get your bait to the strike zone quickly. Jighead-rigged plastics are a great way to target fish that are hanging near or on the bottom. Remember that the most natural presentations are the best, so always use the lightest weight jighead possible for the prevailing conditions. Using a light weight will give fish more time to examine and strike the bait on the drop, which is when most strikes occur.

The easiest retrieve is to cast out and count down the jig to the desired depth and then 'slow roll' the bait back to you by winding at a slow speed. Use plenty of pauses to allow the bait to be kept at the desired depth as the bait draws closer to you.

Alternative techniques include the 'burn-'n'-kill', which involves taking three or four quick turns of the handle before stopping the lure dead in the water, or hopping the bait across the bottom by lifting the rod tip in a jiggling motion and taking the slack as you drop the rod tip back to the start position.

The best tip with jighead-rigged plastics is to vary your retrieve until you find a style that works on the day. Fish will respond to the same lure retrieved in a different manner on different days, sometimes even at different stages of the tide. Stay aware and be prepared to change techniques when it's required.

Almost every plastic on the market can be fished on a jighead. My favourites include single-tail grubs, shad-style bodies and stick baits. Each has its own subtle variations and each can be fished in exactly the same way. Again, it's a matter of assessing the situation and trying different retrieves.

UNWEIGHTED

If you want excitement, rigging your plastics unweighted is the way to go. When you're fishing unweighted plastics, whether on the surface or with a slow, natural drift, you rarely miss out on seeing a fish take the lure.

Most plastics sink when allowed to, and the rate of sink is usually controlled by the amount of salt in the lure. There are some fast-sinking plastics, such as the Senko stickbaits, and others that sink more slowly, such as the Atomic paddle-tails and Ecogear paddle-tails. Senkos work best when allowed to sink, while the paddle-tails work best on the surface or in the surface film.

Unweighted lures sink slowly, drawing strikes on the drop. Because of the slow sink rate you can hold your lure in the strike zone for extended periods with subtle rod manipulation. Slowly lift or twitch your rod while the lure is in the strike zone and never be in a hurry to retrieve the lure.

As you retrieve the plastic, twitch the tip to give the lure an erratic action, periodically stopping the retrieve to tempt any following fish or to allow the lure to sink a little deeper.

If you're targeting the surface you can keep the lure up by holding the rod tip up and winding with some pace. You'll know you have it right when the paddle-tail creates a little vee in the water behind the lure. This is usually followed by a big bow wave and a crashing surface strike.

If a fish is following, you can stop winding and drop the lure back to the fish or keep winding. With wary fish it's best to keep winding, but when the fish are really fired-up or there's a school of them, a drop back often means an instant take.

Splitshot

Sometimes it's desirable to lightly weight your soft plastic to draw it a little deeper in the water column. In areas of strong current or where the fish are holding a little deeper, the splitshot rig can work wonders. The best thing about a splitshot rig is that it still sinks relatively slowly and can be worked very slowly to get results.

I fish splitshot presentations by raising the rod tip slowly to draw the bait forwards and then take up the slack with the reel as I drop the rod tip back. Try to keep your movements slow and measured to keep the bait lower in the water column, unless you want to fish it fast for trevally or tailor.

Experimentation with the splitshot position makes sense. If you rig the splitshot close to the plastic it acts like a Texas-rigged plastic; if you rig it at the hook eye, the rig acts just like a light jighead rig; if you place the split shot farther up the line the rig acts more like a Carolina rig.

Down-Shot (drop-shot)

The down-shot rig is often used when schooling fish are located under the boat or when you're targeting a very narrow strike zone.

Down-shotting is a relatively easy method, as long as you are set up correctly. A short dropper (the distance between the hook and the sinker) is usually best, and the hook should be tied directly to the leader. If the distance between the hook and the sinker is 15cm or less, you're in with a good chance of getting onto some of the fish you've located.

In freshwater, hop and shake the lure off the bottom until you get a strike, then 'dead stick' the bait. Let the sinker hit the bottom, put some slack into the line and shake the rod tip. You should shake the rod tip just hard enough to move the lure and not the sinker.

In saltwater you can use the same method, but I've found a more pronounced jigging can be more successful. Again, when a fish shows interest, shake the rig rather than jig it.

Hooking options

Many of the rigs I've mentioned make use of a worm-style hook. There are plenty of these hooks on the market these days, but you need to be careful to choose the right one for the right job. When I'm rigging weedless to fish on the surface I use a hook that's light gauge and doesn't sink the plastic too quickly. If I'm fishing a downshot, I also go for a light gauge hook because the down-shot worms are often very fine and a thick hook damages the bait and pulls out of the plastic easier when a fish strikes.

You have to be very careful when rigging with worm hooks. If the hook isn't centred perfectly in the bait, it will spin when being retrieved. This doesn't stop fish eating the lure but it reduces the number of strikes. Most plastics have a central line or a hook point slot that helps you to line up the middle. Don't be afraid to start again if you get it wrong the first time. It does get easier with practice.

Worm hooks also provide an option to rig the bait weedless. This is really simple and just requires you to nick the hook point under the skin of the plastic before casting it out. If you rig weedless you can cast the lure almost anywhere and get it back – just remember to strike harder to pop the hook point out of the skin and into a position to hook the fish.

With jigheads, the hook point is most often exposed and in a great position to hook fish. If you are concerned about snagging you can buy some jigheads that use a worm-style hook pattern and rig weedless. It's an option to think about when you're fishing in heavy timber or around weed bed edges or rocky banks. Again, make sure the plastic is rigged down the centre line and hide the hook point under the plastic's skin and strike just a bit harder.

Experimenting

With all of these tips and rigs, keep in mind there is no set rule. Innovation is as much a part of plastics fishing as is having the right equipment. There are more rigging options with plastics, such as Carolina rigging and Texas rigging, but most anglers start with fishing a jighead-rigged plastic and are happy with it. With the variety of jighead styles and weights on the market today, you could go a whole fishing career just concentrating on this method – but where's the fun in that?

Get out there, grab something new or different, rig it in a way you normally wouldn't and try it out. You never know – it just might be the most fun you've had with a rod in your hand.

Facts

PLASTICS KIT

Hooks

Worm-style hooks in sizes 4 – 2/0

Jigheads

1/32oz up to 3/4oz with hook sizes from 4 through to 2/0

Sinkers

Down shot leads from 1/8oz – 1/2oz

Split shot 00 - 2

Plastics

2"- 4" Single tail grubs

2"- 5" paddle tail grubs

2"- 5" shads

2'- 4" craws

3"- 5" stick baits

Leader

4lb-17lb (7.5kg-1.6kg) fluorocarbon

6lb-45lb (2.5kg-20kg) monofilament

[CAPTIONS]

- 1) Tarpon are fun to chase on plastics. A simple jighead-rigged paddle-tail was the undoing of this Southport Seaway fish.
- 2) Bream – the flavour of the month. You can catch these fish on all of the techniques and rigs covered in this article.
- 3) Much-maligned but more than just a by-catch, the humble catfish can provide some great fun on jighead-rigged plastics.
- 4) Unweighted plastics are great to flutter down in front of wary bream. This fish couldn't resist the action of the falling stickbait.
- 5) Tropical fish love to take on plastics and this queenfish couldn't help but attack the jighead-rigged plastic cast into a feeding school.
- 6) Stud bream like this are the main target for estuary anglers using soft plastics.
- 7) Diamond trevally aren't such a rare catch now that anglers are fishing in deeper water with better lures and the right rigs.

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