

The use of natural baits results in better fishing experiences

Two of the best anglers I know of are Ellis and Elsie Ireland from the small eastern North Carolina community of Royal. It seems like this husband and wife fishing team can catch fish when nobody else can. They should be good. They spend every available moment fishing the waters of the Pamlico and Neuse area and their freezer is usually is brimming with frozen fish fillets.

Ellis is noted around the Aurora area as the local plumber who had replaced most of the pipes in Beaufort County at one time or another. He's retired from that career now but has adequate retirement benefits from his first retirement from the U.S. Navy.

After two retirements the Irelands can now spend even more time fishing the waters of eastern North Carolina. That familiar old white pick-up truck with the pipe racks on the camper shell will be seen with increasing frequency at the boat ramps.

Like most fishermen Ellis Ireland has his professional secrets that he guards a lot better than our scientist at Los Alamos. On the other hand it's no secret that one reason that the Irelands do so well at their angling is that they use natural baits whenever possible.

Included in the back of his fishing truck is a small dip net that's for catching fresh grass shrimp whenever they can find them. It's really not hard. Grass shrimp inhabit most any waterway along the coast and are abundant wherever you find lots of submerged aquatic vegetation.

Take a small, fine mesh dip net and scoop up some widgeon grass, Eurasian water milfoil, hydrilla, or elodea and the chances are that you'll find dozens of these small grass shrimp dancing about in the midst of the grass. They're super-abundant along the shallows and constitute one of the very basic forage items in the food chain. There aren't many fish out there that don't like to feed on grass shrimp.

The only trouble with these tiny shrimp is that, due to their tiny size, they're the devil to put on a hook. No matter how hard you try to impale the shrimp on the hook, it seems like you end up killing them. Even tiny hooks are large enough to kill the grass shrimp. The solution to this is to place several grass shrimp at the time on a hook and don't worry about the fact that they're dead. It's possible with a very light line and a tiny hook that you can keep the shrimp alive but it's just not worth the trouble. The fish love 'em even if they are dead on the hook.

Not all the natural shrimp baits are tiny though. Speckled trout fishermen along the coastal sounds and rivers are learning what the Gulf Coast anglers have known for years. That is that live shrimp of the larger varieties are deadly baits for specks. Fished under a floating cork rig or on a fish finder rig, the speckled trout can't resist a live brown or white shrimp. Some coastal bait shops such as Capt. Joe Shute's tackle store on the Atlantic Beach causeway sell live shrimp to anglers. They're expensive though. Savvy speckled trout fishermen can use a cast net and catch their own shrimp for bait.

Another bait for coastal fish that you seldom see being utilized are the clams and mussels you find in the bottom or attached to various marsh grasses or rocks.

Along the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds the Carolina clams are so abundant that surveys have recorded as many as a thousand to the square meter of bottom. With their being this abundant it's no wonder that they're a favorite forage for bottom feeding fish (and waterfowl such as canvasback ducks).

Several years ago I watched two youngsters, who were not very experienced at fishing, as they brought in puppy drum after puppy drum. The kids were standing in knee-deep water along one of our estuaries and casting bottom rigs baited with whole Carolina clam meats. The kids didn't have money for expensive shrimp or bloodworm baits so they simply felt clams in the bottom with their feet, scooped up some, broke them open by smashing them together in their hands, then used the meat as a natural bait.

The adductor muscle was strong enough to hold the bait on the hook

and the fish, obviously, loved them. It was a readily available, natural, cheap and effective bait.

I know that you usually have to kill a fish in order to examine its stomach contents but this is an effective way to find out what the fish are naturally feeding on. If you're really into catch and release fishing, several manufacturers make small stomach pumps that enable an angler to extract the stomach contents of a fish without killing it.

If you examine the stomach contents of a largemouth bass from our waters I'll bet you money that you'll find crawfish remains in the gut.

These crustaceans are readily available in most waters and are deadly bait for many predatory fish. It's simple to construct a crawfish trap and they can be caught in most any roadside ditch. Crawfish are especially effective baits for bass on the beds.

King mackerel fishermen have known for years that the best bait for fishing the tournaments is a live menhaden. Most competition anglers will not even go out the inlet unless they have live bait in their live wells.

Even if you don't kill a fish to examine the stomach contents a freshly captured fish will often regurgitate (throw-up) whatever it's been feeding on when it's brought

into the boat. Look at whatever it is and try to "match the hatch" (as mountain trout fishermen say). If you can't find natural baits that match whatever it is that the fish are feeding on, try and use an artificial lure that looks like and is the approximate size of, the forage of the day.

Redfish (puppy drum, young red drum) feeding in the shallows along our coastal rivers and sounds are great

crab eaters. At this time of the year the preferred food is soft crabs. Small blue crabs in their hard shells are also a favorite food. Cut pieces of peeler crab (a blue crab just before it sheds its old hard shell for a larger, soft shell) is a deadly bait and stays on your hook much better than soft crab (I prefer to keep the soft crabs for personal consumption).

Surf anglers have known for years that some of the best fishing

in the surf is to be found in the shallow "wash" where the waves break and mole crabs (sand fleas) live by the millions.

A small wire mesh scoop can take enough bait to last all day. Incidentally these are crustaceans just like blue crabs and shed their hard shells each time they grow out of their old, hard, shells. The soft version of the sand flea is one of the premier baits you can get.

Commercially bought fish bait is becoming hard to find these days due to restrictions on bait dealers along the Florida coast. When you can find the bait in a store it's often very expensive.

If you look around in the area where you're fishing you can often find a natural bait that's readily available and free for the taking. You don't have to spend a lot of money to find good fish bait.

Outdoors with Fred Bonner

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