

How to Fish With Live Bait [Aftco.com](https://www.aftco.com)



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Fishing with live bait is one of the most productive ways to fish. As anglers, we use a variety of artificial and dead bait. But there are times when artificial and dead bait does not work, and live bait is the only way to get a fish to strike. From dangling worms for panfish to fly-lining sardines for bluefin tuna, our guide covers the basics of live bait fishing in saltwater and freshwater to help you land the fish you're chasing.

Types of Live Bait for Saltwater Fishing

Menhaden are found along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and range in size from 1 inch to about 15 inches. They are roundish silver fish with a distinctive black shoulder spot and a deeply forked tail.

Mullet are a common saltwater bait fish inhabiting the Atlantic and the Gulf coasts. They're characterized by a blunt face, an elongated body, two dorsal fins, dark horizontal stripes, and a dark back with light sides and a belly. Mullet are used as live bait from 3 inches up to about 14 inches in length.

Pinfish are small oval fish with silvery bodies, yellow fins, yellow and blue vertical stripes, and a black spot behind the gill. They are plentiful on the Atlantic coast south of Massachusetts and throughout the Gulf coast. They are incredibly hardy and easy to catch.

Sardines are one of the most popular bait fish on the West Coast. They are elongated fish with a green-blue back, silver sides, and a small dorsal fin. Ranging up to 9 inches, they are a fantastic bait from Alaska south to Baja Mexico.

Anchovies are another common West Coast bait fish. They are long-bodied fish with a blueish-green back, silver sides, and a pointed snout. They can be found from British Columbia down to Baja, Mexico.

Shrimp are one of the best live baits for saltwater fishing. The old saying "everything eats shrimp" seems to be true. Great for catching a large variety of fish species, shrimp are susceptible to bait stealers that are highly skilled at plucking them from the hook without being detected. Shrimp are an easy live bait to fish with, making them ideal for beginners and young anglers. Learn more about how to get started in saltwater fishing [here](#).

Other saltwater live fishing baits include mud minnows, croakers, cigar minnows, blue runners, pilchards, and threadfin herring.



Popular Saltwater Species to Target with Live Bait

Flounder: mullet, shrimp, mud minnows, menhaden, croakers, pinfish.

King Mackerel: menhaden, mullet, cigar minnows, blue runners, pilchards, threadfin herring, bluefish.

Bluefin Tuna: anchovies, sardines, mackerel, menhaden, bluefish.

Types of Live Bait for Freshwater Fishing

Worms are the classic freshwater live bait. For many of us, our first fishing experience was fishing for bream with live worms under a bobber. Readily available, you can buy them or find them yourself. Worm species include red wigglers, nightcrawlers, wax worms, and mealworms.

Minnows are a general name for several types of bait fish, including shiners, threadfin shad, mosquito fish, gizzard shad, and true minnows. Depending on the species, they vary in shape, color, and characteristics and are usually 1 to 6 inches long. Minnows are one of the best baits for fishing in lakes. Be sure to check your local fishing regulations as fishing with minnows is prohibited in some areas.

Insects, specifically crickets and grasshoppers, are extremely popular live bait. They are easy to catch, transport, and use and are excellent bait for young anglers.

Leeches are another common freshwater live bait. They are blackish-brown squiggly creatures with a suction cup on one end. Many people are hesitant to handle leeches, but the ones sold as bait are not the blood-sucking variety. They can be trapped or bought and range from about 1 inch to approximately 5 inches long.

Popular Freshwater Species to Target with Live Bait

Largemouth Bass: worms, minnows, insects, crawfish, frogs.

Walleye: worms, minnows, leeches.

Panfish: worms, minnows, leeches, insects.



Live Bait Care

Keeping your bait as lively and energetic as possible is important. The natural motion and scent of the bait are the key to attracting the target species and getting them to eat it.

Baitfish are kept in a bait tank or live well, built into boats or portable tanks. They work by pumping water into the tank or by using an air pump that bubbles air through the water. Certain baitfish, such as mud minnows, can survive in low-oxygen water; others, such as menhaden, are less hardy and need a strong water supply to stay alive.

Warm water holds less dissolved oxygen than cool water, so there can't be as many fish in a tank during hot weather as you can during cold. Minimize handling baitfish, keep your hands free of insect repellent or lotions, avoid overcrowding, and check them often.

Shrimp must be kept in a live well or bait bucket. They require a steady water supply or an air bubbler to oxygenate the water.

Crickets and grasshoppers can be carried in inexpensive baskets or tubes. Keep them dry, and do not expose them to temperature extremes.

Worms and nightcrawlers come in containers or small buckets with moist soil.

Live Bait Fishing Techniques

Drift Fishing

Drift fishing with live bait is an excellent way to cover many areas. Fishing from a boat as it drifts, the live bait is always moving, exposing it to more of the target species than if it were stationary.

When drift fishing, live baits can be rigged with or without weights to fish the water column's surface, middle, or bottom. You can drift fish in salt or freshwater. Drift fishing is suitable for a wide variety of situations, and it is used to target everything from speckled trout over shallow grass flats to drifting live anchovies for bluefin tuna off California.

Bottom Fishing

Bottom fishing is what the term implies: bait is dropped directly to the bottom or just above it. Species such as grouper, snapper, and flounder in saltwater and catfish, sturgeon, and carp in freshwater inhabit the lower levels of the water column, so that's where your baits need to be. You can bottom fish from a boat, bridge, dock, or shoreline.

Trolling

Trolling with live bait is done in both fresh and saltwater. The boat moves forward very slowly, and live bait fish that are nose-hooked or bridled are trolled in a natural forward motion. The trolled bait fish are rigged with or without weight, so they “swim” at the desired depth. Trolling live bait for salmon, lake trout, and striped bass is a standard freshwater technique. Kingfish, grouper, and wahoo are targeted by trolling in salt water.

Still Fishing

Still fishing is essentially dropping a bait and leaving it in place. With live bait, still fishing usually means going after smaller fish. Rigs are simple and are often a variation of the basic hook and sinker rig, with or without a bobber. Live baits used for this type of fishing are live shrimp or small baitfish in salt water and worms, insects, or small baitfish in fresh.

Rods & Reels for Live Bait Fishing

Rods and reels used for live bait fishing depend on the size and species of the fish being targeted, the angler’s preference, and skill level. Some anglers prefer a fast-action rod, while others prefer a softer tip. The rod must be stout enough for a solid hookset when going after larger fish. Baitcasting, spinning, and conventional reels are all suitable for use with live bait.

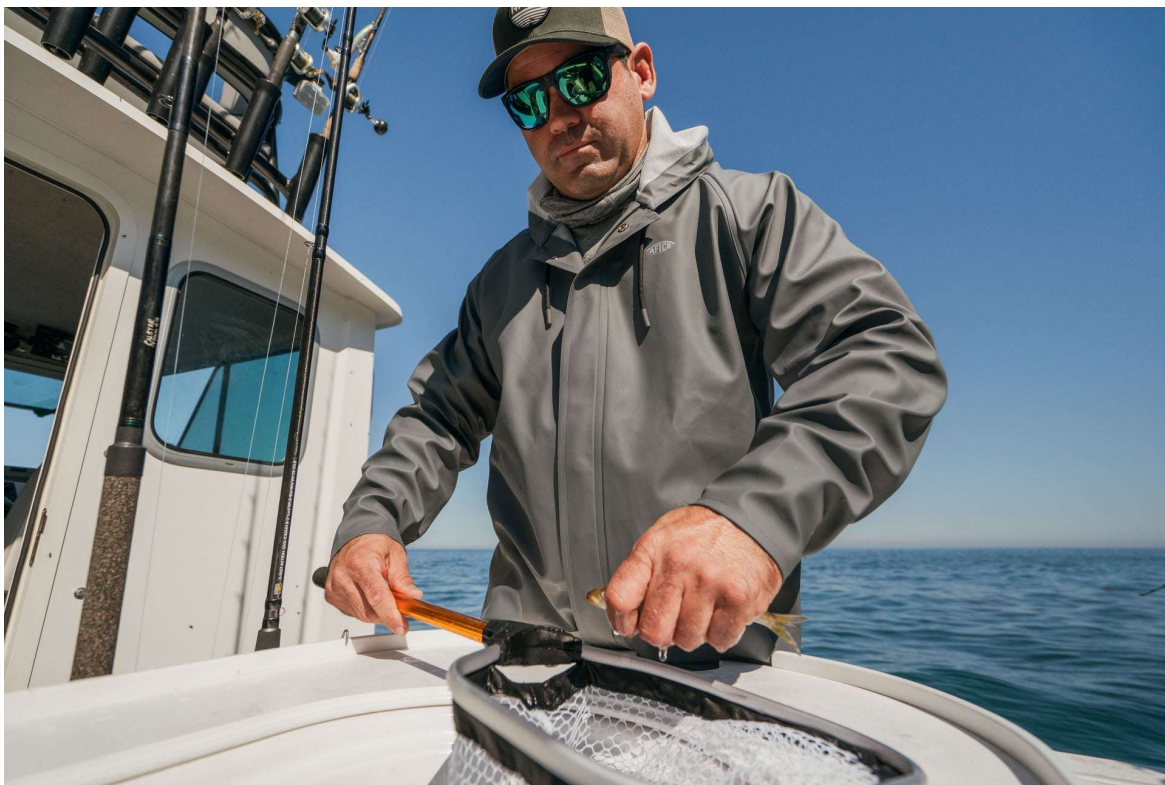
How to Hook Live Bait

Baitfish

Baitfish are either hooked or bridled. When hooking, the hook is run through the snout from the bottom upward or horizontally through the nostrils. Hooking the bait through the nose is the most popular method for general live bait fishing, drift fishing and trolling. To entice the bait fish to swim

downward, hook it on the lower body near the anal fin. Larger bait fish are often hooked in the back or bridled. Check out [this blog to learn more about hooking live bait](#).

Bridling a baitfish involves attaching the hook with a rubber band or light line to the baitfish. The hook is held away from the fish, so it doesn't bury itself into the bait. A bridled bait is livelier, lasts longer, and is more likely to result in a hook-up than a traditionally hooked live bait. For an in-depth look at how to bridle a bait, [click here](#).



Shrimp

Shrimp are hooked either through the head or in the tail area. When hooking through the head, insert the hook horizontally between the eyes and the brain. Alternatively, the hook can be pushed vertically up from the bottom of the head and the top between the eyes and the brain. The hook is run lengthwise from underneath the tail near the back when tail hooking shrimp.

Worms & Nightcrawlers

Worms and nightcrawlers are hooked by inserting the hook into one end and threading it onto the hook as far as it will go. Hook any remaining or dangling worm or nightcrawler a second time. For some species, such as catfish, it is advantageous to gang three or four together on a single hook by hooking them through the body in multiple locations to form a cluster. Larger worms and nightcrawlers can be hooked through the band in their middle several more times to keep them on the hook.

Crickets and **grasshoppers** are hooked by inserting the hook on the top just behind the head and into the thorax. This method keeps them lively and active.

How to Choose a Hook for Live Bait

- For **baitfish**, circle hooks are the best choice. They allow the bait to swim and move freely. Circle hooks harm a hooked fish less than a J-hook does, giving them a better chance to survive when released.
- For **live shrimp**, use a small circle or Kahle hook.
- Use a stinger rig for **king mackerel, bluefish, and other fish that attack their prey by slashing**. This rig consists of a single hook with a trailing treble hook. The baitfish is hooked in the forward part of the body with the single hook, and the trailing treble hook is hooked near the tail.
- **Live worms** should be baited on an Aberdeen hook, a thin wire J-hook. Aberdeen hooks are available with small notches on the shank (baitholders) that help hold the bait in place.
- **Crickets** are fished on small baitholder hooks or Aberdeen hooks.

Choose the smallest and lightest strength hook that is sufficiently strong and large enough to hook and land your target species.

Live Bait Recommendations

As you can see, there are plenty of live bait options at anglers' disposal. But if I had to recommend one live bait for saltwater, it would be mullet. They are plentiful and available most months of the year; they are hardy, and most importantly, they catch fish! I've caught many species on live mullet, including tarpon, snook, bluefish, jack crevalle, sharks, redfish, flounder, and speckled trout. A 4-inch mullet is my go-to live bait for flounder.

I believe the best live bait for bass is the shiner. I have caught quality bass on shiners when they would not bite on anything else. There is something about shiners that seems to turn on a bass's feeding instinct!

Using this guide, you can better understand how to fish with live bait and add it to your list of fishing tactics. Whether you're a [saltwater](#) or a [freshwater angler](#), fishing with live bait is necessary when the fish won't bite on artificial or dead bait. Live bait fishing can save the day, preventing you from going home empty-handed.

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John Flanagan writes about fishing, boating, business, and coastal lifestyle. A life-long fisherman, licensed captain and aficionado of all things coastal, he pursues his passions on the coastal waters of North Carolina. Learn more [here](#).