

STOP WISHING AND GO FISHING

Don't let inexperience keep you from joining anglers hitting the water in growing numbers



written by Mike Zlotnicki
photographed by Melissa McGaw

The Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) released a report last August detailing what we here at the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission have learned as well: Folks are flocking to the water. The 2020 Special Report on Fishing found that:

- 3.7 million African-Americans participate in fishing, an increase of nearly 1 million over the last 10 years
- Hispanic-Americans are participating at a new record of 4.4 million anglers
- Women are participating at an all-time high of 17.9 million participants
- Overall, more than 50 million Americans participate in fishing, the highest number in 12 years
- The activity gained more than 3 million new participants last year, the highest in five years

So how do you get started? Fortunately, the barriers to learning to fish are not severe, and there are different ways to get there. And you don't even have to buy tackle to begin fishing.





• NEEDLE NOSE PLIERS

I sat down with Tom Carpenter, director of the John E. Pechmann Fishing Education Center in Fayetteville. He and his staff have taught thousands of people how to fish over the years, and he's an avid angler himself.

Carpenter said that most beginning anglers start off by targeting sunfish before moving on to largemouth bass in warmwater areas. Next on their list is often catfish using a bottom rig, or crappie if one has access to a boat or fishing shallow flats and coves during spawning in the spring.

"The cool thing about fishing nowadays is kayaking has brought such a greater mobility and access to people," he said. "You know you don't have to buy a \$30,000 boat to go fishing. You get your exercise, go out in your kayak and you have an adventure: fun day, sunshine, fresh air and a little exercise as you go out there and catch a fish."

A good starter rod and reel is a spincast (or "push button"). It is ideal for its ease of use, and buying a "combo" (rod and reel outfit) is not a bad idea. The iconic Zebco 33 has been around since the mid 1950s (but now made in China). Initially, Zebco stood for Zero Hour Bomb Company, because the company made electronic

bombs for oil field production. When the fishing equipment proved more profitable, the company quit making bombs and were bought by Brunswick in 1961. ("I'll take obscure fishing information for \$200, Alex.")

Carpenter detailed other pieces of equipment that every angler should have:

Pliers: "There's a lot of them out there that are very inexpensive."

Scissors or line nippers: "You'll need something to cut line with."

Tackle box: "To keep your stuff organized: Your sinkers separated, your hooks separated and floats and stuff like that. It doesn't have to be large and expensive, but you want to have something where you can get the stuff easily and have it accessible."

Tape measure: "They roll up to the size of a dime or so. [It's important to] have one of those so that you can make sure if you are going to keep a fish, it's legal."

Carpenter recommends an app called Fishbrain, a crowd-sourced database of fishing locations that details what folks are catching at those locations. "This is the largest fishing app on the market with over 11 million users," Carpenter said. "It's loaded with features but the best one may just be that it's a platform that allows local anglers to share information about fishing locations, gear and fish that they have caught."

Carpenter also said that three things to have when fishing include sunscreen, a hat or cap with a brim and sunglasses. The latter two help with eye protection as well as sun protection.

BACK TO EQUIPMENT

Sunfish are the target of most beginning warm-water anglers.

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• SPINNING REEL AND ROD

A basic setup is a No. 8 long-shanked hook with a small lead split shot weight about 6 inches above the hook. Just about any small bobber will do, but I really like the weighted, oval-shaped floats like the Betts Billy Boy and the Eagle Claw Weighted Foam Cigar Float. The lead band on the bottom aids in casting distance and makes the bobber float vertically. The oval shape is pulled under the surface more easily than a round bobber.

Sunfish are preyed upon by larger fish like largemouth bass, so they use cover to hide in. So look for things like docks, piers, fallen trees and aquatic plants in the area you want to fish.

Minnows are a good live bait option. You can use essentially the same set up for panfish but with a larger hook, like a No. 4 or No. 2. Hook the minnow above the spine and below the dorsal fin.

We don't have enough space here to discuss artificial baits and lures. I will say that "safety pin" spinner baits come in various sizes, are relatively snag-free and mimic baitfish. A tiny Beetle Spin will work on a variety of panfish and bass. (Remember, even the biggest sunfish has an open mouth no larger than a quarter.) Lead-head jigs with plastic bodies are also effective and come in sizes suited to panfish and up to bass. Erratic retrieves work well.

NOT QUITE READY TO GO SOLO?

If you want to "test the waters" and have some extra cash, consider hiring a guide. Carpenter recommends using full-time guides who are on the water every day and are familiar with habitats, equipment and baits.

"Guides are going to provide the equipment," Carpenter said. "They're going to know what baits are hitting. They're going to know where the fish are. They're going to explain to you how to work a bait. And they're going to know because their job is to get you on a fish. And so they're going to do everything they can to see that you are successful."

Fishing guides usually offer half-day and full-day trips. Costs vary, but generally range between \$300 to \$400 for a half-day and \$500 to \$800 for a full day.



Top: For catching sunfish, red wigglers or earthworms are preferred over nightcrawlers. They are not as messy and are better suited for the mouth of a sunfish. Left: Sunfish can be landed by simply lifting them out of the water. Right: Heftier bass are better landed by "lipping" them with a thumb on top of their jaw.



• IN-LINE SPINNER LURE



This largemouth bass hit a “wacky-rigged” soft-plastic bait. Wacky-rigged means the bait is hooked in the middle, which creates a fluttering action and is easier for beginners to work.



● TAPE MEASURE

Another tool for learning is to take a class. The Pechmann Center and the Pisgah Center for Wildlife Education in Pisgah Forest each hold a variety of angling classes, including many for newbies. For more information on course offerings, visit ncwildlife.org/learning/education-centers.

Another way to test out the waters is through the Commission’s Tackle Loaner Program, which allows anglers of all ages to borrow a rod and reel to use at participating parks. Many of the Tackle Loaner Program locations also participate in the Commission’s Community Fishing Program. These sites are intensively managed bodies of water that receive monthly stockings of catchable-sized channel catfish from April to September. (See “Wild Notebook” on page 38 for more details on these programs or visit ncwildlife.org/Fishing/Learn-Resources.)

So, getting into fishing is not as hard as you might have feared. In addition to the above bank and pier opportunities, many parks and recreation areas also offer boat rentals, including johnboats, kayaks and canoes. Most offer electric trolling motors for the johnboats. For the cost of movie tickets and popcorn, you can be on the water. The barriers to fishing are small and easy to overcome. Tight lines!

HOW TO BAIT A HOOK

When I was a kid, my dad refused to “pay for insects,” so we often fished with moist bread, hot dog bits and the like. And we often got skunked. My “luck” improved immensely when I started digging for worms and snatching crickets while mowing the yard.

If you dig earthworms for bait, fine. Since you only need to use about 2 inches of the worm, be prepared to pinch or cut some of it off. If you’re buying worms for sunfish, don’t buy nightcrawlers. They can be large and when pinched or cut they are still too thick for sunfish. Instead, buy red wigglers at the bait shop because they are a better size for fish with smaller mouths like bluegill, crappie and perch.

Worms are often refrigerated at bait shops so always open the carton or box and make



● Balsa wood MINNOW LURE

● WEEDLESS JIG WITH PLASTIC BODY

● TANDEM-BLADE SPINNER BAIT



sure they are alive. This is especially important at “big box” retailers. Whatever type of worms you get, leave the top on to prevent escapees and keep the container out of direct sunlight to prevent worms from getting too hot and dying.

When baiting a hook, thread the worm on twice and leave a bit hanging to wiggle and attract fish. Nightcrawlers can be used whole for catfish and bass.

Crickets are excellent bait for panfish and less “icky” to use than worms. You can use either a cricket basket or a cricket tube to store and carry your bait. (As a child, I’d tie a cricket basket to the handle of our lawnmower and grab the occasional cricket that would pop out of the mowed centipede grass.) I prefer the bullet-shaped tube because it’s easier to shake the bugs out of the conical top one at a time.

If you’re targeting bass, catfish or crappie with live minnows, a small investment in an aerated minnow bucket is a good idea. Your bait will live longer. On hot summer days, a couple of ice cubes can help keep the water cool for them.

As the father of three daughters, I have spent a good amount of time afoot and afloat teaching some angling skills. One

thing my dad let me do was explore. If the fish weren’t biting, I’d look for crawdads, snakes, different insects to try, whatever. I try to keep it fun for my daughters. In today’s world, I let my kids check their phones as a break. I don’t want fishing to be a chore. Neither did Carpenter, a father of two. Above all, a trip has to be fun.

“Turn it into an outing, not just centered around fishing,” Carpenter said. “And when the kid’s attention goes to something else, go with them. I think the greatest mistake that I saw parents make with their kids when I was a kid was they turned it into a chore and made them sit there and be quiet. Just make it a day out. And when it’s over with, ‘Hey, time for ice cream! Let’s go!’” ♦

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ANOTHER TOOL FOR LEARNING IS TO TAKE A CLASS. THE PECHMANN CENTER AND THE PISGAH CENTER FOR WILDLIFE EDUCATION IN PISGAH FOREST EACH HOLD A VARIETY OF ANGLING CLASSES...