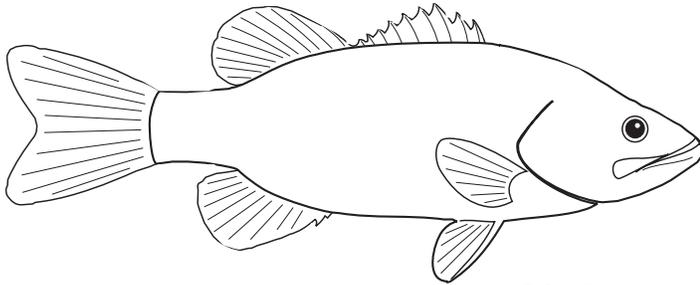
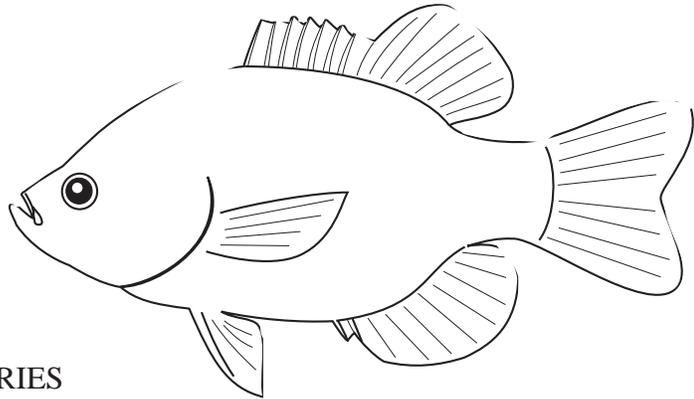


**BASIC OUTDOOR SKILLS SERIES**



# **BASIC FISHING**



BASIC OUTDOOR SKILL SERIES

A Program of the



Alabama Department of Conservation  
and Natural Resources



PREPARED BY

**DOUG DARR**  
AQUATIC EDUCATION  
COORDINATOR

VISIT US ON THE WEB AT:

**[www.OutdoorAlabama.com](http://www.OutdoorAlabama.com)**



Funded in part by the Sport Fish Restoration Fund.

## FOREWORD

Fishing is one of America's most popular participation sports. *Basic Fishing* introduces fishing skills to the public. Fishing is one of four skills taught in the Basic Outdoor Skills Series produced by the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. The other skills in this series include *Backyard Wildlife*, *Basic Hunting*, and *The Preparation, Care and Cooking of Wild Game and Fish*. General tax revenues were not used to produce this series. License fees and excise taxes contributed by anglers, hunters and other lovers of wildlife made these courses possible for the public to enjoy. Designed to promote the ethical enjoyment of wildlife, the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries wishes you a lifetime of outdoor experiences that can begin with *Basic Fishing*.

Fishing is enjoyed for many reasons. One joy of fishing is to successfully meet the challenge of enticing fish to bite. Fishing also offers a chance to relax in the outdoors while being a part of nature. For many, the greatest joy of fishing is being away from the fast pace of modern life, giving anglers a chance to get to know their fishing partner better. Fishing trips bring anglers together and last a lifetime through the memories they evoke.

I am thankful to all the artists whose illustrations were used. Copyright privileges were granted by the Missouri Department of Conservation for Figures 17, 21, 23-28 and 30-44. The Future Fisherman Foundation granted the use of Figures 12-14 from the Aquatic Resources Education Curriculum and Figures 10, 11 15 and 16 from the Sport Fishing and Aquatic Resources Handbook. Figures 1-9, 18-20, 22 and 45-54 were provided by C. J. Turner of the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. Finally, a thank you to Charles Kelley, former Director of what was then the Alabama Game and Fish Division; M. N. "Corky" Pugh, both the former Assistant Director and current Director of the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division; and Fred Harders, former Chief of Fisheries and current Assistant Director of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, who had the vision to see the need of providing the public with a short introduction to fishing. I appreciate them asking me to contribute to it and giving me the time to accomplish the task.

This material is only to be used in a non-profit setting.

### **Fishing**

But if no fish I catch at all,  
Successful I'll still be.  
For I've been fishing, had a ball,  
And for a day been free.

Anonymous

In his book, *The River Home*, Jerry Dennis wrote:

"Fishing makes us alert, pulls us out of our thoughts, and engages us in something bigger than ourselves. It's a restorative that cleanses us when we've become muddied and makes us healthy when we've become sickened. It's a brace against pessimism.

Fishing...teaches us to perform small acts with care. It humbles us. It enriches our friendships. It cultivates reverence for wild things and beautiful places. It offers relief from overdue bills and endless chores and appalling world events. It makes us participants in nature instead of spectators, a crucial distinction because participants tend to become passionate and protective, and spectators tend to become indifferent.

...Looking down into a lake, an ocean, or a river is like looking up into the night sky, that both water and sky are filled with mysteries, and when we stare deeply into them, we connect with every man and woman who has ever sensed the tugging vitality of the universe. We become part of a larger community, united by mysteries so vast that they make our differences of opinion and philosophy seem very small.

Anglers are people who want to get beneath the surface of things...Fishing is simply a way to open our hearts to the world."

# BASIC FISHING

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# INTRODUCTION

## PURPOSE

This short course gives basic fishing knowledge to those with little or no fishing experience. This basic knowledge will help the new angler to have safer and more enjoyable fishing trips. *Basic Fishing* will be a handy reference for the beginning angler. Numbered diagrams accompany the text. A glossary in the back of the book presents some fishing terms that may not be familiar to some anglers.

Fishery management and boating access programs are not funded through general tax money. Fishery management is funded by anglers through license fees and a federal excise tax on the purchase of fishing equipment. Boating access projects are also funded by an excise tax on gasoline in addition to the federal excise tax.

## GOALS

Participants in this course will be introduced to the various types of equipment and tackle by demonstration. Participants will experience knot tying and other tackle techniques and, where possible, practice casting or fishing. Areas for good fishing will be described, and simple techniques used to catch common fish will be presented. Anglers will learn about laws and regulations used to maintain high quality fishing. Handling and preparation of the catch will also be discussed.

## ETHICS

An ethical angler:

- Keeps only the fish needed ...
- Does not use illegal live bait ...
- Uses only native aquatic species for bait and does not release aquatic bait ...
- Properly disposes of trash and waste ...
- Observes all applicable laws and regulations for angling and boating...
- Practices safe angling and boating ...
- Hones angling and boating skills, and passes this knowledge on to others ...
- Respects the rights of other anglers and property owners ...
- Supports local conservation efforts.

## SAFETY EQUIPMENT

When outdoors, safety equipment should be available nearby. Even when fishing from the shore, a life jacket is the most valuable piece of safety equipment. A life jacket should be worn when fishing near deep or swift water and whenever fishing from a boat. Other safety equipment includes sun blocking lotion, insect repellent, and first aid equipment for emergencies, such as stings or bites. When appropriate, warm clothes and rain gear should be taken. Drinking water and ice should be carried during all seasons.

## SECTION 1. TACKLE

### PURPOSE

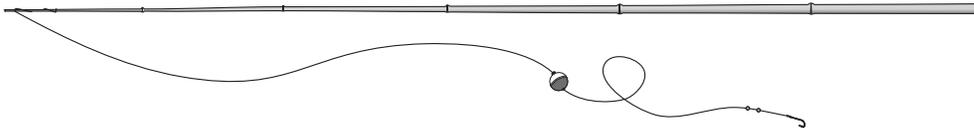
Fishing tackle is the connection between the angler and the fish. The fishing tackle is necessary both to get the lure or bait to the fish and to get the fish to the angler.

### GEAR TYPES

Fishing rigs are named for the reel (or lack of reel) that holds the fishing line. Each type of fishing reel has an appropriate fishing rod that goes with it.

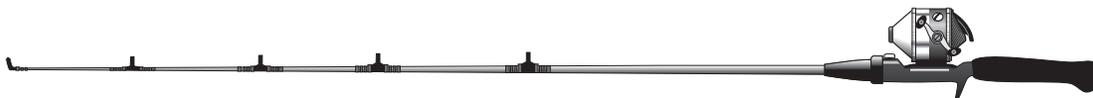
**1. Pole and Line.** The simplest gear is a pole with fishing line attached to the end. Used most commonly with a float, weight, hook and bait; a pole and line can also be used with a lure (Figure 1). This gear is simple, yet very effective, for fish in shallow water. Crappie and white bass are taken in the spring, and bream (sunfish) are caught during the late spring and summer. To rig, tie the fishing line to the tip of the pole. An added advantage of this gear is that Alabama residents fishing in their home county do not need a license to fish from the bank with a pole and line having no reel.

**Figure 1.** Pole and line is a simple, but effective, fishing system.



**2. Spincasting.** Spincast is the simplest gear with a reel (Figure 2). Spincast gear is the appropriate choice for most beginning anglers. The fishing line comes out of a hole in the reel cover. During the cast, the thumb is used to release the line, and the index finger is used for control. Spincast gear is used to cast light to medium size lures. Spincast gear is not the best choice for using very light fishing line or heavy fishing line. Line on a spincast rod must come out of the hole in the cone and go through each of the guides on the rod.

**Figure 2.** Spincasting or push button rod and reel is often the first rod and reel anglers own.



**3. Spinning.** Spinning gear (Figure 3) can cast farther than spincast gear. The fishing line in a spinning reel is exposed, and the index finger is used to release the line and to control the line. The first guide of a spinning rod is large. Various spinning gear is used for casting very light to heavy lures. Line on a spinning rig comes off the spool of line, under the wire bail, and through each guide.

**Figure 3.** Spinning or open-faced spinning rod and reel can be used to catch all species of fish.



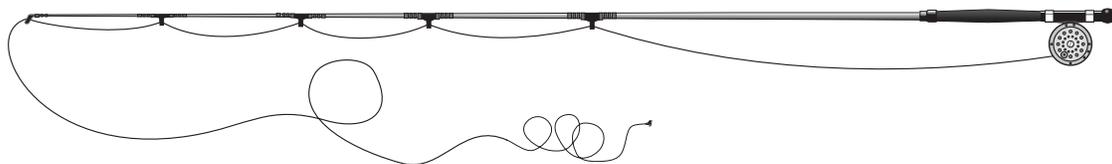
**4. Baitcasting.** Baitcasting gear (Figure 4) has more control and more power than spinning gear. In a casting reel, the fishing line rotates the spool as the line comes off the spool. During the cast, the thumb is used to release the line and to slow and stop the line. Bait casting gear can cast moderate to very heavy weights farther than other reels.

**Figure 4.** Baitcasting rod and reel is commonly used by bass anglers, but it requires some practice to master.



**5. Fly.** A fly rod works differently than other rods. The fly rod casts the line instead of casting the lure (Figure 5). The heavy fly line is used for the casting, and a leader, usually tapered monofilament, connects the fly line to the fly. The fly rod casts very light lures typically made of feathers, fur or fibers that cast out with the line. Fly fishing is not difficult, but it normally takes training to learn the proper technique.

**Figure 5.** Fly rod and reel may be used to catch a wide variety of fish with lightweight lures called flies.



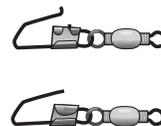
## TERMINAL TACKLE

Terminal tackle is the tackle between the fish and the reel.

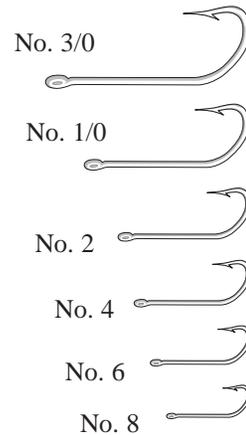
**1. Hooks.** Hooks keep fish attached to the fishing line. **Hooks must be kept sharp.** Hooks come in many sizes (Figure 6) and types. The local bait and tackle store can provide recommendations of hook type and size for the species targeted and the bait used. The size fishing line or leader used depends on the size hook being used. **If fish are nibbling, but are not getting hooked; a smaller hook should be used.**

**2. Snaps and Swivels.** Most hooks and lures are more effective **without** snaps or snap-swivels attached (Figure 7). Crank baits (wobbling lures) are the exception. When trying a variety of lures, a small but strong snap will make changing lures easier. A swivel or three-way swivel can be used to attach a dropper that keeps the bait or lures off of the bottom.

**Figure 7.** Locking snap-swivel (top) and common snap-swivel (bottom)

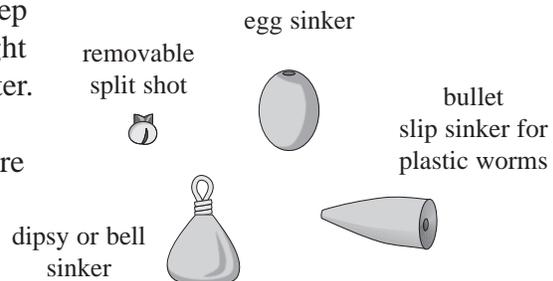


**Figure 6.** Examples of hook sizes; there are many styles too.



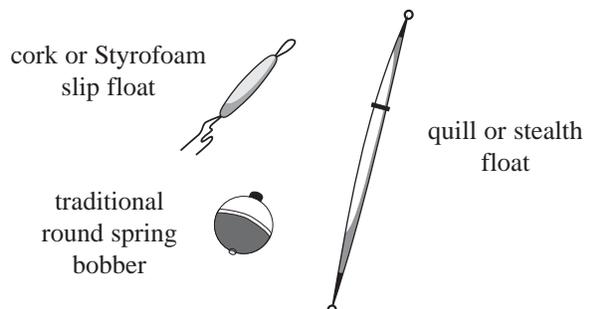
**3. Weights or Sinkers.** Only enough weight should be used to cast the bait and keep it at the desired depth (Figure 8). More weight will be needed in windy weather or swift water. To prevent losing a fish, weights should be attached carefully, especially when weights are on the fishing line directly between the hook and the angler.

**Figure 8.** Common types of sinkers



**4. Floats, Bobbers or Corks.** Floats keep baits off the bottom and assist with detecting a bite (Figure 9). The float should be just large enough to do the job. If the float is too large, the fish will feel it and may not become hooked.

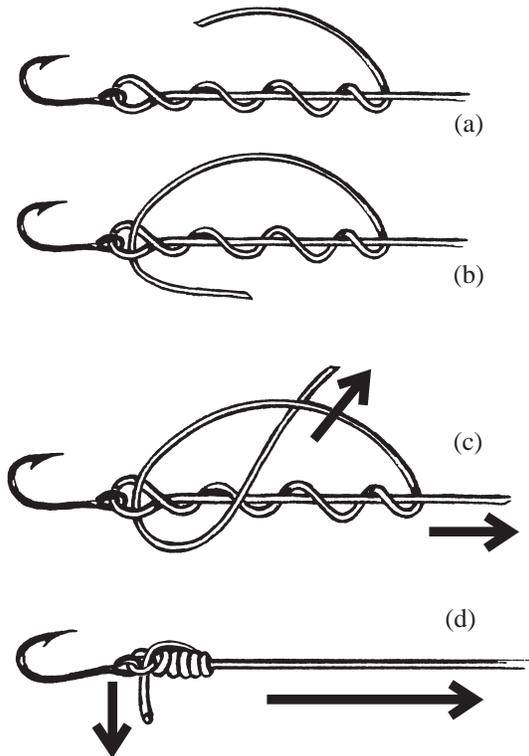
**Figure 9.** Common types of floats



**5. Knots.** Knots connect the fish and the angler. **Tying quality knots is the single most important skill that should be learned.** The knot that connects the hook or lure to the fishing line is the most important knot to learn. Several knots work well, such as the Improved Clinch, the Palomar, and the Duncan Loop knots (Figures 10-16). Anglers should try them all and pick a favorite knot. Anglers should then master the skill of tying their favorite knot.

Other knots are used for special purposes such as connecting fishing lines together. When buying fishing line, the manufacturer's pamphlet on knots should be

**Figure 10.** Improved Clinch Knot



kept in the tackle box. This pamphlet will usually show what types of knots that may be needed and have diagrams for tying them.

The **Improved Clinch Knot** (Figure 10) is a basic knot for anglers to use with monofilament line. To tie an Improved Clinch Knot:

- (a) pass the line through the eye of the hook, then make several turns around the standing end of the line (more for lighter line);
- (b) pass the tag end through first loop above eye;
- (c) pass the tag end through the "big loop;"
- (d) moisten the line and slide tight against the eye.

For light lines, such as 6 pound test, six to eight turns is required; for heavier line (10 to 20 pound test), five or six turns works better.

The **Palomar Knot** (Figure 11) is also a good knot for beginning anglers, as it is strong and easy to tie. To tie a Palomar knot:

- (a) double about 4 inches of line and pass the loop through the hook eye;
- (b) tie an overhand knot with doubled line;
- (c) pass hook through line loop; and
- (d) moisten the line and pull the knot tight.

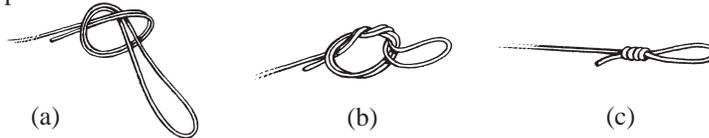
**Figure 11.** Palomar Knot



The **Surgeon's End Loop** (Figure 12) is used to tie a loop at the end of a fishing line. To tie a surgeon's end loop:

- (a) double about 4 inches of line and tie an overhand knot with it;
- (b) bring doubled end through the loop once again; and
- (c) moisten the line, hold both the standing end and tag end, and pull loop to tighten knot.

**Figure 12.** Surgeon's End Loop



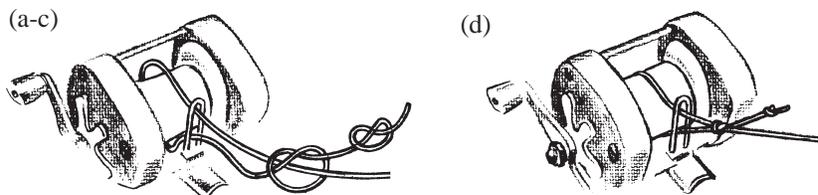
Preparing the rod and reel for use involves running the line through the reel and each circular guide of the rod. For the spincast rod and reel, the line must go through the hole in the cover. For the spinning rod and reel, the bail must be opened before line is brought from the reel to the guides. For the baitcast rod and reel, the line must go through the mechanism that moves back and forth to wind the line in a level manner onto the reel. For the fly rod and reel, the line should come out of the bottom of the reel and move directly towards the guides without rubbing across a post.

The line should come off the line spool in the same manner as it is going onto the reel. When twists develop, the spool should be flipped until the twisting stops. The line spool should then be flipped back.

The **Arbor Knot** (Figure 13) is used to tie fishing line to a reel. To tie an arbor knot:

- (a) thread the line through all the rod's line guides, around the spool and back out the guide;
- (b) tie an overhand knot at the end of the tag end;
- (c) tie an overhand knot with the tag end that has the main line running through the hole;
- (d) tighten both knots and pull standing end until knot is snug against spool.

**Figure 13.** Arbor Knot

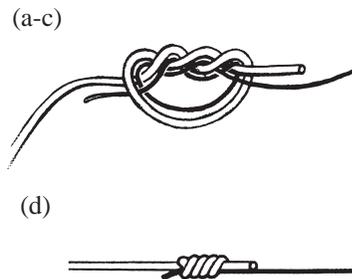


The **Surgeon's Knot** (Figure 14) and the **Barrel Knot** (Figure 15) are used to join two lines together. The surgeon's knot is preferred when tying two lines of unequal diameter.

To tie a **Surgeon's Knot**:

- (a) lay the two lines parallel, overlapping about 6 inches;
- (b) as though the two were a single line, tie an overhand knot, pulling the entire leader through the loop;
- (c) pull both tag end of line and leader through again.
- (d) Moisten line and pull to tighten.

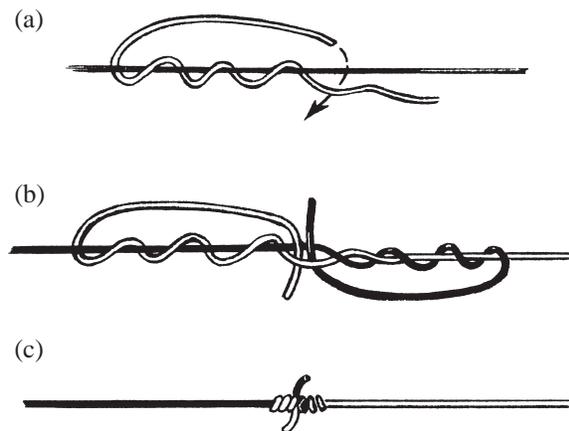
**Figure 14.** Surgeon's Knot



To tie a **Barrel Knot** or **Blood Knot**:

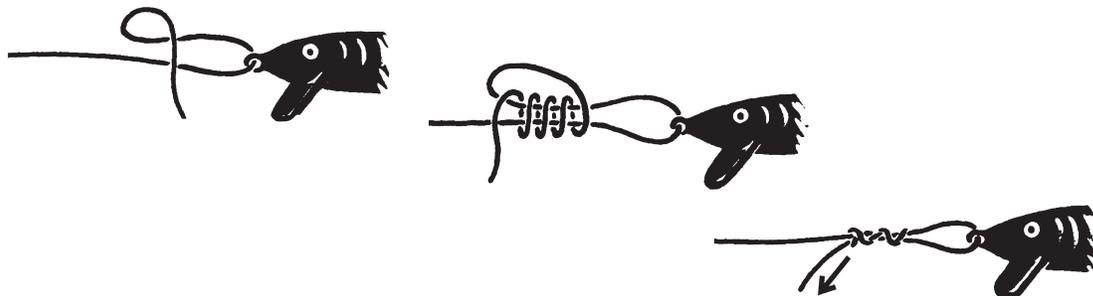
- (a) overlap the two ends for about 6 inches, take the tag end and make 6 turns around the other line, insert the tag end between the two lines.
- (b) Repeat with the other tag end so that the ends of both lines are drawn through the center loop.
- (c) Moisten the fishing line and pull the tag ends to tighten the knot.

**Figure 15.** Blood Knot or Barrel Knot



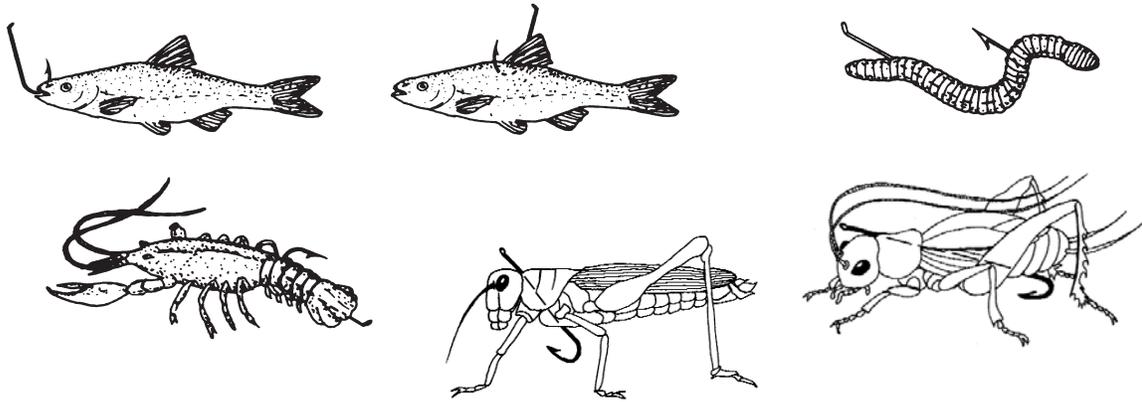
The **Duncan Loop Knot** (Figure 16), like the Surgeon's End Loop, is used to tie a loop at the end of a line.

**Figure 16.** The Duncan Loop Knot

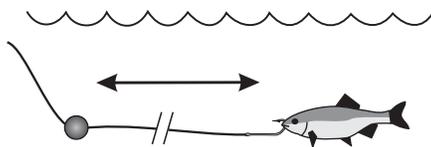


**6. Rigging.** Rigging is how the bait is hooked and where the hook, snap or swivel, weight and float are used. The type rig that catches the most fish is the best rig. Some common ringings are shown in Figures 17-20.

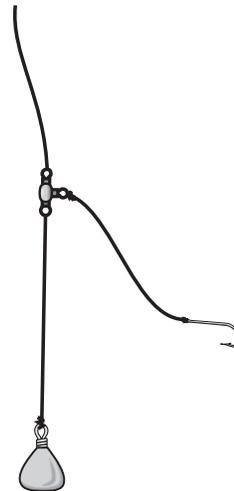
**Figure 17.** Ways to hook live bait.



**Figure 18.** Drift rig for moving water



**Figure 19.** Three-way dropper to keep bait near the bottom



**Figure 20.** Slip sinker bottom fishing rig allows fish to pick up the bait and swim away without feeling the weight of the sinker. The swivel acts as a stop and prevents excessive line twist. A floating jig head may be used to keep the bait off of the bottom.



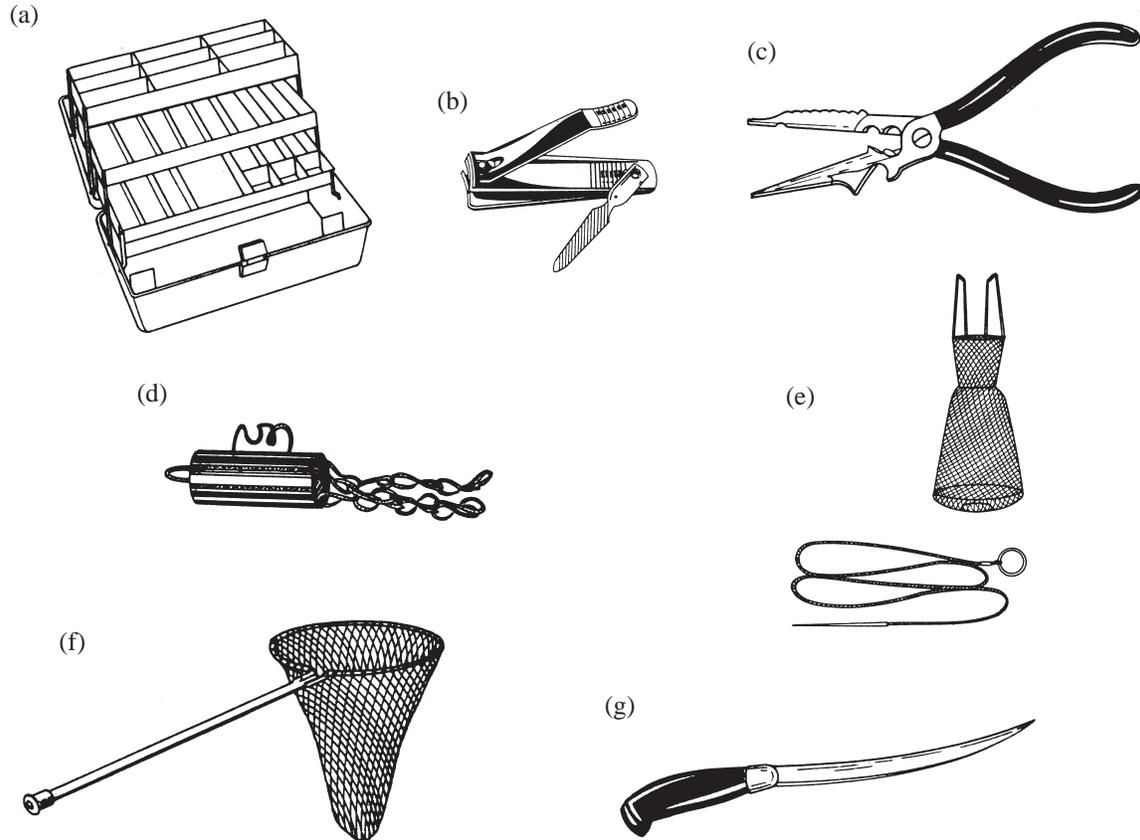
## OTHER TACKLE

Other tackle helpful in fishing (Figure 21) includes a **tackle box** which holds equipment. A soft-sided tackle box is more versatile. Clear plastic boxes will hold hooks, lures and weights; and they can be stored inside the soft-sided tackle box.

**Fingernail clippers** or **scissors** safely cut fishing line. A pair of **long nose pliers with wire cutters** is useful for holding and removing fish hooks. A **lure retriever** frees lures. A **rag** keeps hands clean. A **floating fish basket** keeps smaller fish alive until the fishing trip is complete. Some anglers land fish with a **landing net** after the fish are hooked. Nets are more critical for large fish, fish with spines such as catfish, and fish with sharp teeth such as sauger and walleye.

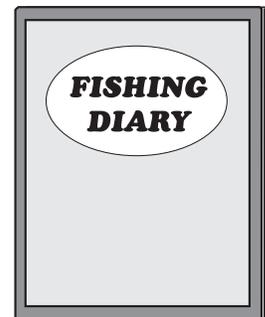
An **inch ruler** measures fish to verify their legal length. Knowing their length will also help determine whether the catch qualifies as an Alabama Master or Trophy Angler Certificate. A picture will verify the catch, so bring a camera. A **cooler with ice** keeps the catch fresh. A thin, flexible **fillet knife** makes it easier to clean fish. A **sharpening stone** keeps hooks and knives sharp.

**Figure 21.** Useful Tackle: (a) tackle box; (b) finger nail clippers for clipping line; (c) long nose pliers are useful to take hooks out of fish, cut line, and tighten nuts; (d) plug retrievers can save lures; (e) stringers or floating fish baskets can help keep fish fresh; (f) a landing net is useful with large fish; (g) a fillet knife is designed specifically for fish.



An **angler's diary** (Figure 22) helps anglers improve their fishing by learning how fish were caught, what the weather was like, and what the fish were eating. An angler's diary also keeps the memories vivid.

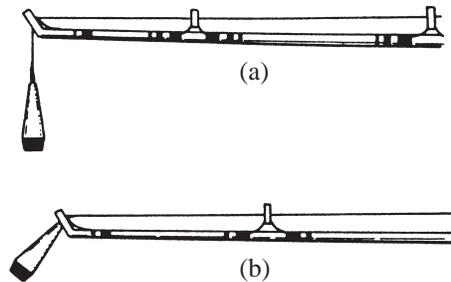
**Figure 22.** Angler Diary: Anglers can improve their fishing by keeping a record of each fishing trip.



## SECTION 2. USING THE TACKLE

### CASTING

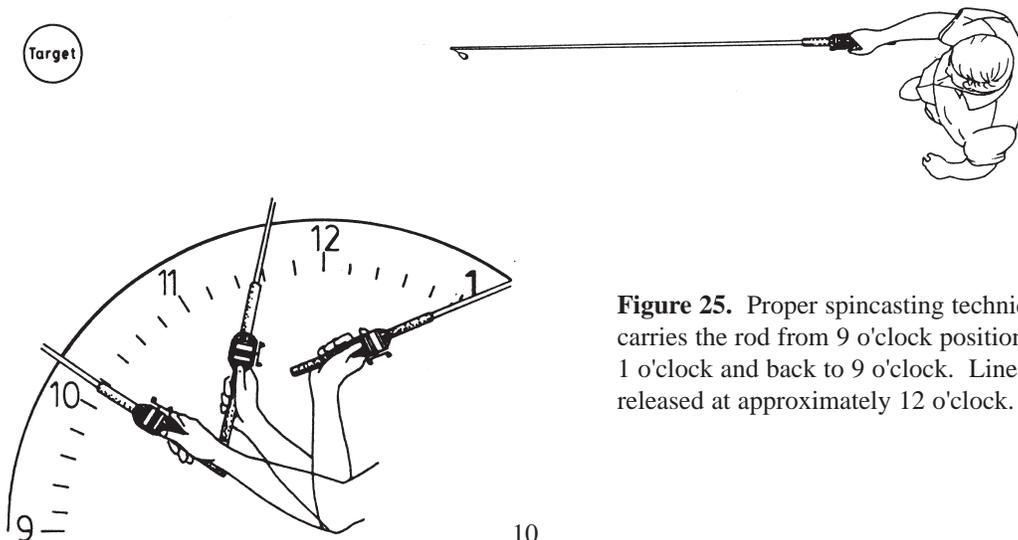
Casting is the skill of propelling a lure from the angler to the water. For spin-casting, spinning and baitcasting, the overhead cast is the easiest. First, the lure should hang one to three inches from the tip of the rod (Figure 23).



**Figure 23.** (a) The lure should hang 1 to 3 inches below the rod tip.  
(b) Do **not** reel it completely to the top guide.

Begin the cast by pointing the rod where the cast is intended to go (9 o'clock position; Figure 24 and 25). Anglers should check behind them and above them to be sure it is clear of anglers and obstructions. In one fluid motion, move the rod to the 1 o'clock position and immediately bring the rod forward releasing the fishing line at the 12 o'clock position. Continue the follow-through to the 9 o'clock position with the rod pointing at the target (Figure 25). If the lure went too high and fell short, the fishing line should be held a little longer. If the lure went too low and fell short, the fishing line should be released sooner.

**Figure 24.** Aim: Begin the cast by pointing the rod tip directly at the intended target.



**Figure 25.** Proper spin-casting technique carries the rod from 9 o'clock position to 1 o'clock and back to 9 o'clock. Line is released at approximately 12 o'clock.

## RETRIEVING

Retrieving is the act of bringing a bait or lure back to the boat (Figures 26). After casting, live and prepared bait are often left in one spot until retrieved. Some baits and most artificial lures are most effectively presented while retrieving. The retrieve can be slow or fast; it can be steady or erratic.

**Figure 26.** The proper way to hold the rod when retrieving. Gently pinch the line as the reel handle is cranked.



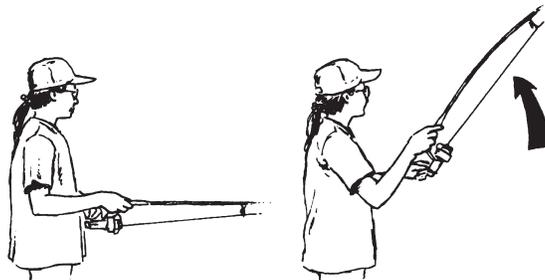
## SETTING THE DRAG

Reels have some way to vary the tension allowing fishing line to be pulled off the reel; this is the drag. Drag should normally be set to less than a quarter of the breaking strength of the fishing line. The many friction points from the reel though the guides affects the force between the fish and the reel.

## SETTING THE HOOK

Once the fish bites the lure, the hook must be pulled into the fish to hold the fish. Then the fish can be brought to the angler (Figure 27). When the fish bites, the fishing rod should be quickly pulled up to force or “set” the hook into the fish. The force needed to set the hook depends on the rod, line, species of fish, and the lure or bait used. For example, a crappie caught on a light multifilament line and minnows will need only a gentle lifting of the rod to set the hook. A bass angler fishing with monofilament line and the hook buried in a plastic worm will need a quick rod sweep to force the hook through the worm and into the bony mouth of a bass.

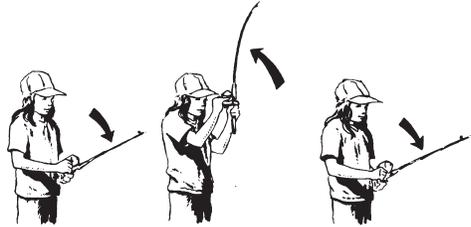
**Figure 27.** Setting the hook and maintaining pressure on the line are the main keys to landing a fish.



## PLAYING THE FISH

After setting the hook, the line should be kept tight so the fish will not shake the hook loose. The fishing rod should be held between a 10 o'clock and a 12 o'clock position. Large fish must be pumped; a large fish is repeatedly pulled toward the angler with the rod. Pulling is followed by reeling the fishing line as the rod is lowered slightly (Figure 28).

**Figure 28.** Pumping the fishing rod keeps pressure on the fish.



## **SECTION 3. TECHNIQUES - WHERE AND HOW TO FISH**

### HABITAT

Some fishing areas have better fishing than others. The quality of fishing depends upon the water's productivity, the fish species present, and the size of the fish present. Productive water has more fish than unproductive water; up to a point, the greener the water is, the more productive the water. In some waters, undesirable fish compete with desirable fish. Fishing is better in a lake with a high proportion of the fish in the right size groups.

**1. Private Waters.** Private ponds are often excellent places to fish. The permission of the owner is required to fish private ponds. Anglers should ask for clarification about what types, sizes and numbers of fish may be kept and whether guests may be brought. Part of the catch should be offered to the pond owner. Do not litter. All gates entered should be closed. Any problems should be reported immediately to the owner.

The right balance of fish species must be present to have good fishing in a pond. Usually only the following combinations of fish work well in a pond: channel catfish only; bass and bream; or channel catfish, bream and bass. The Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division has a program to check ponds for balance. To request such a check, call the local fisheries biologist (Figure 29) at the telephone number listed in Table 1. Ponds with green sunfish, crappie, bullhead catfish or common carp may need to be renovated to make fishing good again. Some ponds work on a pay-to-fish basis. The local Conservation Officer or local Chamber of Commerce can be contacted to see if they know of any such ponds in the area.

**Table 1.** Contact a District Fisheries Office about problems with ponds

District I  
Swan Creek Mgmt. Area  
21453 Harris Station Road  
Tanner, AL 35671-3308  
Phone (256) 353-2634

District IV  
1820 Glynwood Dr., Suite C  
Prattville, AL 36066-5533  
Phone (334) 358-0035

District II  
Eastaboga Fish Hatchery  
P.O. Box 158  
Eastaboga, AL 36260-0158  
Phone (256) 831-6860

District V  
30571 Five Rivers Blvd.  
Spanish Fort, AL 36527-9329  
Phone (251) 626-5153

District III  
P.O. Box 305  
Northport, AL 35476-0305  
Phone (205) 339-5716

District VI  
3520 Plaza Drive  
Enterprise, AL 36330-6468  
Phone (334) 347-9467

**2. Public Waters.** Alabama is blessed with an abundance of water. To fund the management of fishing in public waters, fishing licenses are required for anglers 16 and older. Alabama has two exceptions. Anglers fishing with a pole and line only (the pole does not have a reel) fishing from the bank in the county of residence, a fishing license is not required. For those that like to fish with a pole and line, a Wildlife Heritage License which allows bank fishing statewide. Also, Alabama residents 65 and older also do not need a license; however, a Senior License is available to them which allows the Division to collect additional federal funding.

Most of Alabama is blessed with clean water, and the fish in these waters are safe for eating. There are a few water bodies, however, where the Alabama Department of Public Health advises that fish not be consumed. The latest information may be obtained by calling 1-800-201-8208.

**a. State Public Fishing Lakes.** The Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division operates 23 State Public Fishing Lakes at 20 sites around Alabama (Figure 29). Each of these lakes is managed specifically for fishing. All lakes were originally stocked with bass, bluegill and redear sunfish; channel catfish are now stocked on an annual basis in most lakes. In addition, rainbow trout are available in the winter at Madison County Lake, and crappie are available in some lakes.

A manager maintains the facilities (Table 2), including rest rooms and boat rentals, and provides concessions. An inexpensive daily permit is required for anglers 12 and older. These areas are ideal for beginning anglers because fishing is good, advice is available, and fishing boats and gear can be rented. All lakes have a wheelchair accessible fishing pier and shoreline access for all anglers. Harvest limits for each species are posted at the lakes.

**Figure 29.** State Public Fishing Lakes and District Fisheries Offices

**Table 2.** State Public Fishing Lakes

A) Barbour County Lake  
Clayton, (334) 775-1054

B) Bibb County Lake  
Centreville, (205) 938-2124

C) Chambers County Lake  
Lafayette, (334) 864-8145

D) Clay County Lake  
Delta, (256) 488-0038

E) Coffee County Lake  
Elba, (334)

F) Crenshaw County Lake  
Laverne, (334) 335-2572

G) Dale County Lake  
Ozark, (334) 774-0588

H) Dallas County Lake  
Selma, (334) 874-8804

I) DeKalb County Lake  
Sylvania, (256) 657-1300

J) Escambia County Lake  
Brewton, (251) 809-0068

K) Fayette County Lake  
Fayette, (205) 932-6548

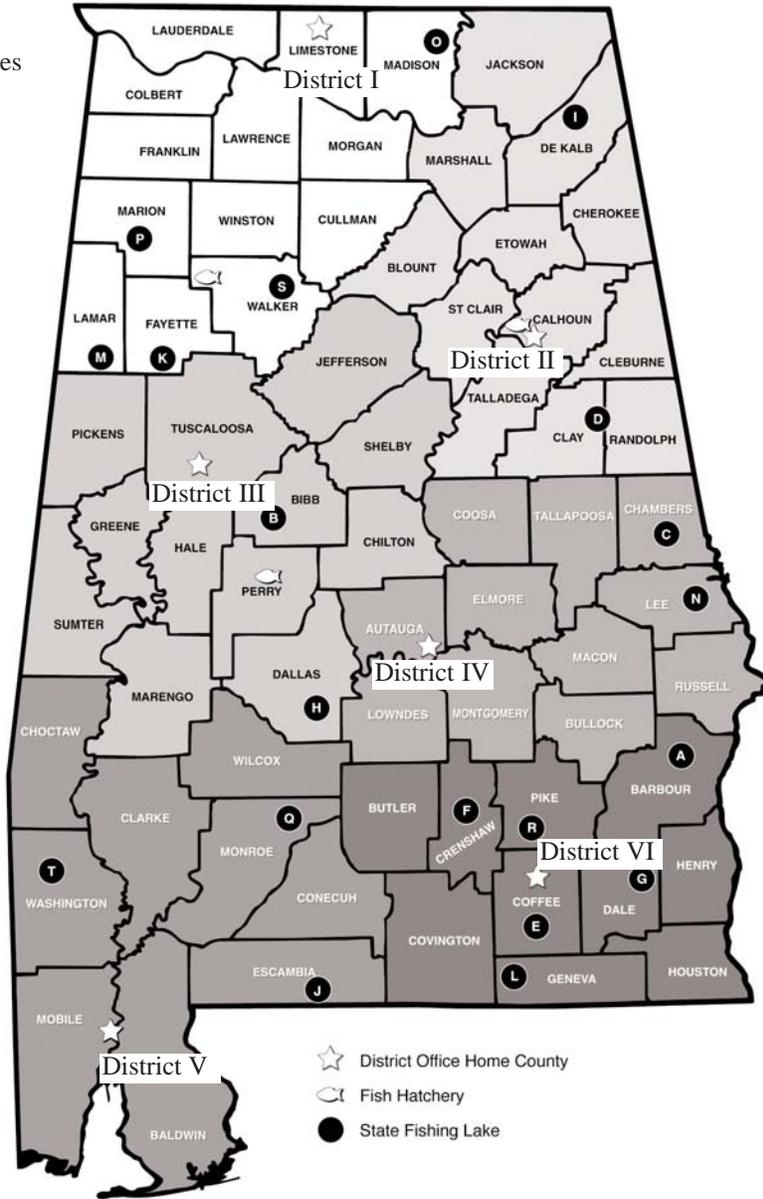
L) Geneva County Lake  
Geneva, (334) 684-9434

M) Lamar County Lake  
Sulligent, (205) 695-8640

N) Lee County Lake  
Opelika, (334) 749-1275

O) Madison County Lake  
Gurley, (256) 776-4905

P) Marion County Lake  
Guinn, (205) 921-7856



Q) Monroe County Lake  
Beatrice, (251) 789-2104

R) Pike County Lake  
Troy, (334) 484-9610

S) Walker County Lake  
Jasper, (205) 221-1801

T) Washington County Lake  
Millry, (251) 846-2512

**b. Streams and Rivers.** The fast portions of streams and rivers bring food into the deep, slower portions. Fish feed anywhere fast water meets a slow, deep area. Anglers should also try areas that fish use for resting; fish rest in areas where the current is slowed by rocks, trees or other structure.

**c. Reservoirs.** The Bass Angler Information Team (BAIT) Report published by the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division gives the results of bass tournaments during the previous year. The BAIT Report summarizes past successes for black bass fishing in a reservoir. Check the [www.OutdoorAlabama.com](http://www.OutdoorAlabama.com) for the latest BAIT Report. Fisheries biologists also study each lake on a rotating basis, so they know about the abundance and sizes of various fish species in a water body (Figure 29).

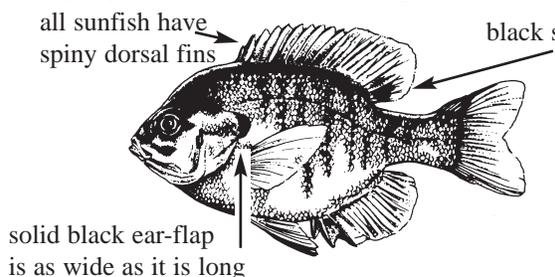
Current attracts fish in reservoirs as well as in streams. Current flow rates are higher under bridges; therefore, bank fishing off highway causeways can be good. Safety should be a top priority in these areas, including the use of life jackets.

**d. Tailwaters.** The areas below dams are called tailwaters. As fish migrate up river to spawn, they sometimes encounter a dam. Since many fish are migrating together, fish are concentrated. Fishing can be very good at specific times of the year. Caution should be used in these areas, including the use of life jackets.

## SPECIES OF FISH

Fishing is most effective when a specific species is targeted. Common sport fish are listed below with a brief description, preferred food, where they are found, when they are most likely to feed, and general information regarding their harvest. Before fishing, anglers should know rules specific to the waters they will be fishing. A fish should be measured with its mouth and tail closed. Local fishing information is available from outdoor magazines, bait and tackle stores, fishing guides, local fisheries biologists and local outdoor writers.

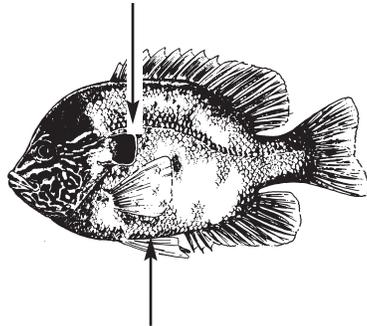
**1. Bream.** "Bream" or "brim" are terms used for both bluegill and other members of the sunfish family in the *Lepomis* genus (Figures 30-32). The world record bluegill was caught in Alabama. Present in most waters of Alabama, bream are deep bodied fish that feed primarily on insects. They are easily caught when fanning beds during spawning in late spring and all summer. Bream often feed all day. Anglers can keep up to 50 bream in most public waters (20 per day in state public fishing lakes).



**Figure 30.** Bluegill are a good choice for beginning anglers; they are very common, easily caught, and excellent table fare. Bluegill are most often caught on live bait such as worms and crickets.

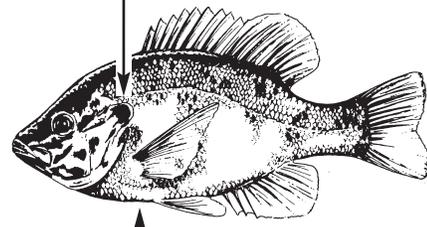
**Figure 31. Redear sunfish** are commonly known as **shellcrackers** in Alabama. Redear sunfish eat mussels and snails in addition to other invertebrates. Their habits are similar to those of bluegill. Redear sunfish and bluegill are frequently found, and caught, together. In ponds redear sunfish often grow to a slightly larger size than bluegill. Anglers prefer worms when targeting redear sunfish.

black ear-flap edged in red, orange or white



short, rounded pectoral fins

black ear-flap edged in red, orange or white



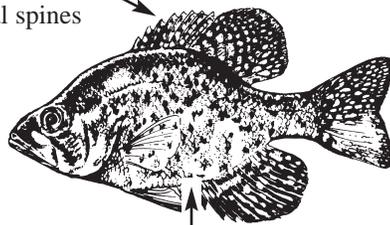
yellow or light orange breast

**Figure 32. Longear sunfish** are stream fish; they are seldom found in ponds. Longear sunfish are very colorful, particularly the males when in spawning condition. Longear sunfish are very aggressive and often easily caught.

**2. Crappie.** Also members of the sunfish family, black crappie and white crappie are less colorful (Figures 33). Young crappie feed on insects, and larger crappie feed more on small fish. Crappie populations are often cyclic, so ask local anglers for the best crappie waters. Spring is the best time to crappie fish. Crappie are most commonly caught near brush and trees, but they can be attracted to the surface with lights at night. Most of Alabama's public waters have a nine inch minimum length limit; check local regulations.

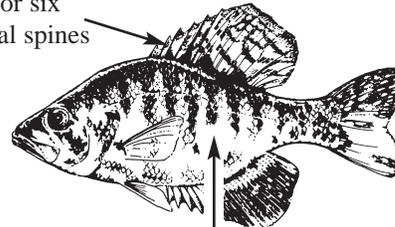
**Figure 33. Black Crappie** (left) and **White Crappie** (right)

seven or eight dorsal spines



spotted body

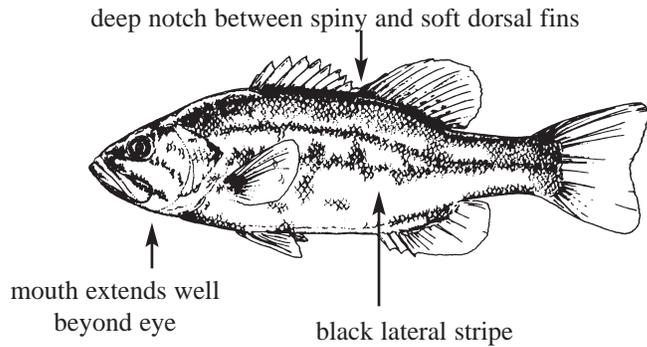
five or six dorsal spines



faint vertical bands on body

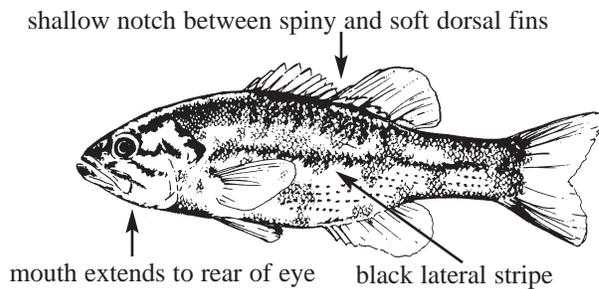
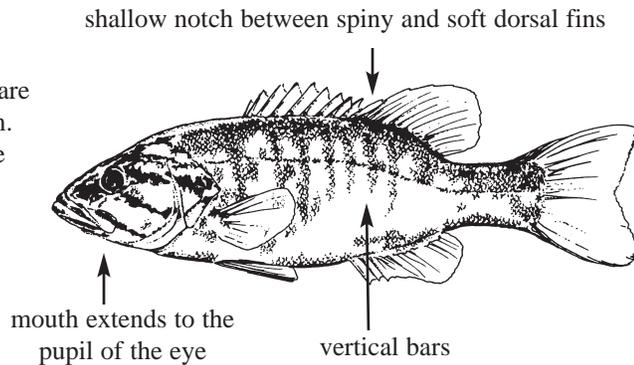
**3. Black Bass.** In the same family as bream, largemouth bass is the state freshwater fish. Also in this popular group are smallmouth bass, spotted bass (Figures 34-36), redeye bass, and shoal bass. Shoal bass are only found in a few streams that drain into the Chattahoochee River; shoal bass cannot be kept. Less deep bodied than bream, bass are mostly a shade of green or brown. These fish have relatively large mouths that they use when they ambush fish or crawfish. Bass are found in all but the smallest creeks. These fish hide and feed near obstructions and structure. Bass see well in low light conditions, so fishing is best at dawn and dusk.

Some bodies of water may protect bass of a certain body length, so check the regulations for the body of water being fished before keeping bass. In waters that have restrictions on keeping medium size bass (for example: 13" to 16"), smaller bass and larger bass may be kept. This is referred to as a slot limit. Keeping smaller bass from waters with a slot limit will help improve fishing in those waters.



**Figure 34.** Largemouth bass are common in lakes and ponds. Largemouth bass grow larger than other black bass species. Fish for them around weeds, brush, drop-offs and channels.

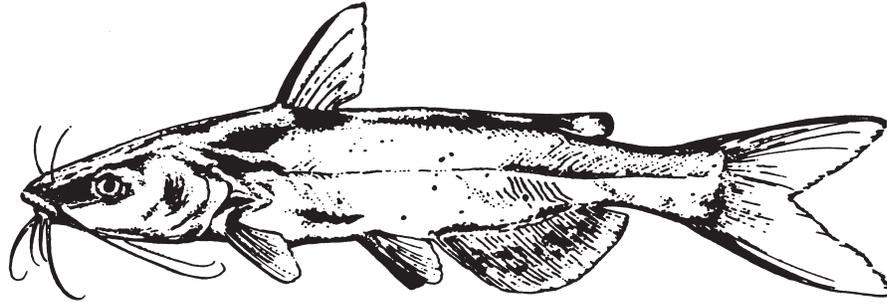
**Figure 35.** In Alabama, smallmouth bass are found mainly in the Tennessee River system. Alabama's best smallmouth fisheries are the tailwaters of Wilson and Wheeler dams.



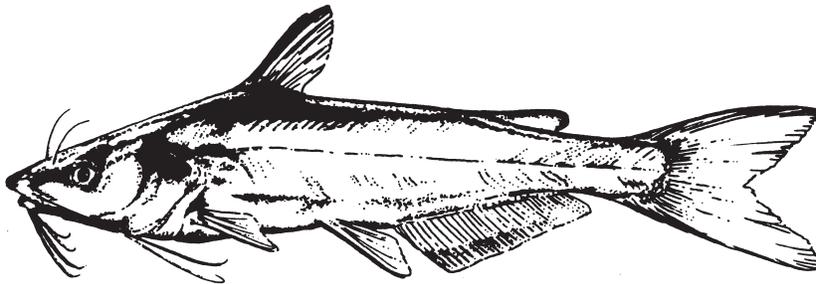
**Figure 36.** Spotted bass are common in flowing streams and deep, clear lakes. The Alabama spotted bass in the Mobile basin are a different type that grows larger than other spotted bass. Fish for them around boulders, brush, deep holes, or current. In reservoirs, fish for them with the same lures as largemouth bass, though spots may be deeper and closer to the main channel of the river.

**4. Catfish.** Catfish are easily identified by the many barbels or "whiskers" (Figures 37-40). A former world record blue catfish, 111 pounds, was caught in Alabama. Catfish feed on insects when small and switch to fish as they get large. Most moderate to large rivers have catfish, and many ponds are stocked with channel catfish. Catfish feed well after a rain or at night. May is the peak month for catfish, and a good location is below a dam. Except in state lakes, there are no legal limits for numbers of catfish; however, keep only what will be eaten. Check regulations for size limits.

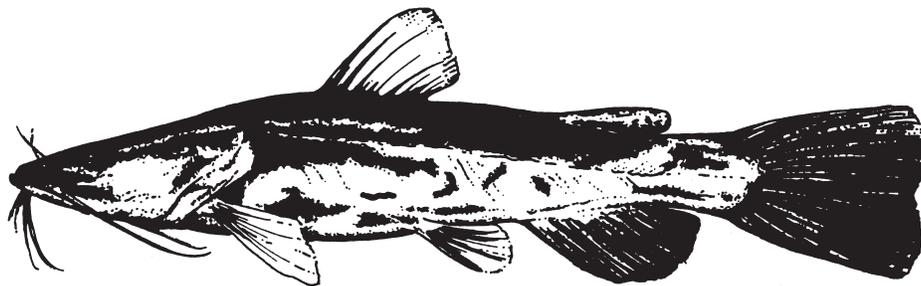
**Figure 37. Channel catfish** are common in streams, ponds and lakes. Tailwaters below dams are good places to fish for them. The channel catfish's anal fin is rounded.



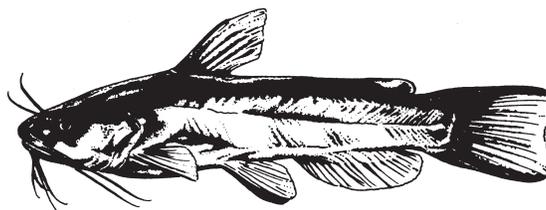
**Figure 38. Blue catfish** are Alabama's largest catfish. They are found in large rivers. Deep holes and tailwaters are good places to fish. A blue catfish's anal fin is straight.



**Figure 39. Flathead catfish** are large catfish that also prefer large streams. Live bait is preferred for flatheads, as they do not scavenge as much as other catfish. They hang around heavy woody cover and boulders.



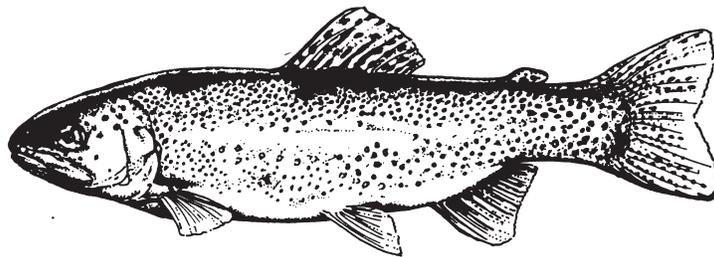
**Figure 40. Yellow, brown, and black bullhead** are three species of bullhead catfish. Bullheads seldom grow larger than 2 pounds. They are usually in lakes or sluggish streams found around heavy cover, such as weeds and brush.



**5. Rainbow Trout.** Rainbow trout do live in Alabama (Figure 41). Rainbows are regularly stocked in the Sipsey Fork below Smith Lake Dam. Trout feed most actively before dawn and at dusk. The regular fishing license requirements apply to this fishery.

Madison County Lake receives rainbow trout three times during the winter beginning the Friday after Thanksgiving. The lake is open during posted hours in November, and selected days during December and January. A five-dollar daily permit is required in addition to regular license requirements.

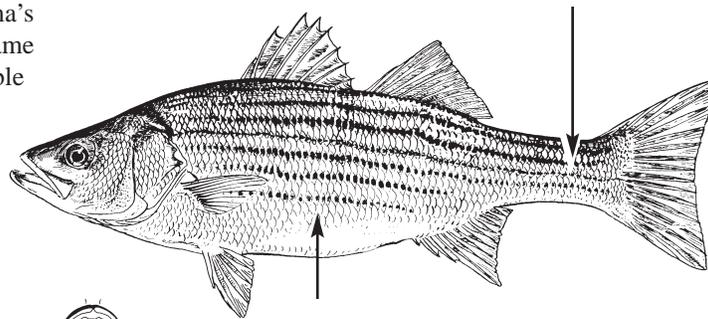
**Figure 41. Rainbow trout** need cold water to survive. They are stocked all year below Smith Lake and during the winter in Madison County Lake. They are curious; they will try a bait or lure and quickly expel it if they do not like like it.



**6. Striped Bass, White Bass and Hybrid Striped Bass.** These fish are mostly white with black lines, but they are less deep bodied than the crappie (Figures 42-44). These fish feed on insects and shad. They are caught in open water. Hybrids and striped bass rarely reproduce in our waters, so check with the local fisheries biologist to see where these fish are stocked. These fish see well in low light conditions, so fish at dawn and dusk. Regulations vary so check the rules for the water body being fished.

**Figure 42. Striped bass** are Alabama's largest (over 50 lbs.) freshwater game fish. Lewis Smith Lake has a notable striped bass fishery. These wary fish are difficult to catch under even the best of circumstances. Live shad bait is usually the preferred bait.

All stripes boldly colored and distinct; few if any broken.  
First stripe below lateral line complete to tail.

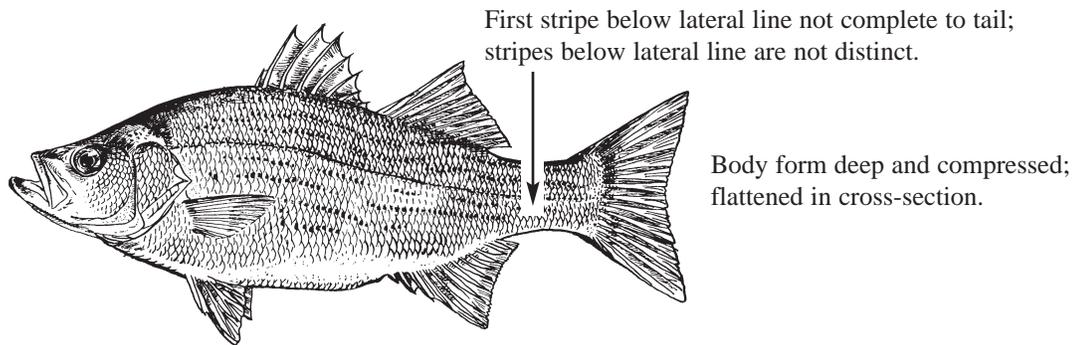


tongue with two tooth patches →



Body form relatively slender and rounded in cross-section.

**Figure 43.** White bass are common in most of Alabama's reservoirs. They do not grow to large sizes; two pounds is considered large. White bass are easily caught in early spring, (late March in south Alabama and early April in north Alabama) when white bass make a spawning run upstream.

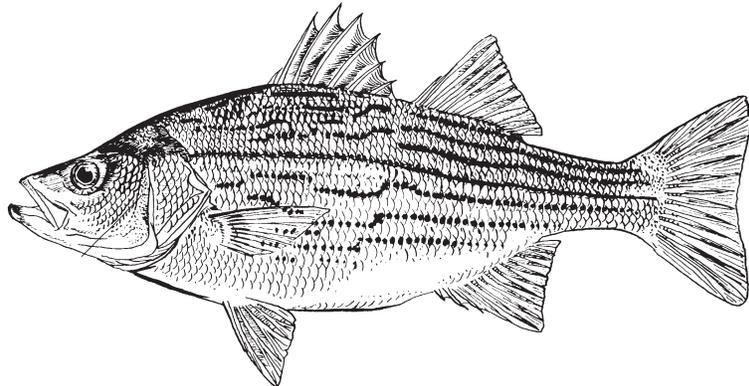


tongue with two teeth patches



**Figure 44.** Hybrid striped bass are produced at Division hatcheries by crossing striped bass females with white bass males. Hybrid bass are stocked in many of Alabama's major streams and reservoirs. They grow to large sizes.

Body form intermediate between striped bass and white bass.



tongue with two teeth patches



**7. Others.** Other species may be popular locally. Local anglers and bait and tackle dealers can provide information about species, techniques and locations.

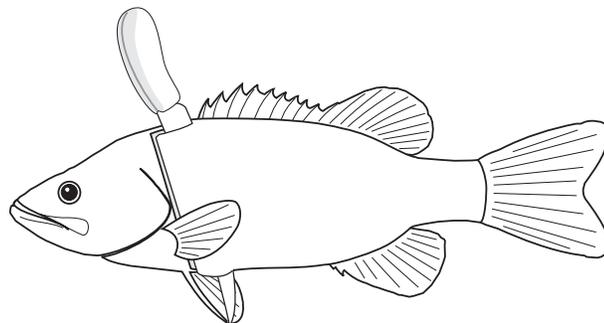
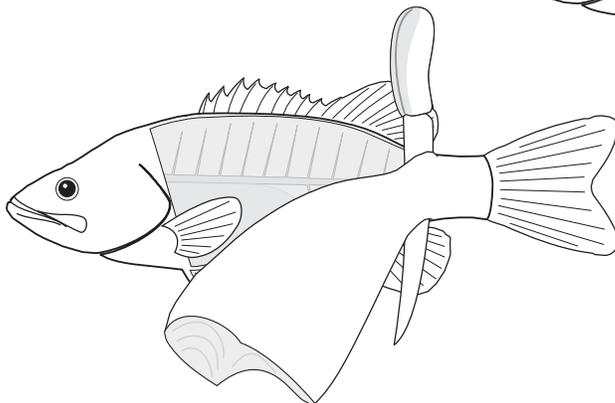
## SECTION 4: PREPARING THE CATCH

Many anglers practice catch and release, and catch and release has its place in keeping Alabama's fishing quality high. All fishing trips should include a plan for how to care for the catch. Even for anglers that intend to catch and release fish, some fish may not be able to be released alive. Care of these harvested fish is important. Harvest of fish plays a critical role in the management of some waters, like those with an over abundance of small largemouth bass (lakes having slot limits). Harvest is ethically correct when the fish caught has a low likelihood of survival when returned to the water. In fact, Alabama regulation 220-2-.13 states, "It shall be illegal for any person, firm, or corporation to kill or cripple any species of game bird, game animal or game fish without making a reasonable effort to retrieve same and include it in his daily bag or creel limit." Alabama anglers should always be prepared to keep some of their catch.

Many fish are kept in floating fish baskets or on stringers. These may work pretty well in cooler weather, but fish die quickly in warm weather. Fish are best kept fresh on ice. To keep the cooler clean and to keep fish out of the water, use a plastic bag to isolate the catch from the water.

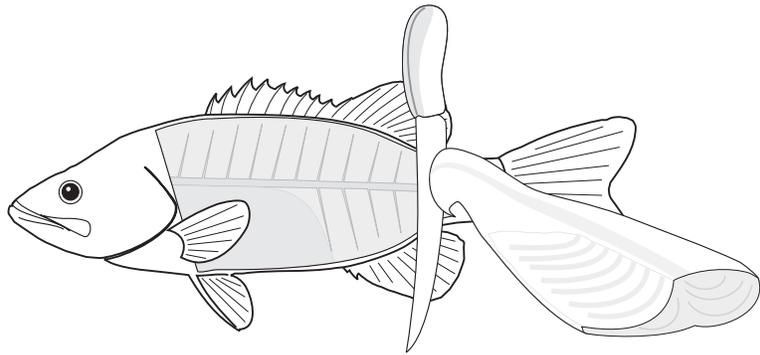
Preparation of the catch for eating is called cleaning the catch. Two different ways to clean the catch are filleting and dressing. Filleting (Figures 45-48) involves cutting the edible part of the fish away from the inedible part; no bones are left. Dressing (Figures 49-52) implies taking off parts that cannot be eaten, and most bones are left with the edible portion. Some fish have to be scaled with a knife or a spoon (Figure 49). Catfish have a skin that must be removed (Figures 53 and 54).

**Figure 45.** Filleting fish, such as bass, removes all bones from the meat. To fillet a bass, place the fish on its side on a firm, flat surface. Make a cut behind the gill plate from the top of the fish to the belly and into the flesh to the backbone. Do not cut through the backbone.

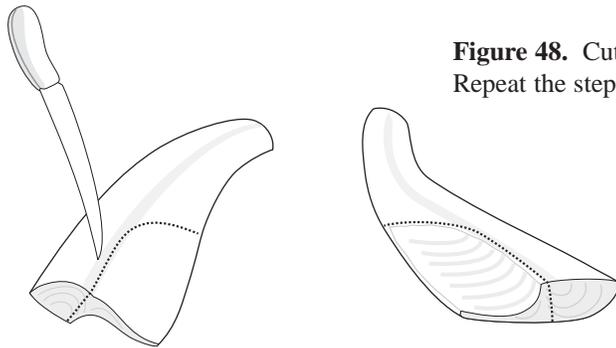


**Figure 46.** Without removing the knife turn the blade toward the tail, cut through the ribs, and continue on the tail, closely following the backbone as a guide. Do not cut through the skin completely at the tail, but leave a half to one inch intact.

**Figure 47.** Flip the fillet over, skin side down, and insert the blade between the skin and the meat. With a sawing motion, follow the inside of the skin closely with the blade and cut the meat away from the skin.

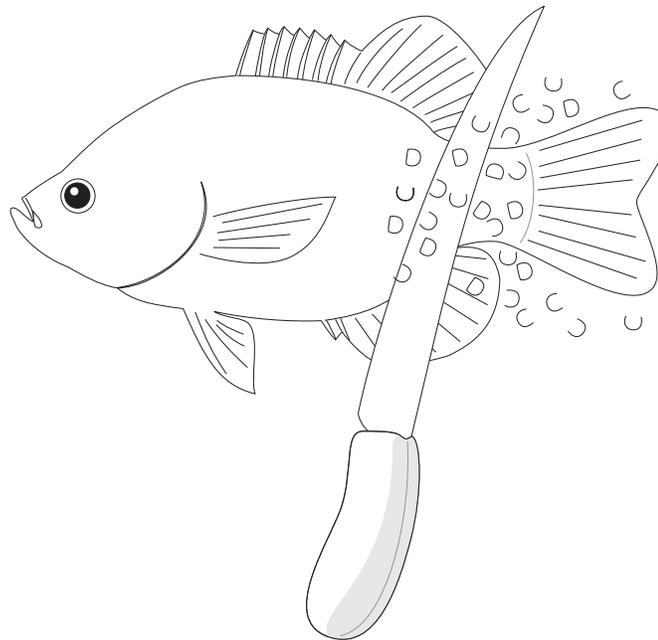


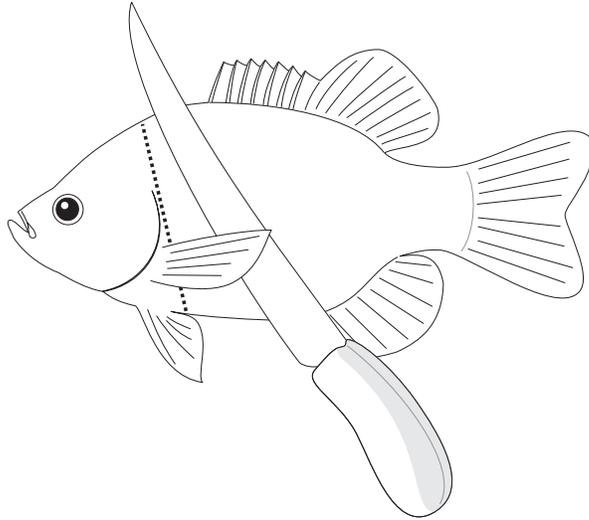
**Figure 48.** Cut the ribs away from the skinless fillet. Repeat the steps for the other side of the fish.



**Figure 49.** Small fish, such as bream (sunfish), are usually dressed. Dressing a fish leaves some of the bones in the meat, but less meat is lost during the cleaning process.

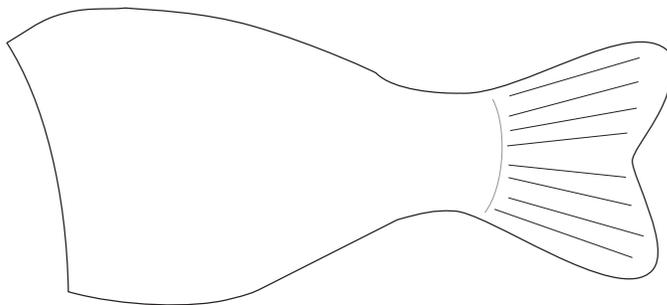
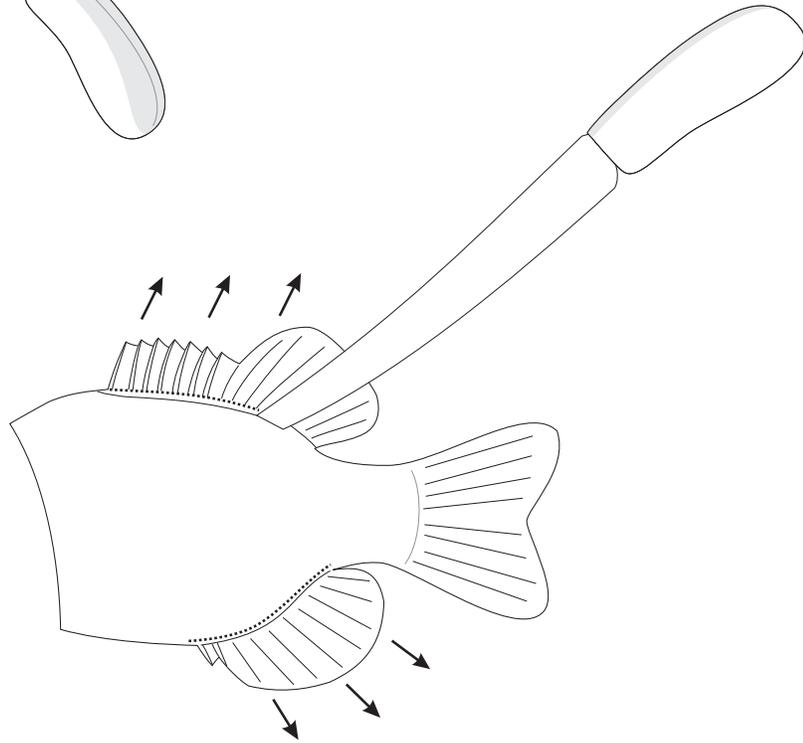
To dress a small fish, place the fish on its side on a firm, flat surface. Use one hand to hold it in place by the head. Scrape the scales from the tail toward the head by using a fish scaler, spoon, or dull knife. Remove all the scales on the body.





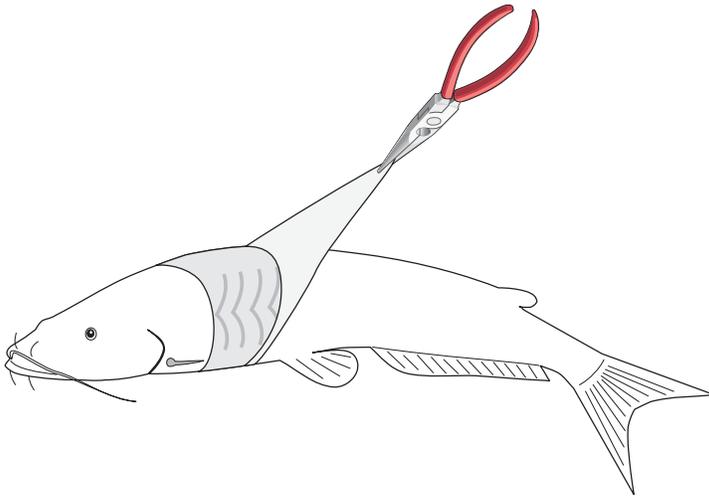
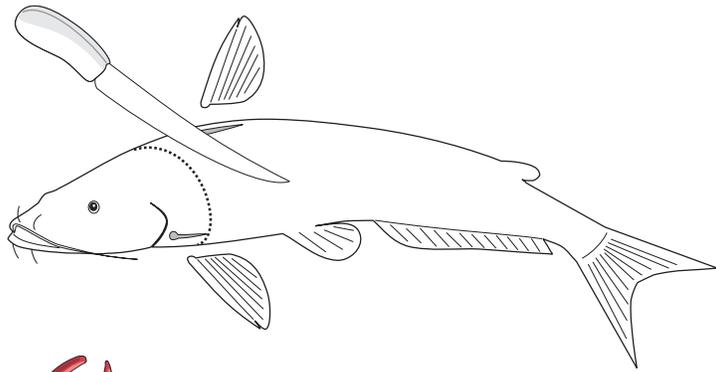
**Figure 50.** Cut off the head immediately behind the gills and remove the viscera.

**Figure 51.** Use a fillet knife to cut along both sides of the dorsal fin. Grasp the dorsal fin and pull forward to remove. Spines should pull out with fin. Repeat process to remove the anal fin and spines.



**Figure 52.** Wash in cold, clean water. The fish is now ready to freeze or cook.

**Figure 53.** Some fish, such as catfish, are usually skinned. To skin a catfish, first remove the spines to prevent puncture of a hand or finger. Cut through the skin around the head and pectoral fins. Do not penetrate the body cavity.



**Figure 54.** Using a pair of pliers, pull the skin away from the meat, working from the head toward the tail. Break or cut the head away from the backbone and remove the viscera.

Filleting is a little more difficult, but filleting yields a more visually pleasing product to most people. **In Alabama, fish may not be filleted while the angler is on a public water, unless the fish is being consumed immediately.** The total lengths of fish are needed for length limit regulations. Fish may be dressed and gutted, if the heads are left on the carcass. Be sure to dispose of the wastes properly.

Once fish are cleaned, they should be frozen immediately or prepared within three days. Frozen fish may develop freezer burn unless they are tightly wrapped or unless they are frozen in water. When freezing fish in water, just enough water should be used to cover the fish. Plastic freezer bags work well for fillets, if they can be sealed without leaking.

Fish may be cooked by baking, boiling, broiling, frying, grilling, microwaving, and poaching. Three preparation methods are also preserving methods: canning, pickling and smoking. Fish are often cooked too long. Fish should be white and flaky, not dry and brittle. Some species cook more quickly than others. Thicker pieces of fish take longer than thinner. Trial and error is the best way to learn to cook fish. The Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division offers a game preparation class.

## GLOSSARY

- bait** - something used to attract fish to bite; the terms bait and lure may be used interchangeably, but bait often refers to something natural or live.
- bite** - when a fish takes or tries to take a bait (or lure).
- black bass** - a largemouth bass, redeye bass, shoal bass, smallmouth bass or spotted bass.
- bobber** - float.
- casting** - the skill of propelling a lure from the angler to the water.
- cleaning** - preparing the catch for eating.
- conservation** - the wise use of natural resources.
- cork** - float.
- creel limit** - the number of fish an angler can keep in a day.
- dressed** - fish prepared for eating with the backbone and ribs attached.
- dropper** - a separate line tied onto the main line near the hook. It is used to attach a weight to a separate line or to fish two hooks.
- fillet** - cleaning a fish by cutting the edible portion from the rest of the fish.
- fishery** - a situation where anglers are trying to catch a species of fish.
- fishing line** - special flexible fiber that connects the fishing reel to the hook.
- float** - used to keep baits off the bottom and to assist with detecting a bite.
- land** - bringing the fish to the land or to a net for capture.
- lunker** - a large specimen of a species of fish.
- lure** - something used to attract fish to bite. The terms bait and lure may be used interchangeably, but lure most often refers to something man-made used to entice fish to bite.
- monofilament** - fishing line that is one piece; opposite of multifilament.
- multifilament** - fishing line that is several strands woven together; opposite of monofilament.
- playing** - the time from setting the hook until the fish is landed or gets away.
- reel** - a device that holds and retrieves fishing line.
- renovate** - with respect to ponds, getting rid of the fish present and starting anew.
- retrieving** - the act of bringing a bait or lure back to the angler.
- rigging** - how the bait is hooked, and where the hook, snap or swivel, weight and float are placed.
- rod** - a pole that is used to cast a lure or bait.
- selective harvest** - keeping fish that will help the fish population reach its maximum potential; sometimes a fish population is helped when an individual fish is kept and sometimes the fish population is helped when the fish is released. On lakes with slot limits, keep fish smaller than the lower limit.
- setting the hook** - pulling the rod up sharply so that the hook will stick in the fish's mouth.
- sinker** - something used to help cast or help sink the bait or lure; a weight.
- snap** - a small metal device tied onto fishing line and used to quickly attach lures to the line.
- snap-swivel** - a snap with a swivel connected to it to keep line from twisting.
- strike** - when a fish takes or tries to take a lure (or bait).

**structure** - any change in an area that causes fish to be concentrated (change of depth, tree, rock, etc.).

**swivel** - allows the lure or bait to twist but reduces the twist of the fishing line; also used to keep weights from sliding near the bait or lure.

**tailwater** - area below a dam.

**terminal tackle** - tackle between the fish and the rod.

**weight** - something used to help cast or help sink the bait or lure; sinker.



**RESORT SPORT FISHERY  
OPERATION**

