

Natural Baits and How To Find Them

ANY amateurs will rely upon their boatman to supply them with all the bait they may require for a day's fishing, and will not usually be disappointed; but those who take the trouble to hunt for bait themselves will be independent of everybody, and will also find that the pursuit is an interesting and profitable one, almost as entertaining as the principal methods of fishing. Many curious specimens of the marine world are brought to view whilst lifting up large stones or investigating the crevices of rocks, which, by the casual observer, would be entirely disregarded. To the lover of natural history the search after bait of various kinds may therefore be aptly described as a pleasure in itself. It is most important that all bait should be perfectly fresh, except in a few rare instances, in which it is sometimes preferred stale. Fish that has been preserved for some time in ice and then finds its way to the fishmonger's stall should be avoided if possible, as its flavor and attractiveness have to a large extent departed. Pilchard. Of all fish utilized for bait this is the Pilchard.

Of all fish utilized for bait this is the most esteemed, owing to its oily and savory nature. In many Cornish towns Pilchards are regularly obtainable during the summer months, and are sold at an average of about five a penny, occasionally being considerably cheaper. Sometimes they are so plentiful that they are used for manuring the land. These fish have (the disadvantage of being tender, and it is therefore rather difficult to keep the pieces on the hooks. It is usual to sprinkle rough salt plentifully among them, and even with this precaution they are generally soft and worthless by the end of the day. There is scarcely a sea-fish that will not greedily devour a morsel of this savory bait, and for all bottom-feeders it is invaluable. The principal supply of Pilchards is maintained by drift-boats at Penzance, Fal-mouth, and other places, which depart in the evening and return on the following day. The salted Pilchard, or "Fair Maid," as it is locally termed, is occasionally substituted for the fresh article.

Herring.

In localities where Pilchards are unprocurable, which is generally the case apart from Cornwall, this fish is largely used. It resembles the former closely in appearance, but is deficient as regards flavor, yet is very good bait for all kinds of fish. Like the Pilchard, its flesh is soft, and care must be taken in placing it on the hook. When suspended by the back fin the Pilchard remains in a horizontal position; whereas the Herring is "down by the head," to use a nautical expression, a simple experiment by which the difference between them may be distinguished.

Long-nose, Gar-pipe, or Mackerel.

These fish, also called Snipe-Needle, from their long bill and sharp teeth, are often cut up into bait, which is excellent for most kinds of fish, being especially attractive from its peculiar smell. In form this fish is very slender and its shape has some resemblance to that of a large Sand-eel, which enables it to pursue its prey with great rapidity. A fine specimen will often measure 2ft. or more in length. These fish usually swim near the surface, frequenting the same localities as Mackerel. Unlike most kinds of fish, the backbone is green, and the flesh also has a tinge of the same color.

Mackerel.

Being tougher than either Pilchard or Herring, this fish forms admirable bait, and at most places it is procurable all through the summer. If the pieces, when cut, are found to be too thick, remove with a knife a little of the flesh on the lower side. The Mackerel, after being caught, deteriorates very rapidly in flavor, and the fresher it is used, the better. If possible, it should be captured on the same day as it is required for bait, which, by means of the methods hereafter described, can usually be affected. In cutting up fish it is sometimes advisable to leave the bone so as to afford a firmer

hold for the hook.

Sprats.

These fish, which are a distinct species, though often wrongly called young Herrings, are excellent bait for Whiting, Pollack, and other fish. They may be used whole or cut up into pieces, according to the size of bait required. At Teignmouth, Torquay, and other places they are taken by nets in large quantities, being often utilised instead of Sardines, for which they make a good substitute. Preserved Sprats are sometimes recommended, and are sold in bottles by tackle-makers.

The following is a useful preparation for preserving baits :

Formalin, 2 fluid oz. ; water, 20 fluid oz. ; glycerine, 5 fluid oz. If the baits are kept for some time, the quantity of formalin should be reduced to joz. or ioz., otherwise it is apt to harden them

too much to be conveniently used. Baits may be kept for a considerable period in the above solution, and when difficult to procure, a supply of them would be ensured.

Chads.

For ground-fishing Chad is often cut up into bait, and is not to be despised when the usual supply is difficult to obtain or is liable to run short. For large Pollack, Congers, Hake, &c., a whole Chad forms an excellent bait after removing the head and backbone. They are also sometimes used alive.

Sand-eels and Launce.

These silvery and delicate little fish are greatly in request for drift-lining and other methods. They inhabit sandy beaches all round the coasts, entering the sand during the receding tide and remaining concealed until the bar is again covered. Spring tides are the best to search for them, and a soft, sandy beach, without much shingle, is a likely locality. In the daytime they can be obtained by digging in the sand with a fork or a shovel, throwing the sand quickly on to the dry surface. When a Launce is unearthed it must be grasped at once, and transferred to a basket or a bucket. Always take a little sand together with the fish, otherwise it is extremely liable to slip through the ringers. Try near the edge of the water or in patches of sand amongst the rocks. Another plan commonly practiced is by means of a launching-hook. This instrument is made of iron, curved slightly at the point and fitted into a wooden handle. The iron projects 1 in. From the handle, and is 1 in. wide at the base, tapering towards the hook, the inside edge of which is rather blunt. When a fish is felt, it is raised by means of the hook, grasped quickly in the hand, and deposited in the basket. The dotted lines show the usual method of working the hook, and it is always directed towards the person. A moonlight night is the best time for Launching when the tide is low, about 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. On dark nights a light must be carried. By this method I have sometimes taken a basketful of Launce in a short space of time, and it is most exciting sport. Any not required for bait should be fried and eaten, as they form a delicious article of food when in roe, but are not so good in winter. There are two species, called the Greater and the Lesser Sand-eel respectively. Calm weather is the best for Launching, and the likeliest spots are where the sand is soft. The Lesser Weever is a small silvery fish that often abounds in beaches frequented by Launce. It has a flat head, armed with two spines with which it can inflict a rather severe sting, and care must be taken not to grasp it hastily. A much more dangerous creature is the Greater Weever, which bears on its head an evil-looking black sting, and its sides are marked with green or blue stripes. Fishermen assert that a wound from this fish will cause the arm to swell as far as the shoulder, and, possibly, blood-poisoning might ensue. They are said to be excellent as food, and I have occasionally taken them when whiffing over sand. If the sand is suddenly stamped upon or beaten with a spade, Launce will occasionally jump out of it, and they are often found dead upon the surface. A rake having several prongs is also used for taking these fish. When required alive, they should be caught in a Sand-eel seine made expressly for the purpose. In many instances Smelts may be substituted for Launce, especially in baiting long-lines.

Cuttie.

Visitors to a beach will be familiar with a white, oval-shaped object often seen lying amongst the seaweed, especially after a gale. This is the back-bone, or rather; shell, of the Cuttle-fish, the soft part being often used for removing ink-stains from the fingers or as tooth-powder when finely pounded. It is also given to cage-birds and is sold in shops for that purpose. A much commoner variety, however, is the Squid or Pen-and-ink fish, which forms excellent bait for ground-fish, such as Congers, Bass, and many others, and it is often known as "Cuddle" by the fishermen. Like the larger Cuttle, it ejects an inky fluid when alarmed which darkens the water and enables it to escape from its enemies. Trawlers catch a great number of Cuttle, from whom they can often be obtained. The best time for taking Cuttle is in the evening or early morning, and they are found at no great distance from the shore. Attach a piece of fresh fish, such as Long-nose, Pilchard, or Mackerel, to the end of a line and, having lowered it to the bottom, draw it gradually to the surface. As soon as a Squid has seized the bait it must be raised very gently, and gaffed before it releases its hold. The fish must be instantly drawn under water by the gaff until it has discharged its ink, otherwise it will squirt it all over the fisherman, and damage his clothing. Meanwhile the boat should be anchored or allowed to drift slowly. Squid are also taken with a "jigger," which consists of a piece of lead having a number of pins soldered to the lower part in a circle, and then bent upwards. Near piers Squid often assemble in shoals, attracted by the angler's baits, and effectually drive every other fish away for a time. In Cornwall, September or October are the best months for catching Squid.

Octopus.

The Octopus, or Poulpe, is a dreaded creature possessing a powerful beak, with which it tears its prey to pieces after it has captured its victim. It occasionally attains an enormous size, and has been known to attack boats. In Guernsey, the fishermen wade out at extreme springs, and poke about amongst the rocks with a hook or a gaff, using the Octopus when captured as a bait for Conger. These creatures are much disliked by the crabbers, as they enter the store-pots by squeezing between the bars, and when the fisherman comes to haul his pot, he finds, instead of Crabs and Lobsters, nothing but shells left, behind. In Southern Italy, the Octopus is largely used as an article of food, the long tentacles being cut transversely, and, when served at table, have the appearance of rings. They are lured in the daytime with a piece of red flannel tied to the end of a bamboo, and are speared with a trident upon their attempting to grasp it. An iron cradle, containing a fire of resinous wood, is placed in the bow of the boat at night-time to attract the Octopus to its destruction. Lately, however, this ancient and picturesque custom has been entirely superseded by acetylene gas, which sheds a much stronger light upon the water. Enormous catches are thus made, and this method might well be adopted by fishermen in the West of England as a means of lessening their numbers.

Mussels.

These shell-fish form the universal bait for Cod, Haddock, Whiting, Bream, Pout, and many other fish, found clinging in bunches to rocks or piers. Method of Opening a Mussel, showing how blade of knife should be inserted, but do not attempt any leverage until the tough gristle holding the thin edges together has been severed. For this operation a strong clasp-knife, or, better still, a table-knife the blade of which has been worn down to a short stump, is useful. When opened, pass the knife beneath the two halves, and collect the fish into one shell. To bait the hook, pass it first through the narrow whitish gristle, bring it between the soft parts, and finally insert the point in the small leathery tongue. The latter is properly the foot of the Mussel, though it resembles a tongue in shape. Some fishermen adopt exactly the reverse of the above method in baiting the hook. A little practice is required to collect this soft mass, and place it upon the hook so that it will not be dissipated at the first bite. Mussels should be opened before starting to fish, and placed upon a piece of board to harden. To render them tougher hot water is sometimes poured on them; or they may be slightly boiled. It is dangerous to eat Mussels which grow near copper, or in proximity to drains, persons having been poisoned by indulging too freely. In Italy these shell-fish attain a large size, measuring sometimes 1ft. length. A Rag-worm is

occasionally found amongst a bunch of Mussels. To preserve these shell-fish alive they should be placed in a bag of netting, and lowered overboard by a line.

Cockles

These are also used largely for bait, being extremely plentiful in some places, but are more difficult to keep on the hook.

Rag-worms or Mud-worms.

These red and green worms, resembling centipedes, are most valuable bait, and all sea-fish will devour them greedily. In the latter case they are often difficult to reach, as they live close to the rock, and retreat at once into some crevice upon being disturbed. They are finer and tougher, however, than those found in mud. By raising large stones near the edge of the sea at low tide, a supply of fine rag-worms may often be obtained. At Torquay, they are obtained from peat or rotten wood, of which the beach largely consists; whilst at Plymouth and Falmouth a supply can always be procured. For a few pence a boy will generally be only too willing to dig a quantity of the worms, which should be kept in a shallow wooden box, with the seams pitched. A little sea-water should be added, and the box tilted so that the worms can crawl out of the water if they wish. Change the water every day, and discard any which are dead or injured. A few may be easily carried in a tin box or a can, a little wet seaweed being placed among the worms to keep them alive.

White Sand -worm.

This is not unlike the rag-worm, and is obtained by digging in sandy beaches, especially near rocks. I have used it successfully for Pollack, Wrasse, and other fish from pier-heads.

The Varm, or Sea Tape-worm.

In appearance this resembles a large rag-worm, and is said to be excellent bait for Bream, Whiting, very local in its distribution, it is not generally used, and appears to be unknown on the South- West coast.

Lug -worms.

On most beaches, composed of sand, numbers of the spiral casts or "coils" thrown up by these worms may be noticed. They form an excellent bait for many fish — Cod, Whiting, Plaice, and all bottom-feeders being especially fond of them. Commence to dig at a little distance from the cast, forming a kind of trench. Then with a rapid movement drive the spade beneath the place where you suppose the worm is concealed, throwing the sand out quickly. These worms are brown or green in color, and often reach 1 ft. in length, being as thick as one's finger. When handled they exude a yellow fluid, which is apt to stain the hands. Under stones among rocks they are often found in large numbers. Do not break this worm, but pass the hook two or three times through it. At many seaside places a supply of Lug-worms is always kept by the fishermen for the use of visitors, and the usual price is per 100. By placing them in a shallow box, filled with sand, they may be preserved alive for a day or so.

Prawns and Shrimps.

These are often used for rod-fishing, and a live Prawn is excellent bait for Pollack. Flat-fish are also partial to Prawns, and when baited alive, the hook should be passed once through the tail. They should be carried in a bait-can, partly filled with sea-water, the interior of which is removable, and constructed of perforated zinc. These bait-cans can be procured from any good tackle-maker. Unboiled Prawns and Shrimps are better than those which have been cooked. Spider Crab.

This is a common species of Crab taken by fishermen in their nets and crab-pots. In shape it has some resemblance to a spider, and the claws are small and narrow. By grasping the legs, and wrenching off the lower part, some good bait is discovered, the red part in the head being most esteemed. Though not generally known, the legs and claws of this Crab form an excellent article of food when boiled, and in Guernsey the Spider Crab is by fishermen and others more esteemed than the other species. Great quantities of these crabs are taken in trammels, and the shell on the back is so sharp and rough that it quickly cuts the twine, sometimes damaging the nets almost beyond repair. They are generally thrown away or used as manure for the gardens. At Porthallow, a small village near the Manacles, the fishermen were reported to have landed quite 1,000 of these crabs in one day, one man alone taking 200 in his nets. Notwithstanding the numbers captured, they appear to be increasing off this coast.

Soft Crab.

This is an excellent bait for Bass, Flounders, and other fish. Soft Crabs are common green Crabs which have cast their shell, and are in the best condition for bait just before this operation. By raising large stones amongst seaweed they may generally be obtained, or by lowering a dip-net, baited with any kind of fish. They are taken in quantities by the round prawn-nets.

Hermit Crab.

This strange creature, having no proper dwelling-place, lives in a vacated shell, and usually occupies that of the Whelk. It resembles a miniature Cray-fish or a Lobster, but the tail part inside the shell is soft. This portion makes a good bait for Cod, Haddock, and other fish. They are locally known as " Farmers " or Soldier-Crabs. A large rag-worm sometimes inhabits the same shell as this curious tenant.

Earthworms

Step1

Scout for an earthworm breeding colony. Understand that earthworms congregate in large numbers in specific locations where they breed. During rainstorms, worms come to the surface to breathe, and can be readily located and collected.

Step2

Look for large numbers of worms on the surface during a rainstorm. Search open grassy areas of public parks or golf courses, schoolyards, athletic fields and parking lots. Worm breeding colonies are common under large isolated trees.

Step3

Collect as many earthworms as you can find, in a cooler or a bucket with a lid. Store the worms in plastic containers with perforated tops in topsoil or worm bedding, in the refrigerator or in a cool part of the house.