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## Chapter **1**

# Getting Hooked on Fishing

**N**early 50 million anglers walk among us in the United States, and while some are more dedicated than others to the hobby, all of them are gaining something positive from the experience. Fishing offers a chance to be near family and friends — a time to bond without the distraction of screens. Or it can be a time to be alone. To fish, you must consider the world of your quarry, the water, and that means imagining a world far different from your own. Catching fish is exciting. Sometimes it enables you to procure and prepare your own food. Sometimes it affords you the thrill of the hunt with the opportunity to return your catch to the water. Importantly, by purchasing fishing licenses and supplies, you can help fund your local conservation efforts.

Because I've been fishing for almost my entire life, and have been fascinated by fish from my first memories (there's a photo of me wearing nothing but a diaper, holding a big largemouth bass my dad had brought home), people often ask me why I'm so captivated by fishing. Even though I think about fish every single day, the answer is a little complicated.

I think I fish for the same reasons so many others do: It's a chance to connect with nature, to get outside, to be a small part of something bigger than my own

schedule or routine for a while. I fish because I like hanging out in the places where fish live – being near water calms me. Fish don't always behave the way I think they should, or follow my plans for them. The weather doesn't either. I like that unpredictability because it forces me to react, to strategize, to ponder. I like angling because I like spending time with fellow anglers. I crave the excitement fishing offers. When I have a disappointing fishing trip (and what they say is true — there is no bad day fishing), I can't wait to go again. When I have a great fishing trip, I can't wait to go again.

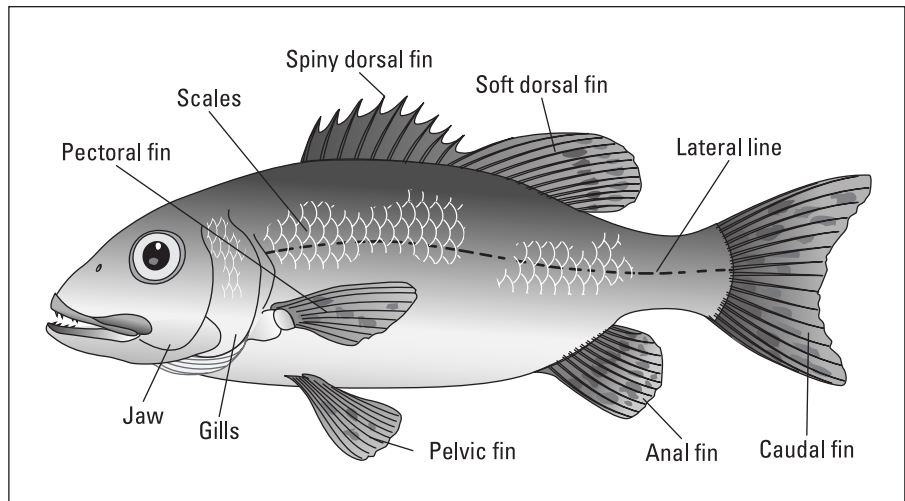
I hope you can find something in fishing that sustains you, too. In this chapter, I give you an overview of this sport I love, from the motivation to get out there to an idea of where you should go to give it a try. Because there's some gear involved, as well as skill and technique, I introduce you to these topics as well, so that you're prepared to fish successfully.

## Why Fish?

Fish are alive, and although some studies suggest that they do not feel pain, at least not in a capacity anywhere near the way I do, they do not jump at the chance to be caught. Using your gear and more importantly your mind, you must outmaneuver the fish. This presents an interesting, constantly shifting challenge.

Obviously, fish live in an environment much different from ours. Understand, though, that they're well-suited to that environment. With a few exceptions, they're cold-blooded and possess a good sense of smell. They live in the water (you already knew that), have backbones, and pull oxygen from the water through gills. They are shaped to move efficiently through water (many look like torpedoes), using fins to navigate, and most are covered with scales. All fish are also covered with a slime-like mucus that protects them from disease and injury. (This is why you should only handle fish with wet hands — dry hands or a towel will remove this valuable slimecoat.) Fish don't have external ears, but they do have internal ones and are highly sensitive to noise like the thudding of a boat hull. Fish possess a lateral line, running from tail to head, that they use to detect low-frequency vibrations. They use this organ to locate prey and evade predators, while also gathering information about water temperature and current. So fish might not share many characteristics with humans, but they're a more than able opponent when it comes to people trying to outsmart them. They know their surroundings as well as you know your living room. Figure 1-1 shows a typical fish, with some of the traits described here.

**FIGURE 1-1:**  
Meet your  
average fish.



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Every angler has a particular reason for pursuing the sport, and after a few trips out to the water you're likely to figure out what it is you appreciate and enjoy about it, too. Whether you are after excitement, peace and quiet, or a healthy food source, fishing has something for everyone.

## For the outdoors

You probably already know this, but fishing is an outdoor activity. So the first reason to take up fishing is that it requires you to go outside. Some of us think that there's something soul-supporting about being outdoors, especially in those places that are inherently wild and unmarked by humans.

## For the enjoyment

Take up fishing because you need some time spent quietly by yourself. Or take up fishing because you want to spend quality time with your family or friends. Two anglers fishing in a boat, or wading their way quietly upstream, won't be distracted by scrolling news programs, honking cars, or instant messages. Cell-phones can be turned off, and social media can be ignored for a while. Whether alone or in a small group, fishing quiets the mind.

This is not to suggest that all fishing is quiet! When a monster fish thrashes near the boat, or goes airborne trying to throw the hook, the adrenaline rush the angler feels rivals that of a linebacker after a crushing tackle or a tennis player after serving an ace. It's a physical sensation. (See Chapter 18 to find out how to land that behemoth bass.)

What fishing provides me might be one thing. You too will find a way to make fishing work for you. If you crave excitement, fish in a way that offers it. If you seek peaceful, introspective time, fishing can give you that, as well. And no one will make you commit to one kind of fishing all the time. Your fishing can evolve as you do.

## For the table

Our ancestors fished for food, and you can, too. Fish are great tasting and good for you, as well. Chapters 20 and 21 tell you how to prepare fish for the table, as I even offer you some proven recipes, allowing you to make wonderful meals of your fresh-caught fish.

Many people today care about where their food comes from, and we like the idea of eating locally grown food. Well, when it comes to sustainability, fishing is tough to beat. Fish are a renewable resource. Selective harvest will ensure that we all have plenty of high-quality food available forever, possibly from a source close to your home. As long as the water quality of your fishing spot remains good, a properly prepared fish can add a healthy option to your menu.

## Where Should You Fish?

Chapter 3 discusses this issue in detail, but the best advice I can give you is to fish wherever you can. (Later, I also advise you to fish whenever you can.) Big fish come from both large and small waters. Beautiful places to fish can be found locally. Slip down into a streambed and you might be surprised at what you find. Many subdivision ponds are stocked, and some of them face very little fishing pressure. Salt-water inlets and tidal rivers attract wonderfully large (and tasty) fish at times, too.

Part of the joy and challenge of fishing lies in finding your favorite spots. Fish move seasonally, especially in rivers and oceans, so catching a particular species of fish all year long will often involve traveling to follow their migrations. (This also means that a new quarry might suddenly arrive!) You'll also learn to go to different locales to catch different kinds of fish during certain times of the year.

## Fishing freshwater

Not all freshwater fishing is the same, and almost every state offers a wide range of fishing possibilities. Michigan, for example, offers everything from small stream fishing for rainbow trout to Great Lakes fishing for king salmon. Even states far from giant bodies of water boast rivers of varying sizes and both natural

and manmade lakes. Your gear, and your approach, will vary quite a bit from place to place, but this too is part of the fun of fishing.

Much freshwater fishing depends on current: You're fishing in either moving or calm water. And there are a lot of fish — and a lot of techniques to fish for them — in both kinds of water. Wherever you live, you are close to good freshwater fishing. Chapter 3 will help you learn how to find it.

## Fishing saltwater

Saltwater fishing possibilities might not always be local since we don't all live near a coast. When you find saltwater, you find an almost limitless variety of fish. Many of the techniques used in freshwater carry over to saltwater; however, the game changes a bit when you're dealing with the fast, strong fish of the oceans.

For this reason, saltwater fishing can be intimidating. But if you limit your initial forays into saltwater fishing to inshore waters — places like estuaries, beaches, bays, and marshes — you'll find that even beginners can find plenty of exciting action.

# What Are You Fishing For?

I once caught a flathead catfish that measured more than 49 inches long from a river that you can wade across in spots. This led my wife to remark, “Why did I ever dip my toes in there?!”

So what are you fishing for? Both salt- and freshwater bodies of water boast a vast range of species, many of which can be taken on rod and reel. Maybe you prefer to catch mostly bluegill and crappie, often taking a mess of fish home to fry. Or maybe you've found great sport by wading flats of big lakes, taking carp on a fly rod.



REMEMBER

Your favorite species might change over time, and you can always adjust your gear and tactics to specialize. You might switch seasonally, too. Some fish stop biting when the water reaches 50 degrees in the fall, whereas others bite all winter long. When you get into fishing, I promise you're not going to exhaust the possibilities.

## Common freshwater catches

Just as there are many different kinds of habitat for freshwater fish, there are many different kinds of fish populating those habitats. Trout require cooler water. Largemouth bass do well in everything from farm ponds to big reservoirs, and anglers pursue them wherever they swim.

Big rivers hide big fish like catfish, striped bass, and carp, as well as smallmouth bass and white bass. Natural and manmade lakes can be home to any kind of freshwater fish, including walleye, northern pike, and muskies. Bluegill and other panfish like crappies can be found everywhere, as well, from the largest river to retention ponds in subdivisions. Freshwater fish represent a diverse collection of gamefish, and each one of them brings something different to the angler.

For complete coverage of freshwater fish, turn to Chapter 4.

## Common saltwater catches

The sky's the limit, or in the case of saltwater fishing, the sea's the limit. Even fishing inshore waters, anglers can catch everything from tarpon to flounder. Anglers fishing the northeast coast can expect flounder and cod to congregate in bays and river mouths. Striped bass and bluefish fall for lures from surfcasters, as will weakfish and seatrout.

Farther south, red drum (redfish), tarpon, and bonefish excite anglers as they cruise the shallow flats of bays. These fish can be taken on traditional gear or fly-fishing tackle. Snook fight like the saltwater version of the largemouth bass, and sharks cruise off many coasts. With saltwater fishing, you don't really know what you're going to catch next, which is part of its great allure.

For the lowdown on the range of saltwater fish available to you, check out Chapter 5.

## What Do You Need to Fish?

Commercial fishermen — those fishing to gather fish or shellfish for food — often use devices like nets, traps, or long lines with multiple hooks to take fish. This book deals with sportfishing, which is fishing with a rod and reel. So, just as you need a few clubs to golf, you need a rod and reel to fish in the traditional sport-fishing manner.

Beyond the rod and reel, your needs are few. You need a hook to snare the fish's mouth, and a line to get that hook from the rod to the water. You can keep your fishing simple. But, just as a golfer probably acquires more than a couple of clubs, anglers tend to gather the equipment that makes the pursuit of their favorite fish more successful and pleasurable.

The important thing to remember is that fishing does not have to be an expensive hobby. Unlike golf, you don't always have to pay to fish in this country (after you have the required license). However, if you are someone who likes to fish with nice equipment and the latest technology, well, all that awaits you, too. Anglers with deep pockets and a matching desire can fish from large, spacious boats boasting cutting-edge electronics and an arsenal of rods and reels.

One of your first choices when you begin fishing is to decide what kind of gear you intend to use. The four basic kinds are spincast, spinning, baitcasting, and flycasting. Figure 1-2 shows the four kinds of rods and reels, and Chapter 7 covers them in much more detail.



**FIGURE 1-2:**  
Spincast (a),  
spinning (b),  
baitcast (c), and  
flycasting  
(d) gear.

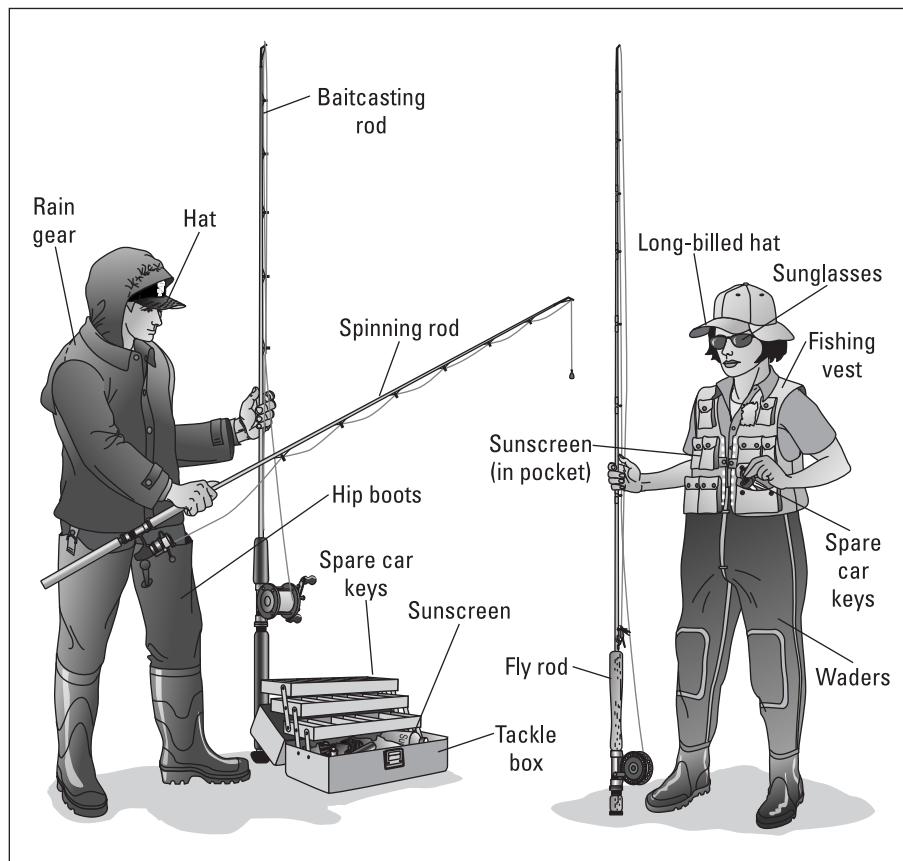
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## Picking up fishing essentials

Basically, to begin fishing, you need a rod and reel spooled with line and a handful of *terminal tackle* — things like sinkers and hooks (covered completely in Chapter 9). Even someone who possesses one hook can probably find a garden worm somewhere and catch a fish.

Most likely, you'll want some kind of tackle carrier to carry your terminal tackle, and other *lures* (artificial, synthetic baits) and flies. This could be as simple as a plastic tackle box or a fishing vest with pockets.

The right clothes will keep you comfortable and safe, as well. Anglers fishing from boats or near rapid current should always wear a life jacket. Waterproof footwear may not be a necessity, but it's pretty close, at times. Sunglasses and a billed hat make life easier while fishing. Figure 1-3 shows two anglers who are pretty much ready for any piscatorial challenge. Chapter 2 tells you much more about how to dress for fishing success.



**FIGURE 1-3:** Two anglers, well equipped for most fishing trips.

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## Adding to your angling arsenal

Cabelas, the giant outdoor retail store, has been selling fishing tackle for nearly 50 years. Bass Pro Shops is nearly that old, and now those two companies have merged. There are countless local bait shops, and stores like Walmart, Dick's, and Academy stock a whole section with fishing equipment. The advantage to shopping retail is that you should find knowledgeable salespeople there to help you. But, of course, fishing equipment can be purchased online as well. In addition to Amazon, there are sites dedicated to offering premium gear at low prices. These might be specialized. For example, Catfish Connection's website ([www.catfishconnection.com](http://www.catfishconnection.com)) offers gear for catfish and crappie only. Companies like Zebco allow you to purchase their products directly from their websites. At [www.zebo.com](http://www.zebo.com), you'll find helpful articles and checklists, as well as a chance to buy rods, reels, or combos (a paired rod and reel).

There's no shortage of gear out there. As you get deeper into fishing, you'll see the need to acquire other pieces of equipment. Anglers who want to start catching bigger game will need heavier line and a rod and reel built to handle it. A well-crafted fishing rod can be a thing of beauty, so light and supple it feels like an extension of the hand. There's nothing wrong with desiring better gear.

So, while you should start with the basics, feel free to add to that pile of fishing tackle in the corner of your garage. Part of the fun of fishing is seeing how the latest gear can make you a more successful angler.

## How Do You Fish?

Fish bite an object because they think it's something to eat, or they strike out of some instinct to do so — they're afraid, or protecting themselves or their young, for example. Fishing, then, requires that you offer something with a hook or hooks on the end of your line in hopes of getting a fish to bite it. You can do this by presenting livebait that the fish are used to eating — casting a hooked minnow into a school of crappies, for example. Or you may turn to trickery — using a fly tied to look like a grasshopper to hook a rainbow trout, or using the flash of a wobbling spoon to trigger an attack from a tarpon.

Whatever you choose for the end of your line, *presentation* matters. Presentation refers to the methods you use to put your offering in front of the fish. You might cast and retrieve a crankbait past a largemouth bass, or use a river rig to anchor a chunk of cutbait upstream from a feeding channel catfish. Basically, you want to present a bait or lure in a way that looks natural to the fish, and the right presentation should allow you to hook the fish after it strikes.

## Casting around: Basic and fly

Because fish are sometimes found some distance from shore, you need to get your bait or lure to them — and this involves the art of *casting*. Casting requires you to use your rod and reel to propel your offering to the target. When using spincast, spinning, or baitcasting equipment, casting requires you to use the flex of the rod to launch the lure outward, and the weight of the lure pulls the line off your reel. When flycasting, you use the (often longer) rod to flex the rod to cast the line, and the (often lighter) fly goes with it.

Like any sport that requires you to do something with your body, casting calls for a certain amount of dexterity and coordination. However, even beginners can learn how to cast effectively. The casting motion (typically involving a swinging, overhead movement) is a simple, natural one. And not every fishing situation calls for perfect casts; many fish are found near shore or around piers or docks, and they require only short, simple casts. To find out how to cast using any of the four kinds of gear, check out Chapter 16.

## Finding freshwater fish

Before you can catch a fish, you have to find the fish. That means figuring out where the fish are within a body of water. Understanding *structure* and *cover* helps you do that:

- » **Structure** refers to the permanent features that mark a lake or stream — a drop-off, ledge, or a hole is structure. Fish relate to structure and often remain close to it.
- » **Cover** consists of things like weed beds, brush piles, or floating docks. It matters just as much as structure.

Knowing that fish are often found near cover and structure helps you figure out how to fish for them. When you know where fish are, you can decide how best to approach them. Should you use a topwater lure, drawing a savage surface strike? Or maybe you should present your bait with a bottom rig, waiting for the fish to find and take it.

Different species of fish respond to different presentations, and with experience and the help of this book, you'll improve at both finding the fish and then getting them to bite.

## FINDING A FISHING MENTOR

Many of us were lucky enough to have a parent or grandparent to teach us how to cast for fish, and more importantly, to make the time to take us fishing. But if that's not the case for you, don't despair. There are plenty of ways to learn how to fish, and many people willing to show you a few shortcuts. I suggest finding someone who fishes for the fish you would like to pursue, and does so in a way that matches your personality. Watch others at boat ramps and bait shops. Search YouTube for your favorite fish or your fishing location. You could seek out social media fishing forums. Ask questions first to get to know someone, and then see if they extend an offer to take you fishing. Most are happy to share their excitement for the sport. Another option, albeit a costlier one, is to hire a local guide. Following the instructions and corrections of a guide for a day is a great way to learn about fishing from an expert. As always, don't be afraid to ask questions.

## Basic techniques for saltwater fishing

Most presentations involve either stillfishing — where a bait or sometimes a lure is cast out and largely left alone until a fish finds it — or by retrieving a lure or bait. Baits and lures can be retrieved in different ways. Some lures are meant to be reeled in quickly, whereas others work better when *jigged* (hopped up and down by lifting and lowering the rod tip). Still other presentations include drifting or trolling baits or lures from a boat.

Fishing saltwater means understanding tides, and how the flow of the rising or falling tides affect gamefish. Because tides tend to congregate baitfish, locating gamefish becomes a matter of finding ambush points where these gatherings of bait become easy prey.

## Fish On! Now What?

When a fish strikes your bait, fly or lure, the first thing you have to do is *set the hook*. This refers to the act of imbedding the hook into the mouth of the fish. Many hooksets involve lifting the rod sharply overhead, using the flex of the rod to drive the hook or hooks into the fish's mouth. When using circle hooks, the fish simply swims away until the rod bends deeply toward the fish — then the circle hook rotates around the corner of the fish's mouth and the bend of the rod drives the hook home. In fly fishing, with many stripers, tarpon, big trout, and redfish, lifting the rod will pull the fly out of the fish's mouth. So you sometimes need to swipe sideways rather than lifting.

After a fish is hooked, you have to *fight* the fish to the shore or boat, and this means controlling the ensuing struggle enough that the fish cannot wrap the line around a snag or do a number of other things to free itself. This is covered completely in Chapter 18, but you should always strive to keep the rod tip up, using the flex of the rod to maintain a tight line and keep the hook firmly planted in the fish's mouth.

## **It's not hunting: You can release fish**

When a fish is in your net or hand, assuming the fish is legal, you have a choice to make: Do you release the fish, or keep it? (Fish that aren't legal — due to size restrictions, say, or species-specific rules on that body of water — must be unhooked and released immediately.) With practice, you can easily unhook a fish, and most fish, when fought to the bank properly, will zip off unharmed when released back into the water.

If the fight has been particularly long or grueling, the fish might be fully exhausted, in which case you might need to *revive* the fish before you release it. Chapter 18 describes how to revive and release an exhausted fish.

Releasing fish ensures that other anglers will have the chance to catch fish, and releasing a trophy is a way to keep the right genes (the kind that make big, healthy fish!) in the pool. Of course, as mentioned in Chapter 19, be sure to get a picture of that award-winning fish before turning it loose.

## **But fish taste great, and you can keep a few, too**

Because a fish's body is made up primarily of muscle, they are a great source of protein. With practice, it's possible to clean fish efficiently and with a minimal amount of gore. When properly cleaned, fish can be cooked in many different ways, pleasing even the most discerning palate.

Chapter 21 includes recipes for preparing different kinds of fish in a variety of ways. Most of the recipes come from noted chefs Lucia Watson, award-winning chef and founder of Lucia's in Minneapolis, and Peter Kaminsky, a cooking writer and one of the authors of this book. You're sure to find a new favorite dish.