

Chapter 1

Getting Hooked on Fishing

In This Chapter

- ▶ Seeing the positives of fishing
 - ▶ Figuring out where to fish
 - ▶ Meeting common fish
 - ▶ Gathering the basic gear
 - ▶ Exploring fishing techniques
 - ▶ Catching fish and taking the next steps
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Everyone knows someone who fishes. After all, over five million anglers walk among us in this country. Maybe you're already an angler. Maybe you're just curious. Maybe you have a son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter or friend's kid who needs a hobby that doesn't involve a screen.

Because I have been fishing almost since I could walk, and fascinated by fish from my first memories (even an accidental dunking in the River Thames aged four didn't put me off), people often ask why I'm so captivated by fishing. Even though I think about fish every single day, it's not an easy question to answer.

But I think I fish for the same reasons so many others do: It's a chance 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. 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 plan, to ponder. I like angling because I like spending time with fellow anglers. 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.

We hope you can find something in fishing that sustains you, too. In this chapter, we give you an overview of this sport we 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, we introduce you to these topics as well, so that you're prepared to fish successfully.

Why Fish?

Fish are alive, and although the latest studies suggest that they do not feel pain, at least not in a capacity anywhere near the way we do, they do not jump at the chance to be caught. Using your gear and more importantly your mind, you must outmanoeuvre 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 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 more than able opponents 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.

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. From a little one-on-one time with Mother Nature to the calm and peace of the pursuit – or the thought that your very next cast could produce that reel-screaming monster fish – fishing has something for everyone.

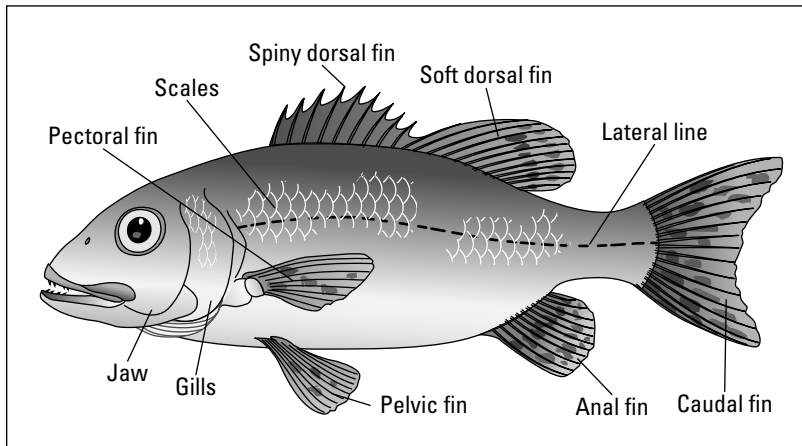


Figure 1-1:
Meet your
average
fish.

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 good for the soul about being outdoors, especially in those places that are natural. Fishing gives you the perfect excuse to spend time in beautiful surroundings.

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 others. Two anglers fishing in a boat, or wading their way quietly upstream, won't be distracted by scrolling news programmes, honking cars or instant messages. Mobile phones can be turned off, and Facebook can be ignored for a while. Whether you're alone or in a small group, fishing quiets the mind.

This is not to suggest that all fishing is quiet! When a monster fish bends your rod double, or goes airborne trying to throw the hook, the adrenaline rush the angler feels rivals that of a footballer scoring a goal, or a racing driver taking a dangerous bend. It's a physical sensation. (See Chapter 18 to find out how to land that huge carp.)

What fishing provides us 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, but most UK anglers fish purely for sporting reasons. Indeed, most of our freshwater fishing is strictly catch-and-release, usually by law. The reasoning is simple: with a limited amount of water and many keen anglers, the fishing must be protected. Once killed, a fish cannot produce young, or grow bigger to give a future angler further pleasure. Fish can and do survive capture perfectly well, provided we are careful (for catch-and-release tips see Chapter 17).

If you do want fresh fish for the table, sea fish or stocked trout are both excellent options. Species such as mackerel and pollack are plentiful from our shores, while the fly fisher can take rainbow trout home for family and

friends. Fish are great tasting and good for you, as well. Chapter 19 tells you how to prepare fish for the table, and we even offer you some proven recipes, allowing you to make wonderful meals of your fresh-caught fish.

Where Should You Fish?

Chapter 3 discusses this issue in detail, but the best advice we can give you is to fish wherever you can. (Later, we 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. Pop down to a local canal and you'll be surprised how wild even your city waters can be. Many ponds and canals are stocked, and some of them face very little fishing pressure. Beaches, piers and estuaries offer a range of fish species too.

Part of the joy and challenge of fishing lies in finding your favourite spots. Fish move seasonally, especially in rivers and the seas, so catching a particular species of fish all year long will often involve moving to follow their migrations. You'll also learn to go to different areas to catch different kinds of fish during certain times of the year.

Fishing freshwater

Not all freshwater fishing is the same, and almost every area of Britain offers a wide range of fishing possibilities. The West Country, for example, offers everything from trout streams to wild beaches; the Midlands is famed for its canals and gravel pits; Wales and Scotland offer secluded rivers and beautiful, natural lakes. Even those places far from giant bodies of water boast rivers of varying sizes and both natural and man-made 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 boils down to current: You're fishing either moving or still 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 seek it out.

Sea fishing

Sea 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 sea.

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

What Are You Fishing For?

I (Dominic) once caught a large pike from the shallow swimming area of a clear lake. My younger brother quickly decided he no longer wanted to paddle there! It just goes to show that just about anywhere you find water, varied and often wholly unexpected fishing awaits.

So what are you fishing for? Both salt and freshwater bodies of water boast a wide range of species, many of which can be taken on rod and reel. Maybe you prefer to get plenty of bites from silver fish such as roach and bream? Perhaps the mackerel are in town on your local pier? Or maybe you've found a lake full of hard-fighting carp?



Your favourite species might change over time, and you can always adjust your gear and tactics to specialise. You might switch seasonally, too. Some fish stop biting enthusiastically when the water cools in the autumn, whereas others bite all winter long. When you get into fishing, we 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. Carp do well in everything from farm ponds to big reservoirs.

Big rivers hide big fish like barbel, chub and pike, as well as fish like roach and dace. Natural and man-made lakes can be home to any kind of freshwater fish, including carp, bream, and tench. Perch can be found everywhere from the largest river to the smallest pond. Freshwater fish represent a diverse collection of species, and each one of them brings something different to the angler.

Freshwater fish species are often divided into two main groups: 'Game' fish (trout, salmon and other species usually tackled with fly gear) and 'coarse' fish (all the others!) For complete coverage of freshwater fish, turn to Chapter 4.

Common sea catches

The sky's the limit, or in the case of saltwater fishing, the sea's the limit. Even fishing inshore waters, anglers could catch everything from conger eels to plaice. Winter anglers can expect flounder, cod and whiting to congregate in beaches and estuaries. Spring and summer see the return of bass and mackerel to give excellent sport to lure and fly anglers.

Flat sandy beaches and estuaries offer flatfish, mullet and other visitors. For those who dare, rock marks hold wrasse, pollack and various dogfish. Charter boats and their skippers can lead you to deep-sea fishing for powerful conger, rays and other creatures. With sea 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 sea 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 play golf, you need a rod and reel to fish in the traditional manner.

Beyond the rod and reel, your needs are relatively 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 favourite fish more successful and pleasurable.

The important thing to remember is that fishing does not have to be an expensive hobby. Once you have your required rod licence, many waters provide inexpensive or even free fishing. 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 with 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. We will divide these into coarse, sea and fly set ups in much more detail later on (see Chapter 7). Figure 1-2 shows some common set ups,

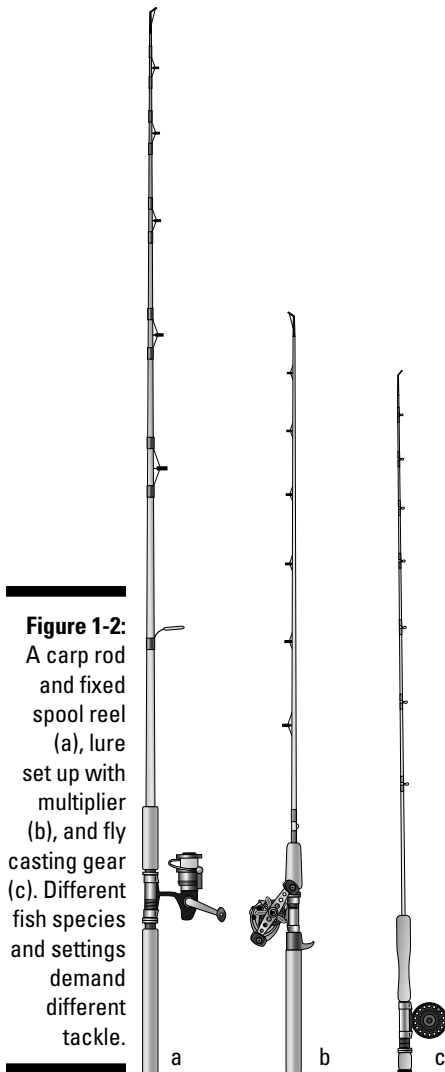


Figure 1-2: A carp rod and fixed spool reel (a), lure set up with multiplier (b), and fly casting gear (c). Different fish species and settings demand different tackle.

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 weights 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, man-made 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 wear a life jacket. Waterproof footwear may not be a necessity, but it's pretty close, at times. Sunglasses and a suitable hat make life easier while fishing, as well. Chapter 2 tells you much more about how to dress for fishing success.

Adding to your angling arsenal

Today's angler is spoilt for choice when it comes to kit. In many ways today's angler can reap the rewards of countless years of development; Hardy, for example, have been producing fishing tackle for well over 100 years. Retailers such as Fishing Republic, Mullarkeys and The Friendly Fisherman offer a vast array of tackle to order online. But the most important link in the chain is your local bait and tackle shop, and a good one will provide you with not only choice but friendly, invaluable advice and info specific to your area.

There's no shortage of gear out there. As you get deeper into fishing, you'll see the need to get various pieces of equipment. Anglers who want to start catching specimen carp need strong line and a rod and reel built to handle it. A well-crafted fishing rod can be 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 help to make you a more successful angler (and trying to justify that next 'essential' purchase to your partner!).

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 – because they're defending their territory, for example. Fishing, then, requires that you offer something with a hook or hooks attached 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 shoal of perch, for example. More often you might use a bait such as bread, sweetcorn or meat which is not strictly 'natural' but offers the fish a tasty, free meal. Or you may turn to trickery – using a fly tied to look like a beetle to hook a trout, or using the flash of a wobbling spoon to trigger an attack from a pike or bass.

Whatever you use on 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 diving plug for zander, or use a leger rig to anchor a chunk of luncheon meat for chub and barbel. 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 bites.

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 a conventional rod and reel (a fixed spool or multiplier) casting requires you to use the flex of the rod to launch your weight, float or lure outward, and the weight of this pulls the line off your reel. When fly casting, it is the line itself which provides the weight. You use the flex of the rod to cast the line, and the fly (comparatively very light) 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. In fact, sometimes the best fishing can be found right under your rod tip. To find out how to cast using any of the common kinds of gear, check out Chapter 15.

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. We call this process *watercraft*. Anglers will often talk about ‘features’ when sizing up a water. By this they simply mean the characteristics of the place, be they man made or natural. It’s not rocket science, but a little detective work can go a long way. Identifying a few types of features can be helpful:

- ✓ **Structure** refers to the permanent features that mark a lake or stream – a drop-off, ledge or hole is structure. Fish relate to structure and often remain close to it.
- ✓ **Cover** consists of things like weedbeds, overhanging trees or even moored boats. Fish need shelter for various reasons – to hide from predators or ambush prey, for example.

- ✓ **Natural characteristics** are not always solid or obvious. On a river, for example, a 'crease' refers to where a faster current meets slower water – a good place to find fish. Even on 'still' water, currents exist and the wind affects the fish.

Knowing that fish are often found near particular features helps you figure out how to fish for them. When you know where fish are, you can decide how best to approach them. Perhaps that weedy corner would be best fished with a shallow float rig? Or would it be better to try the deeper water with a bait on the bottom?

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. Chapter 3 looks at suitable places to find the different fish species, while Chapter 16 explores popular techniques in more detail.

Basic techniques for sea fishing

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

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. Plenty of ways to learn how to fish exist, and many people willing to show you a few shortcuts. We 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 on the bank and don't be afraid to chat. You might even seek out

online 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. Fishing clubs are also a brilliant source of information and many have 'learn to fish' days for newcomers. Another option, albeit a costlier one, is to hire a local guide. Observing 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.

Fishing the sea means understanding tides, and how the flow of the rising or falling tides affect fish. Because tides tend to concentrate prey fish and establish feeding areas, locating your quarry becomes a matter of finding ambush points where the fish find easy pickings.

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 embedding 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.

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 17, 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: Release your 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? For most freshwater fishing situations, the rules state that fish must be carefully released. Indeed, a fishery owner would not take kindly to his prized stock being put on a barbecue! If it is a stocked trout, however, you may be obliged to take it home. Sea fish are at your discretion, but must conform to minimum size limits to be legally kept. 95 per cent of the fish I (Dominic) personally catch go back unharmed, and the sight of a fish swimming away to fight another day always gives me more satisfaction than taking it home. Coarse fish make notoriously bad eating in any case – one old recipe for stuffed bream, for example, finishes with the instruction 'throw away bream and eat stuffing.'

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 gruelling, the fish might be fully exhausted, in which case the angler might need to *revive* the fish before he or she releases it. Incidentally, a good angler never 'throws' a fish back, but will hold his or her catch in the water until it swims off. Chapter 17 describes how to revive and release an exhausted fish, as well as further catch and release tips.

Releasing fish ensures that other anglers will have the chance to catch fish, and releasing a *specimen* fish (angling speak for a whopper!) is a way to keep the right genes (the kind that make big, healthy fish!) in the water. Of course, as mentioned in Chapter 18, be sure to get a picture of that big fish before returning it with care.

The occasional fish supper

Naturally, where rules permit you may want to eat your catch on occasion, and shouldn't feel too guilty about taking the odd fish. The chances are it will be illegal to do so from your local river or canal (and frankly you would have to be quite mad to do this anyway from many waters!) but fresh sea fish and rainbow trout can be excellent.

Because a fish's body is made up primarily of muscle, they are great source of protein. With practice, it's possible to clean fish efficiently and with a minimal amount of gore. Once properly cleaned, fish can be cooked in many different ways, pleasing even the most discerning palate. Chapter 19 includes a handful of fish recipes for preparing different kinds of fish in a variety of ways.