



Beginner's Guide on How to Hook, Land and Release Fish



photo-Darl Black

by Darl Black

While it is important for a novice angler to know where to fish and what to use, it is just as important to know how to set the hook, play the fish and eventually land it. With a few basic tips, a beginner can catch like a pro.

Setting the hook and playing fish

1. Before the first cast of each outing, run the first 3 feet of line between your forefinger and thumb to check for nicks or abrasion; if detected, cut the line above the weak spot before tying on a hook or lure.
2. A reel's drag determines how much pressure is required for line to be pulled from the spool. If you set the drag too light, you won't be able to pull in even a small fish. Set it too tight and a powerful fish may snap a light line on its initial run. Avoid these scenarios by adjusting the drag to the point where you can smoothly pull line from the spool with your hand using moderate force.
3. Contrary to what beginners are often told, a hookset should not be a hard jerk. Instead, it should be a smooth, powerful sweep of the rod.
 - When a fish takes a live bait presentation (with or without a bobber), point the rod tip in the direction the fish is moving and give a firm upward sweep of rod towards the 12:00 position.
 - When using a lift/drop presentation (that is lifting and dropping the lure from the bottom) with a jig or plastic worm, you may detect a hit when the rod tip is high. In this case, rapidly lower the rod tip to the 9:00 position while reeling in slack line, then immediately sweep the rod high to the 12:00 position.
 - When using a lure with a steady retrieve (reeling in the lure), the rod is usually held slightly to your left or right side with tip pointed at the surface. To set a hook in this instance, sweep the rod firmly upward to the side while rotating your torso.
4. With a fish hooked, keep the rod tip high and maintain pressure. Let the fish fight against the flex of the rod. If it is a small fish, you will likely be able to reel it in quickly. Larger fish take more time to land. Do not turn the reel handle unless you are able to retrieve line. Never turn the

reel handle if the fish is pulling line against the drag. If you are turning the handle but line is not winding onto the spool, you likely have the drag set too light.

Landing and releasing fish

1. Use a landing net for all mid-size and larger fish, especially if casting a lure with treble hooks. Use a rubber mesh net. Rubber mesh nets are not abrasive to fish and are less likely to snag a hook, allowing a quick release.
2. Trying to net a highly active fish is a mistake. Keep pressure on the fish, and bring it to the net when you are able to lead it into the bag.
3. Position the hoop of the net at a 45-degree angle with half of the hoop under water. Always lead the fish head first into the mesh net. Never chase a fish with a landing net.
4. With the fish still in the net, use long nose pliers or a hook removal tool to grab the hook shank and back it out. If the fish is hooked deep, you may need to hold the fish vertical to get the hook out.
5. Use two hands to hold a mid-size or larger fish for a photo, supporting its body and never bending its mouth. Then, release it immediately, or if taking the fish home for dinner, place it into a livewell or cooler. ☐



photo-Dart Black

Tools for unhooking fish (from top to bottom): long nose pliers, hook removal tool and diagonal wire cutters for cutting bait hooks that cannot be removed without harming the fish.



photo-Dart Black

A rubber mesh net is beneficial for landing and releasing fish.



photo-Miranda Smith

Sophie Slagenweit caught this Smallmouth Bass while fishing at Prince Gallitzin State Park, Cambria County.



photo-Miranda Smith

When a fish is hooked, let it fight against the flex of the rod.