

THE EARLY TROUT GETS THE WORM

Every year it seems as if there's a slew of new gadgets, gizmos and thingamajigs introduced to help anglers catch more fish. Some rattle, others sparkle - many do both and more. While these novelties will likely catch their share of fish, there's a low-tech lure that's tried and true on early-season trout: nightcrawlers.

Even the most advanced anglers probably got started by tossing a worm on a hook into the water. And for good reason. Besides providing a relatively cheap introduction to the sport, worms are about as popular with fish as chocolate cake is with us. While worms can be an effective bait throughout the year, they can be particularly potent for early-season trout. Streams often run high and turbid in the spring. But trout can use their sense of smell to locate live bait, such as worms, even when cloudy water limits visibility. Similarly, they can use their sense of "taste" to help them hone in on bait.

There are actually many different kinds of worms, but perhaps the favorite among anglers are the larger species generically called nightcrawlers. Nightcrawlers are readily available at tackle shops and even convenience stores. For those who prefer to take a hands-on approach to collecting their opening day bait, it's easy to round up nightcrawlers right in your own backyard.

Here's a few tips for harvesting happy and healthy nightcrawlers:

- As their name implies, the best time to collect nightcrawlers is after dark. Better yet, search for nightcrawlers after a rain storm. Water saturating the soil forces worms to the surface.
- Nightcrawlers don't have eyes, but they are sensitive to light. Don't shine a flashlight directly on them, or they'll detect you and escape. A flashlight with a red lens is an effective tool for seeing nightcrawlers without scaring them into their holes.
- Likewise, while they don't have ears, nightcrawlers are very sensitive to vibrations. So move slowly and quietly when approaching them.
- Try to grab the part of the worm closest to its burrow. If you grab too near the head, the worm will pull it's body back into the hole, resulting in a tug-of-war you'll probably lose.
- Keep the nightcrawlers you've collected in a cool box filled with dirt, potting soil or commercial worm bedding. Keep the bedding moist, but not wet. You can store nightcrawlers for some time in this worm "hotel."
- Commercial worm food is available at many sporting goods stores. Or you can place dead plant material in the box. But do not let rot set in.

