



# Carp Fishing in Pennsylvania

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Photos by Louis A. Cook unless otherwise noted



Brian Wingard with a 35 lb. 9 oz. carp caught from the Juniata River



Matt Coll with a 33 lb. monster carp from northeastern PA



Rebecca Lang holding a 34 lb trophy carp caught in downtown Philadelphia



Chris McIntee with a 33 lb. carp caught from the Schuylkill River, it

The common carp, *Cyprinus carpio*, is a large omnivorous species that can be found in most Pennsylvania waters. Carp are members of the minnow family, with large golden scales. In most waters 10 pound fish could be considered small, and catches exceeding 20 pounds are not uncommon. Native to Asia, and spread throughout Europe by the Romans, carp were first stocked as a food fish in the U.S. in the late 1870s by the newly created Fish Commission. They were then spread by state governments to most U.S. watersheds in an effort to take pressure away from native fishes. Over the years, carp fell out of favor as food and became less popular in U.S. sport-fishing. However, in many other countries carp fishing evolved into a sport with as much popularity as bass fishing has here in the states. In the last few years carp fishing is making a comeback in the U.S., there is even a growing carp tournament scene. But unlike largemouth bass, huge carp can be found in almost every state. With all these massive fish swimming around right under your nose, maybe you would like to give carp fishing a try? Read on to learn how.

To understand how to catch a carp, you should know a little bit about their lifestyle. In rivers carp like to hang out in deep pools and eddies where they can relax and avoid the current. In lakes you can typically find them in and around bays. Carp tend to like areas that transition from shallow to deep so that they can move into the shallows for food but retreat back to the depths quickly to hide. But what exactly are these carp coming into the shallows to eat?

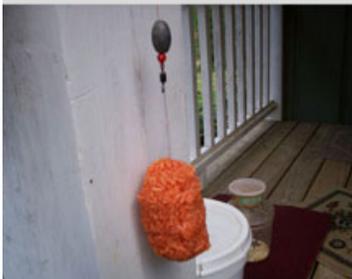
Carp are typically considered bottom feeders, but they sometimes snatch food from the surface and even chase bait fish. Using powerful “pharyngeal teeth” in the back of their throats, carp can crush and eat a variety of foods other fish can’t such as nuts and even clams. They are a true opportunistic omnivorous feeder. But carp tend to be repetitious. Once they get interested in a certain food, they will seek it out and frequently ignore other foods, just like trout that are feasting on a certain bug hatch. Once they have a food in mind and they know where to find it, carp act a lot like cows. They prefer to

<b>How-to Videos</b>
<b>Beginner Guides</b>
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<b>Rigs</b>
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<b>Other</b>
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<a href="#">Video creator Brian Wingard YouTube page</a>

was the biggest carp submitted to the PFBC's Angler Award program for 2006



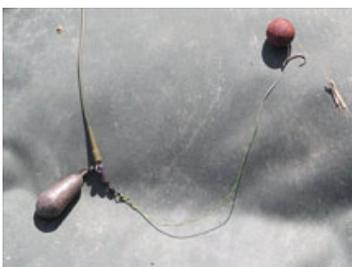
A typical spod



Pack bait made from minute rice. Photo courtesy Tom Brooks.



A small pva bag folded onto a rig "lick and stick" style



A 3 oz. bolt rig baited with a hair rigged boillie. Photo courtesy Paul Ockenden.

travel in groups, and graze. The habitual food choices and grazing is something an angler can use to their advantage...if they chum for carp.

Chumming means feeding the fish a little free food to get them interested. It's a technique used for a wide variety of fish, mostly saltwater. Take your favorite bait (most beginners prefer canned corn) and throw a few handfuls in the water where you plan to fish. The more regularly you do this, the more fish you will attract. Carp will come back to your spot over and over, and they will get less and less cautious about eating your bait. You can use all kinds of chum: bread, corn, nuts, birdseed, or just about anything a carp might like. If they can't throw far enough by hand, anglers use all kinds of tools for chumming such as sling shots, or a castable device called a spod. A spod is a small container shaped like a rocket. The nose of the rocket floats and the bottom end is open. A spod can be filled with bait, and cast using a heavy fishing rod to great distances. When it lands, the spod floats nose up and spills its carpy contents out for the fish to find.

Now that we know where to look for carp, and they are out there eating our bait, just what kind of rigs and tackle should we use to catch them? There are many answers to that question. Plenty of anglers catch carp using a regular 6-9 foot spinning or bait casting rod; 10-20 pound line; some split shot, or no weight at all; size 8-1/0 hooks with a few kernels of corn, bread or dough bait on it. If you have been chumming some corn, and there are carp in the area, you will most certainly hook a few that way. But there are many more carp specific methods for presenting your bait, here are a few of the most popular.

A traditional favorite technique in the southern U.S. is known as pack bait (**see VIDEO list above**—Pack Bait). There are many secret recipes for pack baits made out of rice, bread, millet, fish chow, grits, and oats, but they all have a few things in common that make them pack bait. Pack bait is like dough that is made to stay firm in a golf ball sized wad for casting, but it should break apart after it's been underwater for a short time. Usually pack bait is molded around a hook with a simple cereal corn pop or plastic bead on it. Some fish pack bait with no weight, some with a split shot, and some with a sliding sinker. When the pack breaks down, the hook is laying in a loose pile of chum that carp love. When the line starts to pull, set the hook and hold on!

A similar technique to pack bait that is popular in Europe involves a material called "PVA." Poly Vinyl Alcohol is a safe water soluble material that looks a bit like plastic wrap. Carp anglers fill PVA bags with dry bait, and hook them right to their rigs. When cast, the PVA bag and rig fall to the bottom together, and the bag dissolves in only a few of seconds. This leaves a perfect pile of chum around your hook to attract fish.

( **see VIDEO list above**—PVA)

Another popular style of carp fishing that can be combined with pack bait or PVA very successfully is called ledgering. Ledgering basically means bottom



A 37 lb. carp landed safely in a micro mesh net and laid on a padded mat/weigh sling

2001



2003



2005



2008



A massive mirror carp caught 4 times over a 7 year period! Photo courtesy Patrick Kerwin (top) and Phil Saunders (bottom).

fishing with weight. The idea is not for the weight to simply hold your line down. The weight should be heavy enough to actually set the hook on a fish that picks up the bait and runs with it. Rigging this way is usually referred to as a “bolt rig” because when the fish feels the prick of the hook, it bolts away and sets the hook on itself in the process. For carp fishing, three ounce weights are good to start with, although some anglers use more or less depending on the circumstances, such as long distance casting or fishing heavy current. A typical bolt rig leader would be 6-12 inches long. Ledgering with a bolt rig is a very productive way to fish for big carp, but to be most effective, it requires some more thought about rigs and tackle.

( see VIDEO list above–Bolt Rig)

Anglers who use a bolt rig must either loosen their drag or use a reel with a bait runner system because it is easy for even a small carp to pull your rod into the water when they take your bait!

Fishing with soft baits such as canned corn, bread or dough bait when ledgering can be tricky. Smaller fish can peck away your bait without even budging a 3 ounce weight. An angler might lose his bait and have no idea his hook is bare until he checks it. The solution to this is one of carp fishing's most popular rigs, the “hair rig.” A hook tied into a hair rig has a short loop of line dangling below the shank of the hook. It's very easy to tie with a knot called “the knotless knot” ( see VIDEO list above–Hair Rig). Using a small barbed needle called a “baiting needle” ( see VIDEO list above–Baiting Needle), anglers can slide bait up onto the loop hanging below the hook. A small stick or barbell shaped “stop” is placed on the loop to hold the bait on. Bait then dangles from this “hair” rather than being on the hook itself and the hook point is always fully exposed for maximum hooking potential. Since the hook is not covered at all, anglers can use some very hard baits on a hair rig such as cooked field corn, various nuts or “boilies” ( see VIDEO list above–Field Corn). Boilies are a type of dough bait made with egg as a major ingredient. The boilie dough is rolled into small balls usually 10-30mm and boiled until they are hard. Carp don't mind hard foods at all, but smaller fish have a difficult time taking hard baits like boilies from a hair rig. Now that you are all rigged up and ready to hook a carp, you should learn a few things about landing them.

Carp are bigger than most anglers are used to catching. This presents a number of problems when landing and unhooking a fish. For example, being so heavy makes carp more prone to injury out of the water. If you are a considerate angler, who likes to release your catch to fight again another day, there are precautions you can take to make landing and releasing fish faster, easier, and safer for the fish.

A carp's extra weight can lead to getting wounded in typical knotted nylon nets. Often times they will lose scales or split their fins after getting stuck in the wide holes of this kind of net. It can be a big hassle to untangle a fish's fins and disfigure them permanently. To avoid these problems, a lot of serious carpers use “micro mesh” nets similar to trout landing nets you may

have seen, but much bigger. You can even buy replacement micro mesh for your existing net.

Even if you have a safe net, a large carp is hard to hold while you unhook it. You certainly won't want to get fish slime all over yourself, but flopping around on the ground will cause a big carp to get hurt. You can avoid both of those scenarios by using an "unhooking mat." Unhooking mats are also the best way to keep your carp clean for good looking trophy photos! Plenty of anglers make their own unhooking mats, but they can also be found for sale inexpensively on the web. A lot of unhooking mats also double as a weigh sling. Weighing a large Carp on a hook scale will almost certainly tear their gill plate and a boga grip type of scale will tear a carp's face badly. A sling makes weighing big fish easy, accurate, and allows for safe, simple release.

Now that you know how to catch a carp and release them safely, you might catch the same carp again-it's true! Be sure to take note of any special features a carp has, because many anglers feel very rewarded when they realize they've released a fish and caught it again in good health. Carp live for a long time so this can happen years later, sometimes more than once. Some carp are easier to identify than others, particularly "mirror carp." Mirrors are a genetic strain of common carp that is the same species, but has a unique scale pattern, often with patches of bare skin. Since there are generally few mirrors around, serious carpers consider them a special catch like a golden rainbow to a trout fisherman. Some mirrors are really beautiful, some just look crazy. In fact, many anglers who have never heard of mirror carp think they are just sick fish and their scales fell off. The truth is, the scales of a mirror carp stay the same throughout their life, but each mirror is unique and easy to recognize. That's why it's fun to keep a photo record of the fish you've caught and released to look at and compare later. With some luck you will see the same fish again...only bigger!

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For more information about carp fishing, visit the Carp Anglers Group at [www.carpanglersgroup.com](http://www.carpanglersgroup.com). The CAG online forum is a great place to ask questions and make friends to go carp fishing with, <http://www.carpanglersgroup.com/forum/index.php>.