

How to Be a "Mack Daddy"

An early June sunrise is starting to peek over the horizon, filling the harbors of the Merrimack River and its surroundings in a captivating scene of calmness and anticipation. As I re-check and re-rig my rods for today's adventure, I start my game plan, thinking about the most critical part of my trip, finding live mackerel. It is no coincidence that the better striper men fishing out of northern Massachusetts are also especially adept bait fishermen. Although there are plenty of opportunities for plugging, live bait is by far the most consistent way to catch a cow.

During the early months of our fishery, live mackerel is our primary choice for live bait. Not only do these silver bullets provide stripers with authentic cuisine, but they also allow for a diverse array of presentations to help you land a fish of a lifetime. I will expand on those methods later in the article, but for now, I'd like to start with how I start nearly every trip by talking about how to catch mackerel.

Rocks, Ridges, Reefs, and Rip Lines

These buggers are fast and can cover a lot of ground from one day to the next. I always try to target some sort of structure on my way out. Underwater humps, points, drop-offs, or rock piles are where I start my hunting and point my boat once I leave the mouth. A good bait fisherman will know to target these specific areas, but a great one will keep his eyes open on the way to the grounds looking for visual signs along the way. It's easy to punch in some numbers, and head to them come hell or high water, but so many times, I see people overshoot some excellent fishing grounds because they weren't reading the book mother nature is writing. Tidelines, especially along structure, are some of my favorite places to fish for bait. Mixing water density and temperature outside our infamous estuary creates pockets of disorientation for smaller baitfish that the mackerel feed on, sometimes up to four miles off the beach. You can spot a tideline by seeing a "grease" slick surrounded by choppier waves. Mackerel will tend to congregate on either of the rips, and once you figure out which side, try to stay on that side of it. A significant advantage is that you can actually see mackerel "bubbling" on the surface. Weed lines and birds flying are also good indicators of life in the area.

Early morning is my favorite time to fish for anything. It is consistently less windy less crowded, and the low light conditions bring fish of all species shallower. All three of these factors are the prime conditions to maximize our time on the water. Once I pick my spot, I stop the boat and set up my drift.

Set Up and Send 'em Down

As I throttle down upwind of my intended structure, I wait for a few min to gauge our drift direction so I can position my boat in a drift that will keep us in the prime spots for the most extended amount of time. Then I will tie a mesh laundry bag full of a half-gallon of frozen chum (either herring or mackerel) over the side and tie it up to a cleat. My clients then deploy custom-made mackerel rods and reels loaded with 15-pound test, a bead, a sabiki rig usually with size 8 hooks, and a two-ounce jig on the bottom. I cut two sabiki rigs in half and fish the

other two as full stringers to avoid tangles. I use fiberglass rods for the softness to not pull hooks when we have a whole string of mackerel and for the toughness to lift up to 6 mackerel over the rail on the deck. The real key is to keep a consistent chum flow and keep your lines as vertical as possible. I start with 2 oz jigs but have lead up to 6 oz if need be. I instruct my clients to drop down 20 feet, move the rod up and down in big long sweeps, and adjust the depth from there. Communication is key. Let everyone aboard know if you are hitting them at a different depth! If your drift is too fast and your lines are at a steep angle, anchoring is your best resort. This is made a lot easier since I installed a Minn Kota Ulterra on my boat to utilize my Spot Lock quickly and accurately to avoid the hassle of throwing the anchor.

To really put the hammer down when you get on the school, you need to have some teamwork and rhythm. The first person who hooks up should slowly reel to the boat while maintaining a tight line to avoid tangles. This accomplished 2 things. The first is to have more mackerel jump on the remaining hooks on the sabiki. Second, it lures the rest of the school up to the boat scrambling to find some tasty morsels. Once you see the school, lift your rig into the boat, and have your buddy simultaneously drop his rig down to hook the scraps. While angler number one is unloaded his baits into the live well, angler 2 holds his mackerel just under the surface to keep the school up until angler 1 is ready to drop back down. You can repeat this cycle without having a cluster on the deck and establish a flow where one person always has a line in the water holding the school, and the other has space to unhook his bait and put it into the "sin bin." Keep in mind, it would be foolish to put a bloody mackerel into the well, as it will kill off all its friends in short order. We keep a small cooler filled with ice, seawater, and kosher salt where we put our bleeders to eventually be used as fresh dead bait.

Before we even start striper fishing, I want a minimum of a dozen baits per person on the boat, including myself. But we always try to "blackout" the tanks. For this season, I have a new custom-built 24 ft Pair Custom CC equipped with a 40 gallon round leaning post livewell with a light blue interior, a 1100 gph pump, and pressure sealed to the top. I also have a secondary 27-gallon livewell on the transom that is oval-shaped. Having two livewells allows my bait to not be too crowded and be happy little fish until I send them back down to awaiting jumbo bass.

Versatility in Techniques

What I love most about having feisty, shiny mackerel is the versatility it allows me to have in my presentation while targeting stripers. Having live bait gives you options no matter the prevailing conditions. Mackerel can be drifted with or without weight, slow trolled in the shallows or in the super deep, pitched into rock piles, freelined on structure (what I call "Spot Hopping"), ballooned, chunked or stripped, or fished freshly dead. No matter the time of year, day, tide, wind, temperature, or moon phase, you can always find a way to catch a striper with a fresh piece of bait.

My general setup is a small conventional reel (I use Seigler SGs) and generally prefer a lever drag, although star drags are fine. Spinning reels with a live liner feature are popular, but I like the versatility of a conventional setup when it comes to trolling. You can spool the reel with

either 40-pound braid or 20-pound mono. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, so I'll call it a personal preference. For rods, I have been running Tsunami Slow Pitch Jigging rods. I like the slow action of these blanks, the feather lightweight, and the comfort of the extended rear grip to tuck under your arm. I base all my live bait fishing off a simple rig consisting of a 2 oz egg sinker connected to a leader consisting of a 130# Spro Power Swivel, 3 feet of 40# fluorocarbon, and an 8/0 Mustad Perfect Inline Circle Hook 1X with a straight eye. All my knots are tied with a simple uni knot. We start with this rig but will constantly adjust weight sizes or no weight, lighter or heavier fluorocarbon, and different size hooks. For most situations, the original setup does just fine.

Having live mackerel gives you options to fish in many different ways. Where I am fishing dictates by strategy. I prefer to drift when a strong current is prevalent over a large area. In areas deeper than 10 feet, I'll use a weight to keep my presentation on the bottom on at least one rod. Drop the bait to the bottom and keep the reel disengaged in free spool with your thumb lightly on the reel and the rod pointed low. Patience is the key when your mackerel gets gobbled up by a hungry striper. When you get a hit, keep the rod tip down and point at the fish until you feel the striper take a hard run that gives you a small loop or backlash, slide the lever up to strike, and reel slowly until the rod bends tight and you are hooked up! Acting like Charlie Moore setting up on a largemouth is a guaranteed way to lose your fish, bait, and sanity. Don't overlook fresh dead mackerel as an excellent change-up when drifting. Most of the time, the biggest fish of the day is duped by drifting a dead mack.

When targeting a specific structure, like a rock pile or ledge, utilizing the Spot Lock feature on my Minn Kota Ulterra trolling motor has a considerable advantage. Since I put it on my boat, it has been the single biggest influencer of how I can fish and present my baits. You just pull up-current of a spot you like, press a button, and BOOM! With the GPS-controlled motor, you stay right in the strike zone. I can pitch bait off my transom, much like guides in the Florida Keys have been doing with Tarpon for years. It is a super fun way to fish and can be very productive. The best part is you can "Spot Hop" on different structures quickly and efficiently to pattern out striper behavior. Look for subtleties like wind direction, current breaks, and water temperature to learn each specific spot intimately.

The open ocean has less current and structure than inside the river. I tend to troll my mackerel out in front of the beaches. I keep the same rig I would use to drift, except I start with different weight sizes until the fish tell me what they want. When "outside," I'm looking at sandbars, troughs, points, bait schools, and tide lines. Fish can be anywhere from 2 feet of water out to 120 feet. So local knowledge and a good network can be constructive. I have utilized my trolling motor in this situation as well. I like to troll as slow as possible, preferably under 2 knots. The trolling motor gives me the speed I'm looking for and the control when in "Auto Pilot" mode. Because the motor is pulling from my bow instead of my outboard pushing from the stern, I can track straight and not be affected by wind or tide. I can fish more lines than I usually could, plus it's a lot safer when fishing in the rollers in 4 ft of water off the beach as I'm not constantly fighting to not get pushed into the sand. Trolling livies accounts for my biggest fish every single season.

The best part about all these techniques is they also apply to fishing with pogies, which we have had an abundance of the past two seasons! So get the idea out of your head that live bait fishing might not be sporty or technical because it certainly is. It's fun, productive, and versatile. By varying our "spots" and our techniques, using mackerel keeps us consistently catching keepers all season long.