



from Pacific Coast Sportfishing Magazine...

For many private boaters and kayakers, finding and catching live mackerel is a huge part of one's success. Many days this making-bait ritual goes according to plan; mackerel are easy to find, they bite full speed, and we're off to the fishing grounds. Other days we can't catch a mackerel to save our life. It's these tough bait-making days that separate the talent. If we take a close look at some of the finer details and techniques of catching live macks in Southern California, we will see that it is not as easy as it looks. Here's what I have seen work over my many seasons on the water.

Finding Bait

Anglers taking their skill to the next level keep detailed notes on the best bait-making areas up and down the coast. From Santa Barbara to San Diego, it's a good idea to start writing down in a notebook the best bait spots for each harbor. These areas are a starting point for every trip.

Without this information, you're going to waste critical fishing hours trying to locate mackerel, while the locals are already hooked up. Whether this information is obtained through a network of friends or trial and error, your notes should include the general area, depth, and a couple backup spots. For example, I have in my logbook that when the marlin are up west, stay in Cat Harbor and the middle or east side of the anchorage in six to ten fathoms for the best greenies. At my homeport of Newport Harbor, I have written down West Jetty, East Jetty, Number 1, and Blue Roof as my best bait areas (in order).

Eyes Tell the Story

Once you've arrived at a likely bait-making area, take a look around for clues that will pinpoint your quarry. Often times live mackerel are harassing anchovies on the surface. This attracts pelicans, seals, and other bird life – a dead giveaway for a bait area. Anglers can often slide up on a spot with this condition and tank up very easily.

In other areas we want to look for color breaks. I have noticed that if I set up on the clean side of the color break that is typically found off the west Newport Jetty that the mackerel like to feed along this edge, and the catching can be quick and easy. Another clue as to where to start at most harbor entrances is to simply watch some of the jetty anglers: On which side are they catching mackerel? (Note: give these guys plenty of room. Best bet is to set up inside of the end of the jetty, so you're not drifting into their casting area.

You can also find bait on your meter. When looking for conditions above the water, you should also be watching your meter closely for schools under the boat. And, of course, many of the best yachts these days over 50 feet are equipped with sonar, making the hunt even more effective.

Time of Day

Early mornings and evenings can be your best times to catch bait. I like fishing in the dark with my underwater lights on. It's a magnet for mackerel and seems to get the job done quickly. The early afternoons can also be prime time. Many weekends in the summer, I will head out after work on a Friday and tank up at sunset. Bait just seems to bite best under low light conditions. Plan accordingly.

Chumming

Write this down: Buy cases of seafood-flavored cat food and store it on your boat or kayak for chumming up mackerel. I prefer the cans with the pull-off top. I recall one trip without a can opener, and plunging a 10-inch fillet knife into a can of cat food in the dark was not fun. While all flavors work, the seafood blends work best for us. But I do get some strange looks while in Ralph's at three o'clock in the morning, buying a couple cases of tuna-flavored cat food. "Dude, how many cats are you housing?"

If the visual signs are not there, simply setting up on one of your bait spots and throwing a steady stream of cat food has worked for us many times. Actually, it's so effective that this is typically my first order of business. Stop on the spot and throw chum. Use steady spoonfuls of cat food – not big chunks. Let those little suckers come to you!

Rigging Up

Catching mackerel is very similar to albacore fishing. Some days they want to eat the paint off the transom, and, of course, other days the fishing can be scratchy at best. Mackerel are notorious for playing this game.

When they are tough to catch, one trick to get things going is to simply tie six- or eight-pound line to a number-six hook, bait up with a strip of squid or anchovy, and lower the rig down with no weight and watch for a bite. Fresh meat on the hook makes all the difference in the world when the bite is a slow pick; however, it amazes me how many serious anglers fail to have a pack of anchovy or squid on the boat for their bait-catching chores. Sure, you will get a few dumb ones on the lucky joe or sabiki rigs, but when the going gets tough, the single-hook rig with a strip of bait will work wonders.

On slow pick days, I have noticed while fishing a sabiki rig that removing the weight, adding a bait strip, and just letting the flyline back into the current will work. When fishing bait strips, there is less jigging; just float the rig right under the surface. Furthermore, if somebody forgot to bring a bag of bait, I will sometimes sacrifice the first mackerel we catch for fresh meat on the hooks.

Quality Bait

Live macks are fragile baits. Do not touch them or bang them up against the bait tank. Once their protective slime coat is touched, infection leads to sickness, and these baits will contaminate the entire tank. Baits that fall onto the deck are thrown back.

That barb on the hook will sometimes tear the mouth of the mack while trying to remove the sabiki hook, making your typical nose-hook rig quite difficult. What I like to do is pinch down the barb on your hook. That will prevent tearing the mouth of the mackerel when offloading bait into the tanks. As long as you keep pressure on the line, the barbless hook is clean and simple.

If the bait fishing is good and you're fishing the sabiki rig and catching two, three, or four baits on every drop, unless you wind up very slowly while the rig is loading up, you're most likely to get a big tangled mess from the mackerel going in all directions. Here's a very simple technique: once you hook the first bait, wind very, very slowly towards the surface – just enough pressure to keep the line tight and the rig moving up-wards. If rigs are fished this way, you can load up all hooks and will only very rarely get a tangle. I learned this technique on the Golden Gate Bank on the Mirage – thanks Lassley!

Bait Capacity

Every trip has different bait needs. A kayaker spending a morning pursuing sea bass off the beach can get by with a half-dozen baits. On the other hand, a group of four anglers going marlin fishing can go through 30 to 40 baits pretty quickly. Factor these needs into your bait-catching plan and capacity. I usually figure for one bait per a gallon of water in the tank's capacity. Overcrowding your baits will lead to all sorts of problems, like a lack of oxygen, and it doesn't take long before you can lose the entire tank. Always make it a point to check on bait regularly. Throw the ones out that look sick or are forming blue spots on their backs or sides.

Keep Them Cool

Avalon and some of the anchorages can get very hot in the late afternoon. Many yachts have bait tanks with large Plexiglas windows on both sides. These are great for monitoring your bait; however, these same windows can "cook" your bait when exposed to the hot afternoon sun. Bait exposed to the hot sun will become sluggish and may even die from the exposure. I like to drape a towel over these windows when on the mooring or in the anchorage – keeps the baits dark, cool, and relaxed.

Go Fishing!

Many of us are complaining about fuel prices and the many reasons not to go fish. If you're like me, you use fishing to take the stress out of your workload. So, there is no better time than now to go fishing. And we have lots of big seabass and yellowtail along the coast that love to eat a slow-trolled mackerel. That is one of the best things about fishing live mackerel – it weeds out the small fish. See you on the bait grounds!