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Fishing with Eels

by Rich Russo



If you're a striper fisherman and you don't fish with eels, you're missing out on one of the most productive methods of taking big bass. When I first started fishing with the [Connecticut Surfcaster's Association](#), the other guys I fished with were using plugs while I was using eels. Pretty soon, a lot of them turned to eel fishing due the results of those outings. Here is an overall look at striper fishing with eels from caring for your bait to fishing techniques.

The first thing that you will have to do is get the "snakes" from the tackle shop to your fishing spot. The best method I have found for transporting them is to place them in a small "six-pack" sized cooler with a reusable plastic ice block. The cooler is compact and will easily accommodate a dozen medium sized eels. The plastic ice block keeps the eels cool without melting. This is important because if the eels become immersed in water, they will deplete the oxygen in the water and suffocate. It is also a good idea to place a damp cloth in the cooler as the eels prefer a moist environment.

If you are not wading, you can carry your eels with you in the cooler, but if you're doing any wading or a lot of walking from spot to spot, you'll want something more convenient to carry them in. I use a mesh bag with a drawstring at the opening. Many tackle shops, as well as scuba diving supply shops, carry them. You can also fashion an eel container out of a plastic institutional sized mayonnaise jar. First, you make small drain holes in the bottom of the container to allow water and slime to drain out. Next, you make two larger holes near the opening of the jar to attach a carrying rope. You cut the rope to a length to suit you, you don't want the jar to interfere with your casting, then stick each end of the rope through the holes from the outside and knot them on the inside. You might want to attach the lid to the container with the knotted rope method.

These pieces of "striper candy" can be difficult to handle at times. If you've kept them in the cooler, they will be easier to handle because the ice pack slows them down. The best way to handle eels that I have found is to cut up an old burlap bag into rags. This course material lets you get a good grip on the "snake". If you can't find burlap, old cotton socks will do. You grab the eel by the back of the "neck" and grip tightly. Remember, eels can't hurt you but sometimes they will try to wrap themselves around your wrist and get you a little slimed up.

Your terminal tackle should consist of a hook, a monofilament leader and a swivel. The hook should have a short shank and have a bronze or black finish. Stay away from the nickel or gold finish hooks as they are more apt to be seen by a wary striper. Depending on the size of

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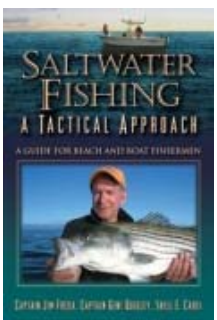
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the eel, I use a 4/0 to 6/0 Mustad 94150 or Mustad 9174 (Gamakatsu Octopus #0241_). Some guys swear by the circle hooks but I have to admit, I haven't tried them yet. Now that they come in a black finish, I'll have to give them a try (Gamakatsu Octopus Circle #20841_). For leader material, 3 feet of 40 to 60 pound test monofilament is preferred. I like to use heavier leaders when fishing rocky areas due to the striper's penchant for diving into rocks. Attach a 90/100 pound test black barrel swivel to the end of the leader and that completes your terminal tackle.

Now it's time to start fishing. There are several methods of hooking an eel. One method is to run the point of the hook through one eye and out the other. This way you have the support of the skull when you cast your eel. Another method is to place the point of the hook into the eel's mouth and bring it out through one of the eyes. My personal favorite method of hooking an eel is to place the point of the hook as deeply into the eel's mouth as possible and bring it out through the bottom of the throat. The disadvantage of this is that the soft tissue tears more easily and you might lose a few more eels when casting, but not a significant number. The advantage is that the eel will stay lively longer and you can hide more of the hook shank in the eel's mouth so as to be less noticeable to your prey.



American Eel
Anguilla rostrata

After you cast your eel seaward, hold your rod tip in the 12:00 o'clock position and reel in slowly. When a bass strikes your eel, there are two schools of thought as to what to do next.

- One way to proceed is to drop your rod tip so it's parallel with the water and set the hook when the line tightens.
- The other school of thought is to drop your rod tip like before but as you drop your rod, open your bail, or throw the clutch if you're using conventional gear, and count to 10 while you let the fish run. You'll want to close your bail or engage your gears, but not without slack in your line because the fish might feel the tension and drop your offering. To get that needed slack, you slowly raise your rod tip while the fish is running, then drop it again. Engage your line pick up and keep your rod tip low until the line tightens, then set the hook. This gives the fish a chance to take the bait and gives you a better chance for a hook up. Unfortunately, this often means you'll hook the fish deeper and could do damage to a fish you intend to release.

If you wish to release a deeply hooked fish, cut the leader as close to the hook as you can as quickly as you can.

You can keep using your eel until it hangs lifeless from your hook. If there's still a curl to its tail, keep using it. There seems to be an attraction by stripers to eels that have already been taken by other stripers. I'm not sure why this is but I do know that you can catch multiple fish on the same eel, so don't throw out that snake after it has worked for you once. You might have to reposition your hook as the strike of the bass may have torn a hole where the hook penetrates the eel.

If you find yourself with leftover eels at the end of your trip, they are not difficult to keep alive for your next trip. The easiest way to keep your eels alive is to get a 5 or 10 gallon

aquarium with an aerator. Try to keep the aquarium in a cool part of the house because if the water gets too warm, the eels won't survive. I keep the eels in the mesh bag and dunk the whole thing in the aquarium. This saves me the trouble of having to scoop net them. If you don't keep them in a mesh bag, put some sort of covering over the aquarium as the eels can escape.

Another way to keep your eels alive is to use what I call the "three bucket system". This consists of three 5 gallon buckets, two of which have drain holes in the bottom, damp seaweed or rags, and ice. You place the eels with the damp seaweed or rags in a bucket with drain holes and place that bucket inside the bucket without drain holes. Then, you place the second bucket with drain holes over the bucket with the eels and place ice cubes in it. This set up allows the ice to melt and drip onto the eels to keep them moist and it lets any excess water and slime to drain off of the eels and into the bottom bucket. They will stay alive and healthy as long as you keep them moist. This method is a little more labor intensive because you'll have to add ice and drain the bottom bucket a couple of times a day.

I hope this has shed some light on some of the ins and outs of fishing with live eels. It has proven to be a successful technique for me and I hope it will be as successful for you. Keep a tight line and happy fishing.

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