

Bait Catching Breakthroughs

STATEWIDE, SPECTACULAR CATCHES START
WITH SPECTACULAR CATCHES!

By Orlando Muniz

Over the past five decades, the pursuit of high jumping, hard fighting, saltwater game fish has been a major pastime for millions of anglers all along our 1200 miles of coastline. Like so many, during the last twenty of those years, I too have spent a large percentage of my free time pursuing piscatorial prizes over our near-shore reefs and throughout our coastal offshore waters. Over this time frame, all of us have learned that there are various tactics and techniques that have time and again proven their worthiness. None in this heavily pressured environment are as consistently as effective as live bait fishing. Even the evolution of artificial bait technology which today provides anglers with soft and hard lures with natural looks, textures, and odors, has not been able to slow down this popular method of approach.

My good friend and self proclaimed blue water specialist, Captain Luis Cortes, actually hooked me on live baiting in the early 1990s, and I have thoroughly enjoyed it and have attempted to perfect the approach ever since. Prior to this, I spent the vast majority of my time on the water dragging colorful lures and soaking freshly cut chunk baits. I did well, but together, utilizing only this most natural of approaches, Cortes and I have accounted for scores of sailfish, cobia, kingfish, wahoo, tuna, and dolphin, along with plenty of the most sought after inshore and bottom dwelling species inhabiting the lower portion of our state.

Anyone who has ever attempted procuring live bait knows all too well that there are occasions when your intended quarry practically jump right in the boat, while on other occasions the time consuming process turns into nothing more than a frustrating struggle. Sure, anybody can soak a quill rig at a well advertised bait hole and string up more than an ample supply when they're thick and hungry, but there's an awfully big difference between the weekend novice who gets lucky on occasion and the week long professional who has the ability and angling know-how to fill the well when conditions are far from favorable. It during days with little current or when the water is extremely clear, that catching bait can test anyone's patience.



Another way to detect productive near-coastal bait catching spots which most anglers entirely miss out on is to keep close tabs on nearby boats that may be after the same bounty. On many occasions, I've been anchored over a near-shore reef, repeatedly swinging stringers of bait over the side, and boats which are apparently heading offshore don't even throttle down to take a second look.

In my opinion, it's wise to know what everyone around you is doing, even if that means marking a potential

If there is one thing I've noticed about novice bait catchers is once they find success using one method in one particular area, they're hesitant to try anything else or anywhere else. That's a monumental mistake. Always keep your options open, and always be willing to explore.

Location, Location, Location

Regardless if you fish up in the Panhandle, out east along the Treasure Coast, or down in the Keys, when heading out first thing in the morning to capture your day's supply of bait, there are three critical elements to consider; location, location, and location. It really doesn't matter where you hang your hat; it is of the utmost importance to spend your valuable time investigating only areas worthy of your bait catching efforts. Sure, weekends typically invite dozens of boats to popular bait holes which are a cinch to locate, but this crowding effect often makes the task at hand much more difficult and sometimes a completely fruitless endeavor. After years of trial and error, I've learned that it's imperative to discover at least a few private bait catching holes where you won't have to deal with the competition.

I recently took a quick glance at my well kept log and found that over the last 10 years, I've successfully blacked out the baitwell at close to thirty different spots around my immediate area. How did I find these spots? I'll tell you how; I pay very close attention to my surroundings each and every time I'm out on the water. I personally believe investigative work is a critical element for all successful sport fishing adventures.

I highly recommend you, too, pay very close attention to your surroundings every time you're on the water, not to mention keeping one eye glued to your bottom machine. Remember that all species of baitfish are just that, fish, and while this may come as a surprise, the vast majority of all fish are constantly on the move, stopping only periodically to feed. You just never know where bait concentrations may pop up. A quality fish finder will help you pinpoint and keep close tabs on likely areas which feature appealing bottom contours that could very well be baitfish pit-stops. Not to be overlooked, above the surface, diving or swarming birds could be a surefire sign of bait activity below and should also be considered an indication of an area worthy of future investigation.



spot on your chart plotter and taking a closer look at a later date. Not only in obvious areas around reefs, piers, and buoys, baitfish often concentrate in the most unlikely of places, so always keep your eyes and ears wide open.

For inshore gurus targeting snook, redfish, trout, and the such, grass flats are ideal locales to look for pockets of whitebait during the early morning light. All one needs to do is locate diving birds, and you'll likely stumble across a jackpot. Bridges and channel markers are also great forms of structure to explore, as are distinct edges where the bottom contour suddenly drops or rises. In addition, anytime you see fish boiling or crashing on the surface, there's an excellent chance baitfish are not far away.

One of the most important elements to remember about the characteristics of any productive bait spot, inshore or offshore, is that it may not always produce. Keeping concise records of date, lunar, and tidal information will make it easier to maximize your bait catching effectiveness during future outings.

Tools of The Trade

Just a few short years ago, if an angler walked into a tackle shop and asked for a sabiki, the clerk would have sent him down the road to the nearest sushi bar. Back then, the bait catching crowd really only had two choices: small gold hooks, or a cast-net. Personally,

I've done extremely well with gold hooks and still keep a box on the boat at all times. Today though, it's no secret that the vast majority of bait catchers opt for popular and undeniably very effective, multiple hook sabiki rigs. I personally feel sabiki rigs, which are designed at best case scenario to catch a few baits a time, have made some anglers a bit lazy and therefore reluctant to learn how to properly throw a cast-net. The reason I mention this is because in most situations, especially when it comes to mullet, a cast-net which can capture upwards of a hundred baits at a time, can be a bait catcher's very best friend.

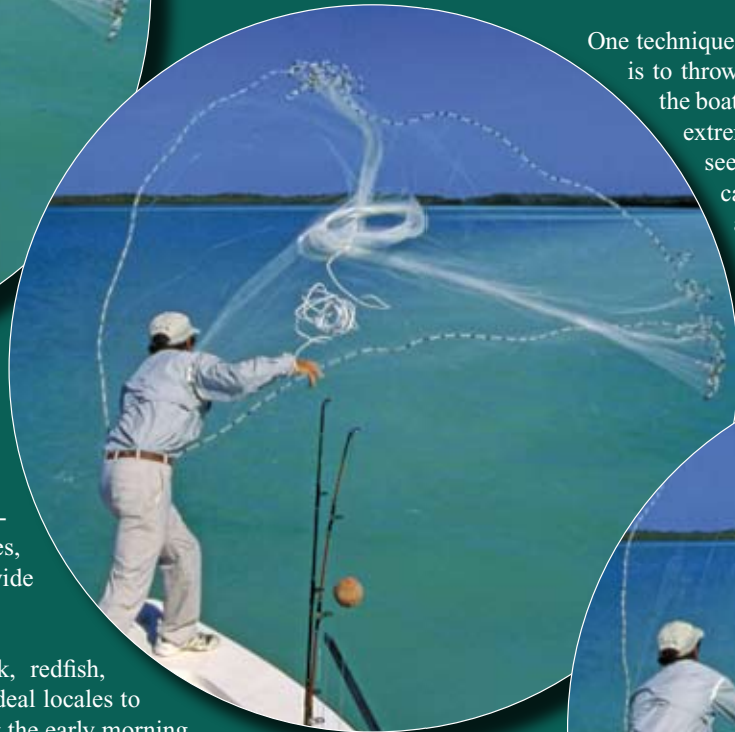
My very first cast-net measured six-feet in length, though currently, I own several ranging up to twelve-feet. It took many hours and close to two million practice throws in the back yard before I mastered the perfect pancake. Though any experienced bait catcher will tell you, throwing a large cast-net well does not always guarantee success, sometimes casting techniques need to be refined as well.

One technique for successfully catching bait using a cast-net is to throw it over the transom after marking bait under the boat. Throwing a cast-net with this approach works extremely well in deep water when baitfish can't be seen flipping on the surface. Make certain your cast-net has a long enough rope attached to allow the net to sink freely in deep water or where there is a strong current. Too short of a rope and your efforts could easily go in vain.

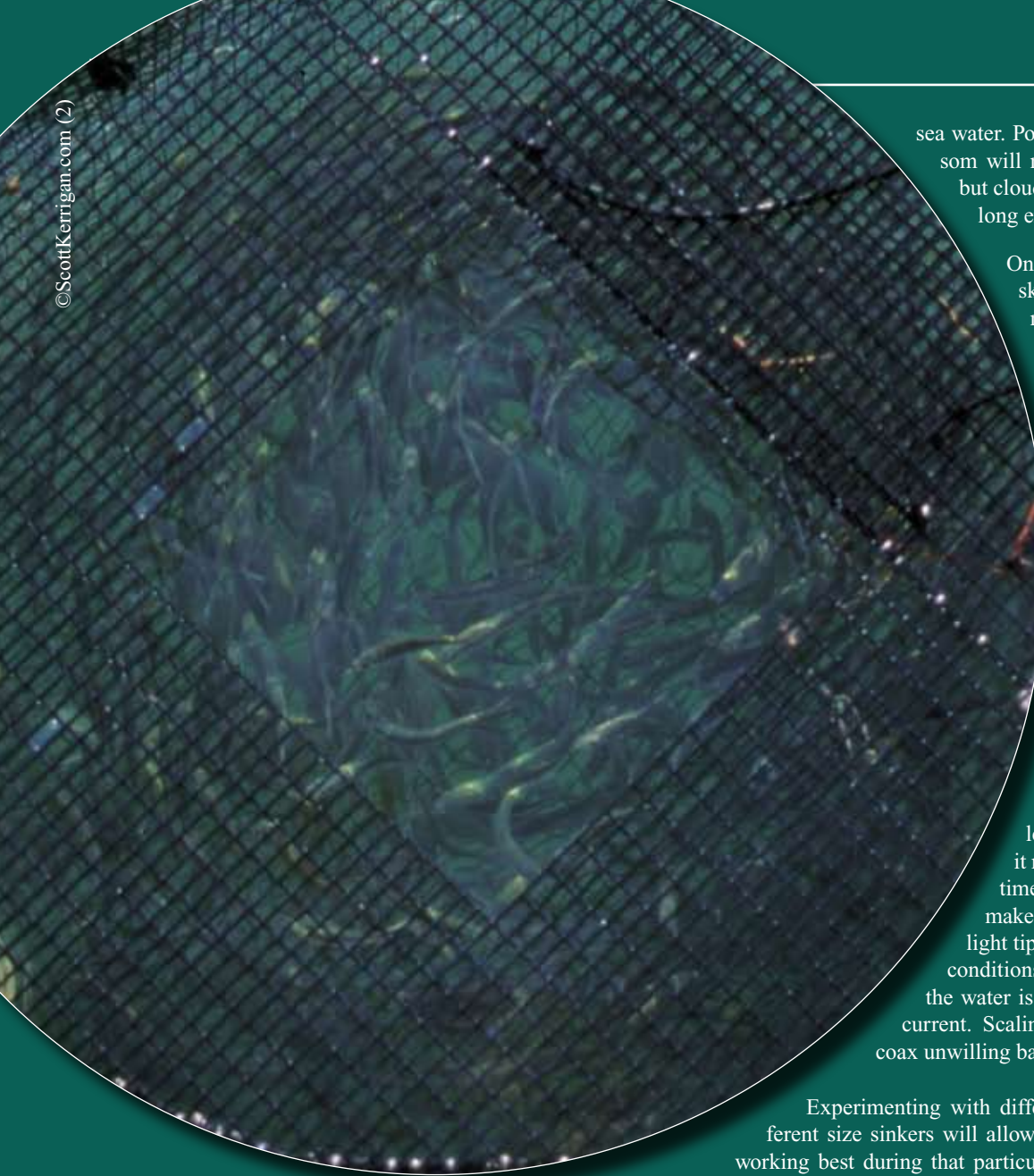


With either approach, it's imperative to select the proper cast-net for the targeted species. This selection process depends heavily on circumstance. As an example, throw a net with one-inch mesh on three-inch finger mullet, and the result will be an absolute disaster. The small baits easily get 'gilled' in the large mesh and become a formidable task to remove. Clearing the net will not only result in a bunch of dead bait, but requires a great deal of time when time can't be wasted. Throw large mesh nets only for large baits and preferably in deep water, as the larger mesh will also allow the net to sink faster.

Cast-nets work exceptionally well during low light conditions, but become increasingly less effective as the sun rises. During daylight hours, anglers usually have to get a little bit craftier in order to achieve the same level of success.



On the other hand, throwing a cast-net off a skiff or bay boat in shallow water over grass flats or along mangrove shorelines is best done from the bow rather than the stern. Adorning quality polarized sunglasses will facilitate visually spotting the bait and will help you sneak up on unsuspecting victims with a slow, stealthy approach.



sea water. Pouring the concoction over the transom will not only help concentrate the bait, but clouds the water which distracts the bait long enough to throw the net on them.

On days when baitfish are extremely skittish or too scattered for a cast-net, it's important to refine your bait catching techniques even further. It's now when sabiki rigs, also referred to as quill rigs, should be utilized. It's important to experiment with the terminal gear until you find the winning combination. I like to carry a wide variety of sabiki rigs on the boat along with various sinkers. Not only do I rig each bait rod with a different brand of bait rigs, but in varying sizes and colors.

With small, fragile baits in shallow water, the rule is to go as light as possible. Use the smallest hooks and lightest branch size leader you can get away with, even if it means losing one of the hooks from time to time. Choice of rod can also make a big difference; an outfit with a light tip often makes a big difference when conditions are less than ideal, such as when the water is crystal clear or there is very little current. Scaling everything down tends to help coax unwilling baits into cooperating.

Experimenting with different types of sabiki rigs and different size sinkers will allow you to quickly determine what is working best during that particular day under those particular circumstances. You can then adjust accordingly. While the anglers go about the duty of catching bait, I stand by with a trusty de-hooking device to speed up the process. When bait fishing with sabikis, don't forget to hang a chum bag over the side and shake it often to keep nearby parties interested.

One neat trick I learned a few years back is to spray water behind the boat using the wash down hose. The idea here is to disturb the surface of the water just enough so the baitfish can't see the net coming. Another good idea is to mix a handful of chum in a bucket with



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As you spend your valuable time bait fishing, make the most of it, especially on the offshore scene. It's very important to watch the bait as it collects behind the boat. Highly prized large pilchards and hearty goggle-eyes often suspend right above the bottom. Herring and sardines on the other hand, like to hit the rig on the way down. Cigar minnows, blue runners, speedos, and ballyhoo prefer to swim right into the slick and can often be coaxed into striking by tipping hooks with a piece of squid tentacle. I will even go as far as baiting the hook with a piece of chum plucked out of the bag (desperate times call for desperate measures).

When targeting large, offshore type baits, long, stout rods and six to ten-ounce sinkers will allow you to work your heavy-duty sabiki rig straight up and down in the chum slick and will assist you in making short work of a few dozen prime baits.

Bait Catching Etiquette

When attempting to catch bait, time is the enemy in more ways than one. The goal is to attract the bait and to get it in the well as quickly as possible while handling it as little as possible. This gives you more time to target your favorite game fish. Don't get discouraged if you have a tough time catching bait. Sometimes, frustration is rewarded by the fishing gods with an excellent trip. I vividly recall one particular outing a few years back when our bait pump crashed. We had just caught a well full of pilchards and had to pour buckets of water into the well all morning long in order to keep our valuable baits alive. Most other anglers would have simply gone home or completely switched tactics. However, our efforts that day were handsomely rewarded when we boated a trio of wahoo over fifty pounds.

Like with all angling avenues, persistency is the key to successful fishing, and this is especially true when it comes to fishing for bait. Like in any arena, proper etiquette should always be considered. The excitement of a hot bait bite has a tendency to bring out the worst behavior in some people. It's important to keep a cool head at all times. When approaching other boats already on the spot, idle in and approach cautiously.

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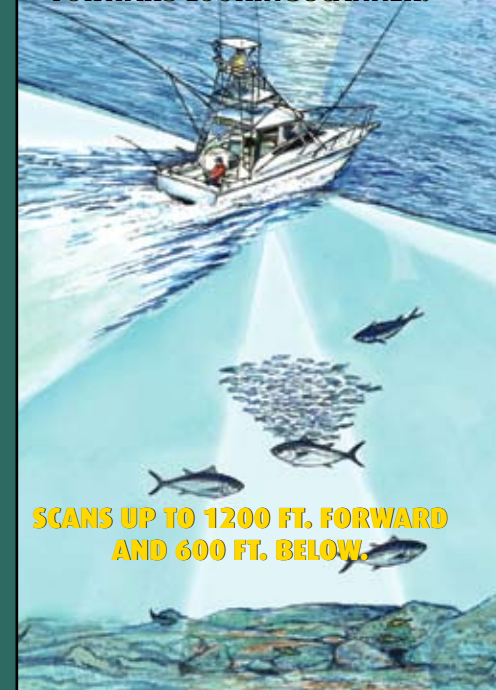


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Pay close attention to wind and current conditions that can be troublesome in tight traffic. Watch for boats that are anchored and know which are drifting. Know your limitations, and if you are not comfortable maneuvering in tight quarters, remain outside of the other boats. Many arguments ensue when boats nearly collide or when anchor lines and chum slicks are crossed. Trust me on this one; it's not a pretty sight, and the meaningless arguments waste valuable fish catching time.

In closing, I know you'll agree that novice or pro, everyone can benefit from brushing up on his or her bait catching skills. Hopefully, this little refresher course will also help you in making your future trips more productive and more enjoyable. Keep expanding your horizons and never be afraid to try new tactics and techniques. That's what makes our sport a lifelong passion.



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Orlando Muniz grew up in Miami and was drawn to fishing at a very young age. Today, he is a graduate of Barry University with a degree in education. He is also a licensed realtor. On his time off, Orlando enjoys spending time aboard his 25 ft. SeaVee, Nomad, of course, primarily fishing with live bait.

You can email Orlando at: omuniz@bellsouth.net

