

CATCHING MARINE FISH WHILE SNORKELING

by Bill Ballard, Elberta, Alabama

Although I catch and keep many native freshwater and brackish fishes, my favorite pastime is the marine species. The method I use in catching the majority of these is quite different from the "swamping" method I use on other fish.

The necessary equipment includes face mask, snorkel, two small dip nets of the kind used to catch fish in an aquarium (8" or more), a container for the fish, and a diver's flag. This flag has nothing to do with fishing, but clearly shows your position to any boats nearby.

The best hunting grounds are rocky areas or places where sizeable objects of metal or wood are on the bottom. In my area, the main rocky situations are the jetties at the entrances of various bays.

Fish-catching varies a bit from species to species, but the following plan is often successful. First, single out one fish you want and stick with him. Chasing a whole school of fish is nearly always unsuccessful. Move after this fish at a moderate pace so it will know you are after it. Avoid terrifying it if possible. Try to coax the fish to an area of small rocks with as few ways in and out under them as possible. When the fish is under the desired rock or rocks, quietly bring one net in front of the entrance the fish used to go under the rock. With the handle of the other net, quickly thrust under the same spot from a different direction. If you're lucky, the now terrified fish will swim at top speed into the waiting net. Now quickly raise the net to the surface using the force of the water to hold the fish in the net. At the surface, rapidly close off the net above the fish so the wind won't blow the fish out. Now carefully put the fish in the container.

This is the general system I use, but there are many variations possible in the procedure. Examples of variations are putting both nets at strategic places and thrusting under with a hand (this can be dangerous in some situations), and rocking a small rock back and forth to make a fish move towards a waiting net.

Of course, you will not always catch the fish. My capture rate varies from around 20 percent to 50 percent of attempted captures. Marine fish often move in hiding, and if the water is over 3' deep, the necessary quick trips up to get air offer some chance of escape.

To avoid long trips back to a bucket somewhere on the jetty somewhere after each catch, I carry a container with me. To do this, I take advantage of the float and weight on the diver's flag. On the weighted end of the flag, I tie a small section of a concrete block. Underwater, it is almost weightless. Above the float, I tie a string, on the other end of which I tie a plastic milk bottle about half full of water. While swimming, I carry the piece of concrete block, dropping it when I see an interesting fish. Although light, it is still heavy enough to hold the flag in place. I then catch the fish and carefully put it in the bottle. I then close the bottle, pick up the block, and continue on my way. If I get a large number of fish in the bottle, I carefully change some of its water. Later, I return to my starting place and transfer the fish to larger containers for the trip home.

I live on the Gulf Coast on the Alabama/Florida line by Perdido Bay. This bay has jetties with fairly good fish, but the best place in my area to fish this way is about two hours' drive to the east at Destin, Florida. Here the water is clear, and many species are available. Between these two is Pensacola Bay, which has a good many species; unfortunately, however, there are treacherous currents at the entrance to that bay, and competition from regular fishermen is very high.

In my area I catch fish this way from May through September. Really hardy souls (or those with wetsuits) could probably find some fish in April and October also. The most productive time is generally July through September.

I have never scuba-dived and use none of the scuba-diver's equipment beyond mask and snorkel. Scuba-diving would make more species available, but it is expensive and very dangerous unless one is trained by a certified diver. I catch all of my fish in less than 10' of water and many in less than 6'.

As a word of caution, it should be mentioned that strong currents run in and out of bay entrances. Areas that are calm when you arrive may have raging currents by the time you're ready to leave. Before snorkeling in areas you do not know, observe the area and talk with local residents in the know.

Obviously only good swimmers should attempt any of this. One should also be knowledgeable about problems that can develop in the water and have confidence in an underwater setting.

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