

Hetton Lyons Angling Fish Care

How to keep fish safe on the bank while fishing during your session.



Take a look across the internet and you'll find plenty of articles and videos dedicated to fish baits, rigs and methods, but very little on the topic of fish care in comparison. This is a huge shame as fish care is vital to the upkeep and maintenance of our sport. Here we tackle the subject head-on and give our tips and tricks for ensuring that these beautiful creatures are appropriately cared for.

It is important to remember that when the fish is on the bank, its welfare is completely in our hands. It is up to us to preserve our fish stocks in the best condition possible, by looking after each and every fish to the best of our ability.

Naturally, a good number of anglers who read this will understand exactly how to best look after their catch when it is on the bank, nevertheless to an inexperienced angler or someone new who is coming into the sport, it may be less obvious. It is not uncommon to find a novice angler who is able to tie a decent PVA presentation, but completely unable to look after the fish that they catch with it – a worrying outcome from the lack of attention given to fish care online perhaps.

Every fish should be given the maximum care possible when on the bank

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ESSENTIAL GEAR

Having the correct equipment is vital, there is simply no excuse for anglers to not have the right gear with them when out by the water. This starts with a decent unhooking mat, and one that is appropriately sized for the fish or other fish that exist in the water in which you are fishing.

Despite what you may expect, the largest mats don't always provide the most protection. This means that you need to consider the thickness and density of the mat too. If the weight of a fish is enough to 'bottom out' a mat over solid ground, then it is possible that the fish could severely damage itself, should it start flapping about.



Onto the landing net now; a 42" or larger net for large fish with a deep, soft mesh is the minimum of what you should be using. A fine mesh is vital, as it prevents the fish's pectoral fins from getting caught during the landing process. Nets with removable arms are preferred as they make transferring the fish to the unhooking mat far easier.

Fish care kits are another must have. These products provide you with the tools to clear up and address any damage that has been done to the fish, through the application of antiseptic gels or liquids. They often come with swabs to make applying the treatment easier and more accurate.

If you're out for big fish, you will need a weigh sling in order to weigh your prize. Pick a sling that is sturdy, to keep your catch secure, but also made from a soft material to keep it comfortable. Slings with front and rear access zips make the process of releasing the fish back into the water much easier.

Obviously, if you want to weigh your catch you will also need scales – keep these next to the mat for easy access. Always wet your sling and zero the scales before getting the fish out of the water.

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UNHOOKING TOOLS

Depending on the size of hook you are fishing with, there are two or three unhooking tools which anglers should have with them at all times – a small set of wire cutters, a pair of forceps and if using smaller hooks, a disgorger.

ADDITIONAL GEAR

It is also worth having a spare container with you. Fill it with lake water (never tap water) and keep it close to your unhooking gear. When a fish is caught, use the bucket to pour water over the mat and onto the fish itself, if needed.

REMOVING A FISH FROM THE WATER

Preparation is vital when it comes to removing a fish from the water. Once you've done the difficult part and actually caught a fish, you need to be as organised as possible on the bank to keep yourself, the fish and your equipment safe. If the water depth is suitable and there are no obstructions on the bank, start by stabbing a bank stick in front of the V in the net frame. This will keep the fish secure and frees you up to get everything else ready. If for instance there are obstructions on the bank, meaning that you cannot use a bank stick, move the fish whilst it is still in the net to somewhere where it is safe to do so.

Now you need to get all of the required equipment out and prepared. It's always good to have a tidy swim and your tools organised, but the bare minimum is to have a clear path to your unhooking mat. Once that's done, it's time to get wet. Use lake water (never tap water) to wet your hands, the unhooking mat and the weigh sling. This is crucial, as it will prevent the protective slime secreted along the fish's body from drying up, which can lead to damage and scarring of the fish's skin.

On a hot day, a foam mat can absorb a lot of heat, so keep it wet and cool by topping it up with water throughout the session. As well as this, you need to place your unhooking mat in a suitable place which has the backdrop you want for any pictures you are planning to take.

Don't forget to zero the scales with your wet sling either, so that the reading is accurate.

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Where the fish needs to get to

Get the camera out and correctly positioned, ready to go. Most of us now have high-quality cameras in our pockets, in the form of smartphones or digital cameras. This means that it is no longer necessary to take half a dozen photos of one fish, no matter its size. We can now see the photos that have been taken almost instantly, check the quality of the three or four of them and then return the fish to the water – greatly reducing the time that the fish is held out of water. In addition, self-takes are now far easier to do, a real blessing if you enjoy fishing alone. Regardless of the gear that you are using to take the photo with, make sure that you know what you're doing with it before the fish is on the bank, so you can return it as quickly as possible.

Attempting to control both the rod and the fish in your net at once is a real challenge and completely unnecessary. Avoid doing this by cutting the mainline below the tubing. To keep your tubing on the mainline, use your forceps to nip the end of the mainline or tie a few of hand over knots in the mainline itself.

Many anglers press their nets into the floor when folding it down, this damages the net, lowering its structural integrity and lifespan. Don't do this. Instead, rest it on the top of your boot as you press down the flex arm.

Before taking the fish out of the water, it is very important to check where the hook and lead actually are, as it is possible for the hook to become caught in the mesh. If this happens, when you go to lift the net it will cause a lot of damage to the fish's mouth, so watch out! Always check that the fins are not sticking out and are folded flat against the fish's body, this is particularly important for the pectoral fins.

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Finally, double check that there are no obstructions in the way of your path to the mat and that you have a secure foothold. Now it's time to actually get the fish out of the water. Avoid using the net by itself to lift your catch, as this can strain the fish needlessly. Instead, slide the net and the fish straight into a floating fish sling and pick it up by lifting the sling.

A fish can often be far heavier than it may appear, so when lifting one, always exercise caution. Lift with your legs, not your back and keep the fish as low as possible, without scuffing it on the ground, obviously. Take it straight over to the mat, where it's time to move on to unhooking.

UNHOOKING A FISH

Fish with battered and damaged mouths are sadly an increasingly common sight, particularly on waters with a high angling pressure. Playing the fish correctly when it is on your line is important for avoiding this phenomenon, but for the most part, it is a result of poor unhooking skills. Looking after the fish and maintaining their wellbeing is crucial for keeping our sport sustainable, unhooking your catch correctly is simply a must.

The area that the hook is sitting in the fish's mouth (the hook hold, as it is also known) will dictate how you should remove it. If the hook is positioned neatly in the fish's bottom lip, it should be rather straightforward to remove. Simply use your thumb to apply pressure to the eye of the hook in the direction of penetration, then follow the curve of the point to roll the hook out.



A favourable hook hold

Keep a finger next to the point and maintain pressure of the floor of the fish's mouth, this will prevent the fish's lip from moving with the hook. When you hear a small pop you are done – this

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is the sound of the barb being released. If the hook is too far back in the fish's mouth to do this, you will need to use a pair of forceps to clamp onto the shank of the hook. The forceps should be used to apply pressure in the same way that you would with your thumb, then roll out the hook. Extracting a hook with a short shank and a wide gape is generally easier than long shank hooks, they also cause less damage to the fish's mouth.

The wire cutters, included in the essential gear section, are ideal if a hook has gone in and then come back out past the barb. Instead of trying to push the hook back through the way it came, which will likely do some damage to the fish, use the cutters to split the hook in two, it should then just drop straight out. If the fish is angry or stressed during this procedure, keep its eyes covered and give it a chance to relax before continuing. If using a small hook, it is possible to safely and easily remove a hook using a disgorger.

Now get everything out of the fish's mouth, including the lead (if it hasn't dropped) and mainline. Once it's out, put it somewhere away from the fish to prevent it from being stepped on. Now it's time to apply your antiseptic product or iodine to the fish's mouth.



Applying anti-septic to the fish's mouth

Don't forget to check the fish's body for any damage and apply the antiseptic/iodine to any scrapes or scratches that are found. Dry the area with a clean cloth before applying the product, this helps the product stay in the area that it is needed. A lot of anglers leave the iodine/antiseptic on the fish for a few minutes for it to take effect before returning the fish to the water. If doing so, stay with the fish during this time, ensure its eyes are covered and get ready to step in if it starts to flap around on the mat.

MOVING THE FISH FROM THE MAT TO A WEIGH SLING

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Start by using lake water (never tap water) to wet the sling. Open the wet sling and place it onto the mat, lift your catch onto the sling in an upright position. Do not lay the fish on its side in the sling, as this can lead to fin damage when the sling is lifted. Before zipping up the sling and weighing your catch, ensure that all the fins are flat to the fish's body. Failure to do so will cause the fish unnecessary stress and can damage its fins.

Now your catch is tucked up in the sling with all its fins flat against its body, zip it up to secure the fish and prevent it from falling out when the sling is lifted. Attach the scales to the handle of the sling and lift. Whilst the fish is suspended in the air, make sure you keep it above the mat and don't forget to write down those pounds and ounces!

CONTROLLING THE FISH ON THE MAT

Some fish fight harder than others. If you catch enough, you'll eventually run into an extremely lively one that continues its fight on the bank. Being able to deal with this is crucial in order to stop the fish from causing damage to itself.

If you find yourself with a fish flapping around on the mat, the very first thing to do is to get your body over the fish and hold it in position to stop it from flapping. It's all related to how much direct sunlight is hitting the fish's body, so this acts to both lower the amount of sun hitting the fish, as well as directly preventing it from flapping. If this doesn't stop the fish going berserk on the mat, cover its head with the wet sling, this will provide it with additional moisture and block out more sunlight.



Keep it calm

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PICTURE TIME

Having the fish give you a tail slap or start to thrash around whilst you're holding it for a photograph is a recipe for disaster. Most of the time, just before the fish does either of these actions it will tense up in your hands, if you feel this happen immediately lower it onto the mat and wait until its behaviour returns to normal. If the fish does start to flap about whilst you're holding it, bring it in close to your body and lower it gently onto the mat.

HOW TO HOLD A FISH

For many people this will be obvious, but look online and you'll see anglers holding their catches all wrong, from cuddling it, to holding it above their heads. Correctly holding the fish is important for two reasons, firstly it will be a more comfortable experience for the fish and lower the risk of something happening to it, like being dropped. Secondly, it will make your photos look great.

Try to stay low when holding your prize, either by kneeling or posing in a crouched position and always keep the fish above the mat, just in case it does start to flap around and you lose your grip on the slippery critter. The further you hold the fish away from your body, the harder it will be to safety control if it starts to thrash around. With that said, cuddling the fish will make for a bad picture and can also make it harder to control, as your range of movement is limited. There is no need to do either, just keep your upper arms parallel to your body with your elbows tucked and your forearms at a right angle.

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR HANDS?

It's important to look after the fish's fins when you're posing with it, to do so place one of your hands with the pectoral fin secured between your fingers, do the same with your other hand for the anal fin.

Don't forget, this document applies to all specimen fish!

TIGHT LINES!