

Catching Ladyfish 101

The Ladyfish (*Elops saurus*) is a commonly found fish within the family Elopidae. With similar fin structure and shiny scales, they resemble a close relative of theirs - the Tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*) - but in a much skinnier form. They have very shiny scales, large eyes, a forked tail, and the pectoral fins are very low behind the gill plate. They also have a similarly shaped mouth to a tarpon, where it is curved upwards for eating fish and other critters off the surface. Ladyfish inhabit a wide range of salinities, and are commonly found in brackish environments within mangrove and salt marsh channels, but also venture offshore in the fall for spawning. Reaching a maximum size of about 39 inches and 15 pounds, ladyfish of all sizes put up a great fight on the end of the line.

Ladyfish Behavior

The "poor man's tarpon," the ladyfish is a great all-around sport fish for all anglers. Whether you're an avid fly fisherman or a die-hard live bait angler (live ladyfish make excellent baits for other fish), there is a lot of fun to be had catching Ladyfish. Even at small sizes, juvenile ladyfish pack a punch, and full of energy, while the larger adults can be a good five pounds or more and of course, just as energetic.

Throughout most of the year, ladyfish inhabit brackish environments with slow moving water, such as mangrove and salt marsh channels. Here, their favorite food item is fish, such as anchovies, mullet, sardines, menhaden, but will also consume shrimp and other crustaceans when available. Stomach content studies often reveal over 90% of their diet being fish-based. In the fall, adult ladyfish form large aggregations offshore for spawning, where they are often found just off the beaches.



Elops Saurus – aka The Ladyfish. They occur in the western North Atlantic Ocean from Cape Cod south to Brazil.

Where to Find Ladyfish

I do not remember catching a ladyfish offshore. It probably happens, but if we have ladyfish on the boat and we're in 60 feet of water, they're usually cut into big chunks and are being lowered to feed to grouper, snapper, or shark we're trying to catch. Ladyfish are live-bait predators, but the open water is likely to be a broad grass flat, the edges of channels, or at times the channels themselves inside the bigger bays. The species has been studied in both Tampa Bay and the Indian Lagoon chain of waterways on the east coast, and they're known to breed and egg and begin their life cycles in the estuaries, where brackish water serves as their early environments.

They are around all year, with the smaller fish closer to the mangroves, inside residential canals, and in general anywhere that speckled trout, snook, redfish, cobia, tripletail, and catfish are caught. They are fast in the water and when they're feeding in schools, easily identifiable by diving birds.

Where to Catch Ladyfish

Throughout most of the year, you will find ladyfish within the estuaries along our coasts. Ladyfish can tolerate a very wide range of salinities, from full salt water to just about full freshwater, and are often found everywhere in between. The juveniles prefer to stick to the more calm backwaters between mangroves or salt marsh grasses, while the adults are often found in the deeper channels, and even offshore during the fall spawning season. The fish do not act much differently in the coldest wintertime than they do in the hot summer months.



They're active feeders around the clock, and you can catch them in a dead slack tide – something you cannot expect from snook or redfish. The bigger fish are on the edges of flats and often in the open channels, where they feed in schools. They're rarely alone, and if you catch one on the flats as it's jumping and running you often see two or three following the action and seeing if any food falls from the mouths of their seemingly excited cousin. If you catch one, there are more of them looking at you even if you are not looking at them.

Tackle for Ladyfish

The biggest ladyfish are beasts and will break you off or shake the lure or bait nine times out of ten. At nighttime, underneath big bay bridges or near sea walls, you can catch them weighing six and eight pounds. The biggest one we ever heard of was almost 40 inches and weighed in at 15 pounds, which we can only imagine. We have caught them at 30-32 inches though, and they fight like a miniature tarpon. Most of the ones you catch will be between a foot and two feet long and weigh a few pounds. They do not run far, but they jump and can definitely strip drag.

Spinning Tackle

The best tackle for them is what you're carrying, which most of the time should be a seven to a seven-foot-six, fast action spinning rod. If you want to fish for them with live baits, make the rod softer – more of a medium action. The extra bend and whip in the rod will keep live baits from getting ripped off when you throw them.



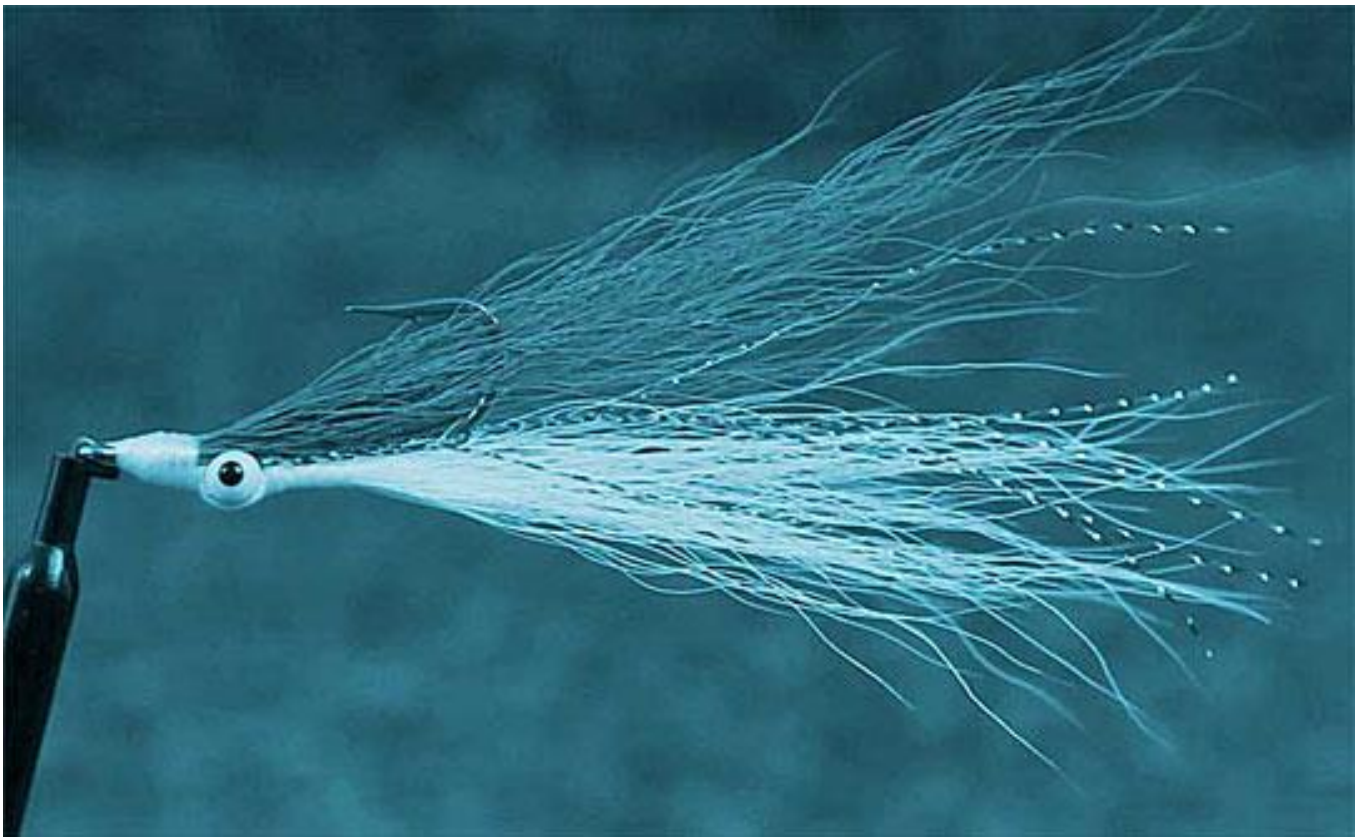
Spinning tackle is easy to use and easy to find in a light or ultralight setup, allowing you to go as low as two-pound test line. Since spinning tackle is easiest to use, it's generally recommended for beginners, but is also easy to use for flipping small live baits or lures under mangrove branches where ladyfish will be lurking, so use them when fishing the backwaters and in tight spaces. Spinning gear is also great for letting the drag loose, so you can avoid tension breaks when a Ladyfish makes several jumps.

Conventional Tackle for Ladyfish

Most of the benefits you'll hear about conventional tackle refer to the amount of leverage you have against the fish -- this helps pull big fish away from structures, and is very useful for fighting big snook, grouper, or anything else that may pull you into a hole. When it comes to ladyfish however, a good light conventional reel will allow you to cast farther lures, so you can cover more ground. Ladyfish like to hit a fast-moving lure, so the farther the cast, the better. Conventional tackle also has better casting accuracy, and thus can really help out when trying to cast far distances into a school of bait being busted by ladyfish.

Fly Tackle for Ladyfish

Fly-fishing is one of the best ways to target ladyfish. These small but aggressive fish will readily hit small silvery streamer flies and popping surface flies, and are a lot of fun to fight on a fly rod, most of the time taking you to the reel. The backwaters can be pretty tight, but are usually protected nicely from the wind, making fly fishing a little easier. Use about a 2-to-4 weight rod for a good balance of "far casting and fun catching."



Baits for Ladyfish

The main diet of a ladyfish consists of small silvery fish. Juvenile ladyfish eat mostly anchovies (called glass minnows by many), and small menhaden, sardines, and mullet, while the larger adults tend to prefer bigger menhaden, sardines, and mullet. Of course, as these are the natural prey of ladyfish, and usually very abundant in the estuaries, they are all great baits, with the exception of the anchovies, which make great live chum for perking up the fish.

Lures for Ladyfish

Since ladyfish love to eat those small silvery baitfish, there are a lot of good options when it comes to lures. Perhaps one of the best is a small silver spoon. Probably just as good, a small silvery shallow-diving plug that mimics a mullet work very well also. Ladyfish love to eat fast-moving prey, so cast these lures far to cover a lot of distance, and then retrieve fairly fast for solid action.

Ladies: Trash Fish or Great Fun?

You can decide that you hate ladyfish; the nasty gray poop they spray all over your otherwise perfect boat and perfect fashion clothing was just too much. You want to slam them onto the deck, and let them try to swim away as they die slowly.

Or you are like us. You love them. You can catch them on a fly-rod, you can use them to teach people a great deal about many aspects of fishing, they jump like little tarpon, and they can be cut into chunks to catch redfish stupid enough to eat them raw. We love ladyfish. And so should you. Try them. Just leave the white starched shirt at home and bring soap and a brush to clean your boat. They're killer fun to catch.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/ladyfish#sthash.RnD0D074.dpuf>

Top 10 Tips for Catching Ladyfish

This open-water predator is often called a “poor man's tarpon”, and for good reason. The ladyfish, or *Elops saurus*, is not often targeted, but their jumping ability and big fighting strength make them a great introduction to fishing for the young, or young at heart.

You can catch them just about anywhere in and around Tampa Bay and Indian Lagoon on the east coast. That is not to say you cannot catch them all over Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, but they're known to spawn in low salinity estuaries in those two places.



This image is courtesy Mike Wilson.

1. Keep them in the water.

They are slimy and they will secrete a toxic substance able to reach across a 21' bay boat.

Keep them in the water – they will survive the experience and you will smell much better.

2. Try catching them with spoons.
3. Watch for birds.
4. Fish the backwaters for constant action.
5. Go light!
6. Use a high gear ratio reel.
7. Bring fish grips or at least a pair of pliers!
8. Use a strong fluorocarbon leader.
9. Keep one for the freezer!
10. Try fishing one of them live near a dock or bridge piling.

The Slime Machine Called Ladyfish

Ladyfish are fun to catch, bite all day, and are abundant where you have a good mix of fresh and salt water (i.e. estuary). Use a light tackle setup, a few small shiny lures, and get out there and have some fun. Using these tips should help you to first of all, catch ladyfish, and secondly, use them as bait to catch bigger gamefish. Be sure to visit our saltwater and freshwater Portals prior to going after a species that you are not familiar with.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/ladyfish/10-ladyfish-tips#sthash.iG8egyhg.dpuf>

Line and Leaders for Ladyfish

Besides the bait, the most important thing for most fish is the line. Sure, you could catch a catfish in dirty water on a piece of yarn, but for most fish that rely on eyesight, line and leader choice is key. Taking a look at those great big eyes on a ladyfish, it's easy to see that these fish have superb eyesight, and below we describe the best fishing lines and leaders for catching them.

Fishing Lines for Ladyfish Fishing

Between the three main types of line materials (monofilament, braid, and fluorocarbon), it's important to always keep the end of the line, or the leader if one is used, clear, because of that excellent eyesight. Although ladyfish can reach up to 15 pounds, they commonly weigh about two-to-four pounds, so use as light of line as you wish for the sport of it.

Monofilament Line for Ladyfish

Monofilament line is recommended for the main line when targeting ladyfish because the stretch in the line may give you a little slack when the fish jumps or runs unexpectedly. When a fish jumps -- and ladyfish jump a lot -- they sometimes land on the line, resulting in a quick tension break in the line. It's also a good choice just based on its clarity and cost.

Braided Line for Ladyfish

Braided line has both benefits and costs when it comes to catching Ladyfish. For one, it has a thinner diameter than the other line types, which means the line is lighter and more sensitive, allowing you to cast farther and control smaller lures more easily. The negative side of braided line however is that it completely lacks stretch, so the hook may easily rip out of the fish's mouth after a strong run or jump if the drag is not set appropriately.

Using Fluorocarbon for Ladyfish

Fluorocarbon line is always a great leader, but can also be a great main line when using light test (heavier test can get cost-prohibitive to spool an entire reel). The best thing about fluorocarbon line is that it is essentially invisible underwater, which will increase your catch on days that the fish are line-shy. It is also more resistant to abrasions than monofilament or braided lines.

Using Fly-Line for Ladyfish

A forward-weighted fly-line is recommended for targeting Ladyfish, so that you have more control casting into the tight spaces where the fish are. Forward-weighted line is also a bit easier to cast against the wind, which is usually pretty breezy near the coasts during the cooler months. At the end of the line, use a fluorocarbon tippet, as it will sink well and have good clarity for presenting the fly well.

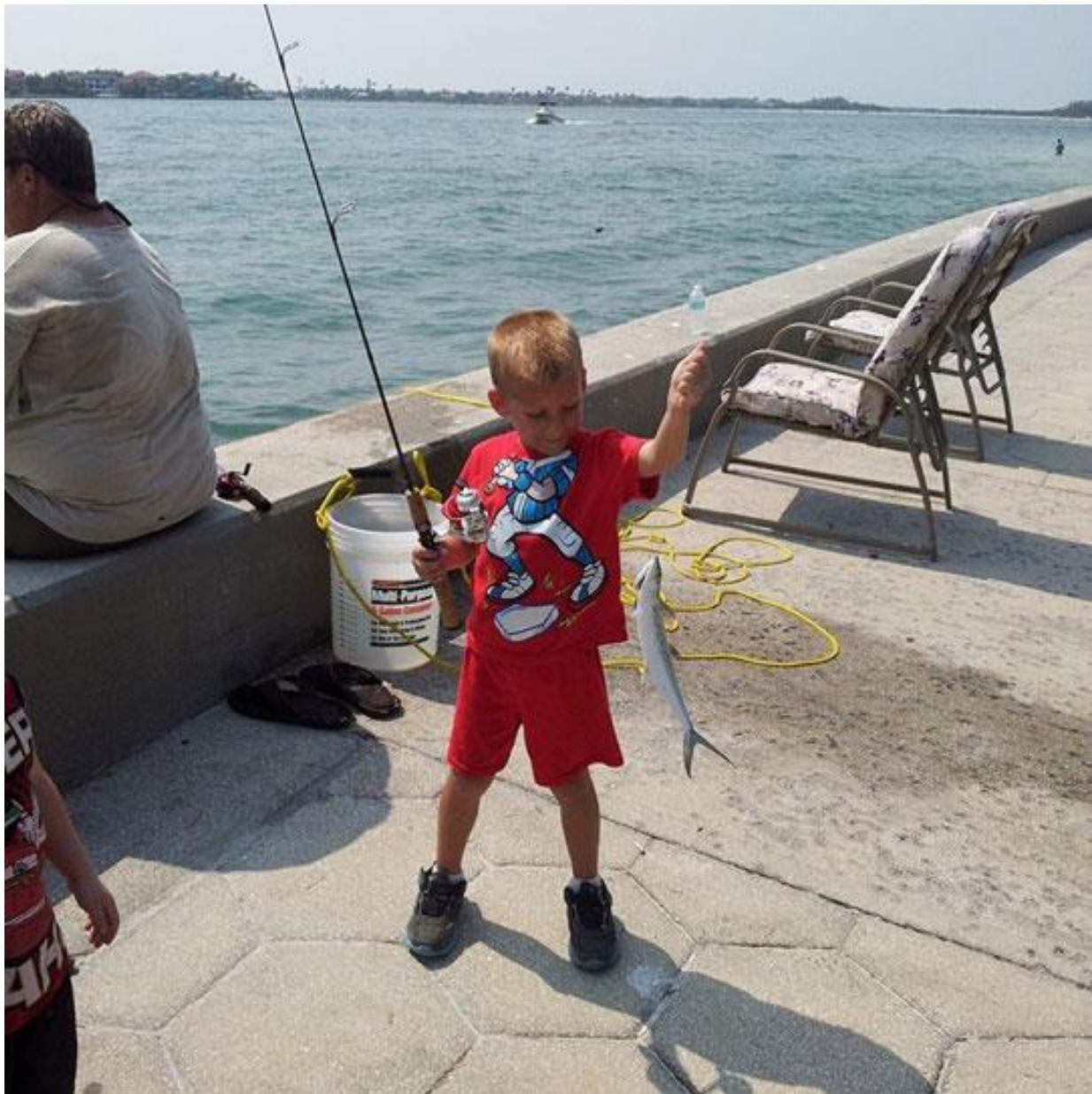
Final Notes about Ladyfish Lines and Leaders

In summary, a light monofilament line may be all that you need to have a good day catching ladyfish. If choosing braided line for its better casting ability and sensitivity, use a monofilament shock leader to absorb some of the tension. Either way, make sure the end of the line is either clear or a clear leader is used.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/ladyfish/best-line-leaders-ladyfish#sthash.k8j1GEJ5.dpuf>

Natural Baits for Ladyfish

There aren't many fish out there as fun and easy to catch as a ladyfish, especially for the kids, or when you just want to have some good fun, hooking into a big ladyfish will always make the day, and natural baits will always catch these hungry fish.



The Best Baits for Ladyfish

In the wild, ladyfish mostly consume small baitfish species like sardines, mullet, anchovies, or menhaden, so these are obviously great choices for bait. Overall, these baits can be either live, dead, or even cut into chunks and used quite effectively.

Menhaden

Menhaden are possibly the favored meal of a Ladyfish. One study of stomach contents found that almost 75% of the food eaten by ladyfish were menhaden alone! So, if you can castnet a good few dozen or so back in the estuaries, menhaden make the perfect bait for them. They can also be found frozen and be very effective under a bobber that way, too.

Mullet

Mullet are extremely abundant within estuaries and lagoons, and are great baits for just about anything, including of course a ladyfish. Look for smaller mullet in the three-to-four inch range along the shorelines of flat shallow areas for cast netting, or buy them frozen just about anywhere that sells bait.

Sardines

Sardines are also very abundant in most of the estuaries, and are great ladyfish baits. Sardines are about as shiny as they come, and the small ones can usually be cast-netted near the shorelines first thing in the morning, or near structures like channel markers, docks, and pilings in shallow water.

Anchovies

Anchovies are the small one-to-two inch fish that most fishermen call "glass minnows" because of their see-through appearance. Although anchovies make up a large portion of a juvenile ladyfish's diet, they can be a great bait for "live chumming," the process of taking a handful of anchovies at a time to get the fish spruced up.

Other Baits that will Catch Ladyfish

Like most fish, ladyfish are opportunistic, and primarily eat fish like menhaden and mullet because that is what is around to eat. It's generally best to "match the hatch" and use the most common bait in the area, but any fish you can get your hands on with a bit of shine will work. Small mojaras, pinfish, or even smaller ladyfish!

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/ladyfish/natural-live-bait#sthash.K224Ks35.dpuf>

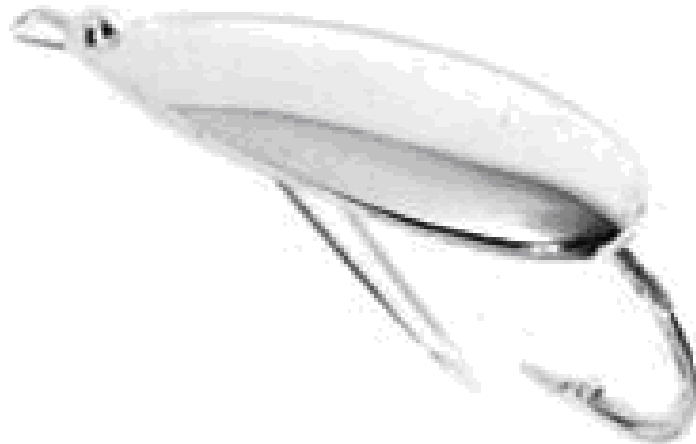
Artificial Lures for Catching Ladyfish

Ladyfish are a lightning-fast and aggressive fish, which makes them the perfect target for artificial lures. Called the "poor man's tarpon" by many, ladyfish can be very impressive jumpers for their size, often leaping two feet out of the water several times before being landed.

The majority of a ladyfish's diet consists of fish. In fact, studies looking at the stomach content of ladyfish have found very high amounts of shiny baitfish in particular, so the best lures are the shiny and flashy ones like spoons, spinnerbaits, and the many others on the market.

Spoons for Ladyfish

Silver spoons work great for catching ladyfish, because they not only look like their favorite prey, small, shiny fish, but they work well when reeled in very fast, which is exactly what a ladyfish just can't resist. Use smaller spoons (one to two inches) in the backwaters of estuaries and lagoons to catch big ladyfish all day long.



A silver spoon is a perfect mimic of a fast-moving silver fish like a menhaden, one of the Ladyfish's favorite meals.

Hard Plastics for Ladyfish

Hard plastic lures work great for ladyfish because they can be retrieved fast, often have a great shiny new coat on them, and make lots of noise. In dark water like the back of estuaries, that noise can do a lot for attracting the attention of aggressive fish like ladyfish.



For Ladyfish, choose a lure with a nice shiny coat that makes lots of noise.

Saltwater Flies for Ladyfish

Any time you have a hungry, aggressive fish as a target, they are usually a good candidate for using flies. The best flies are the streamers of course -- white or silver in color to mimic an anchovy, small sardine or menhaden. Sometimes flies can be difficult to use in the tight corners of a mangrove channel, so find the small open coves where the ladyfish will be hiding for the best fly action.



Choose a small silver streamer when chasing Ladyfish. A nice white or silver color will give the appearance of the small baitfish they love to eat.

A General Statement about Ladyfish Lures

Ladyfish are a whole lot of fun to target with artificial lures, and they can be taken on just about anything that shines. In fact, to really keep up the excitement, switch up the lures when the fish stop biting, so you have some action all day. Anything from the lures shown here in this article to small spinnerbaits for bass or crappie will catch their attention.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/ladyfish/artificial-lures-jigs#sthash.uZfDKavZ.dpuf>