

# Catching Spanish Mackerel 101

A high-salinity "terminal" fish, the jaw structure of a Spanish mackerel presents a top and bottom jaw of the same length. They're designed to look in front of them, they feed in large schools, and because they drive their small baitfish prey to the surface, they make diving birds show you where they're feeding. In all, they're fun to catch, easy to catch, and not so bad to eat if you know a few tricks.

Like all of our 101 articles, all of the issues we discuss here – from live bait to lures, and from tackle to eating the fish -- are covered in depth if you dig into the resources available to you at [TheOnlineFisherman.com](http://TheOnlineFisherman.com).



*Spanish mackerel contains high amounts of beneficial Omega-3 and Omega-6 oils.*

## When to Find Spanish Mackerel

Watch for diving birds anytime from March through September and even early October. In the heat of summer they're all over the bays and inland waters, and we've caught them while fishing for redfish next to oyster bars and on grass flats drifting for speckled trout. Pelicans might get into the fray, but we're talking about small terns – white (usually) with black beaks that dive in loops, touching the surface as they grab pieces of the chewed bait.



*Keep your eye on the mobbing birds.*

Diving birds are a dead giveaway that some kind of open-water predator is feeding. The birds are feeding on the bait and the bait would not normally be so close to the surface - or unable to "sound" (dive deep) to get out of the birds' way. A lot of different predators cause this activity, but in the spring, summer and early fall the frenzy often means Spanish mackerel. Try drifting into the school using the wind or even the breeze. You see this happen in calm windless water at times, but more often than not you can get upwind of the feed and drift in. It's a sure-fire way to catch one on a fly-rod. They're not particularly spooky when they're covered with blood and chunks of recently-killed baitfish, but you can make them sound if you run right into the school, or even too close. Use the wind, stay quiet, and you'll catch them.

The birds are not usually big enough to eat the whole baits, which become only table fare once they're mangled into pieces by fish with teeth. If there are a cloud of birds diving and swooping as they approach, and flying off the surface of the water with food, then something's going on just below the surface. From March until June they're mostly offshore, then onto the beaches and passes. By July they're so close to the beaches and piers you can catch them standing on the wood, ground or sand. In the summer and until the early fall – like the first couple of weeks in September, you can catch them on the flats and near the tops of the big bays. They eat a lot and are easy to find and catch.

*A Spanish mackerel or three -- excellent table fare when properly prepared.*

# Where to Catch Spanish Mackerel

Spanish Mackerel are open-water fish. Even when they're inshore (which they often are) they're not hanging out waiting for bait; they are chasing it. They school around it, they send out scouts to tighten the schooling targets, they tighten the prey into balls, and they take turns eating them. This herding behavior is not commonly discussed, but if you watch the schools form like we have, you see this behavior in kingfish, Spanish Mackerel, and even ladyfish. They seem to be swarming randomly within the bait schools, and they do get so excited that it's not like they're marching in lock-step. However, when they begin feeding on schools of baits like threadfin or anchovies or scaled sardines, or any of the school baits like Spanish sardines (not related), they seem to keep the bait in a ball near the surface.

## Tackle for Spanish Mackerel

The tackle used for Spanish Mackerel will vary depending on your taste, but there should be some constants that will make it easier for you. Since Spanish Mackerel are not the biggest fish in the sea, the tackle you can use can range anywhere from light to medium, but one thing must hold for any setup – you have to be fast with it. Spanish Mackerel are incredibly quick and hit fast, so you need to cast far, reel fast, and be ready to set a fast hook.



*Shimano 8-foot spinning rod -- light-to-medium power and moderate-to-fast action.*

# Spinning Tackle for Spanish Mackerel

A lot of the mackerel we've caught in our lives have been from boats. Fishing from the beach, a pier, or fishing waist deep in water on a grass flat near the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean is different than fishing from a boat. Spanish Mackerel also hit a certain way. Because they are 'terminal' fish, they run up and grab baits and keep running. They might grab a bait sideways and turn it to swallow it lengthwise to their throats, but they do all of that while they're running. They're terminal fish, and designed to grab fast bait. That means that the best all-around lure for Spanish Mackerel is a spoon or other heavy (relative) casting and retrieving artificial. Distance casting – not so important when snook-fishing in tight backcountry – becomes much more critical when you're trying to reach a flock of diving birds like you'll seek when targeting Spanish Mackerel from boat or shoreline. An extra five or ten feet of casting distance can mean the difference between only a few fish and one every cast.

We like longer spinning rods for Spanish Mackerel fishing – as long as eight feet. We prefer medium action in the rods we use, rather than the action (flex) in the rod being near the tip, which means having it about midway into the blank (measured from the tip backwards towards the handle). If the fish are big, or are mixed in with much bigger kingfish, a heavier duty rod with more backbone and perhaps faster action is called for.



*There are many types of so-called 'spoon lures,' some unconventionally colored.*

## Conventional Tackle for Spanish Mackerel

To accommodate for the often-hooked kings that are sometimes eating the Spanish Mackerel, and to grant additional leverage, a lot of anglers fishing for open-water species use "conventional" tackle. Comprised of a rod with a trigger grip, the conventional rod puts the reel on top of the rod -- not below it -- as is the case with spinning gear. This added leverage plus the technology of "level winds," which keep the line building up on the rotating spool even as you retrieve, makes them better suited for fishing from piers. Conventional tackle is also recommended for trolling lures at high speeds.

## Flyrods for Spanish Mackerel

Spanish Mackerel, being open-water terminal predators, are always looking for flashes. And nothing can flash quite like a well-tied saltwater "streamer" fly. Made to look like baitfish, and often small enough to simulate even tiny anchovies (a favorite of some people on pizzas and all fish in the water), a fly is a killer lure for mackerel.



*A mackerel streamer fly.*

If you can cast a fly-rod in the often-windy conditions of open water, surf or windy grass flats, you can very well cast to a mackerel. Let a boat drift into a feeding school of them in the bays or open Gulf waters, and you can catch them 10 feet from the boat – perfect for anglers new to the ‘long rods,’ as we often call them. Most fly-anglers fishing in open water use large rods – 10 or even 12 – but the fly-rods we use for redfish and snook that often measure in the much more comfortable 8-weight range – work just fine for mackerel in open or close inshore waters. Just match the tackle to the conditions, and if you intend to release fish, try to use ultra-light tackle less often than mid-range gear.

## Baits for Spanish Mackerel

Spanish Mackerel are not picky eaters – they will eat just about anything. You can sure catch them with beautiful scaled sardines, but you will often catch just as many on a slice of cut squid belly, frozen chunk bait, or strip bait from previously frozen bait. Again, Spanish Mackerel are terminal feeders – built from the bones out to see and catch smaller fish in front of them. Although sardines are great baits, they don't hold on to the hook as well as a mullet or another hardier fish when casting far or trolling.

## Lures for Spanish Mackerel

Spoons - we could really stop there and you would never want for a tough fight and the ability to catch them until your arms are sore and the ice box filled. Other heavy, metal baits work just as well, but silver spoons are incredibly effective for Spanish Mackerel, especially when spoons are fished fast at first and then slower if you don't immediately draw hits.



*Treble hook spoon lures in silver.*

You can also try the "Countdown" method if the fish are running deeper in the water column – which they often are. If you see birds flying high and there are a few of them looking around as if they're waiting for something, they usually are. In season, in the warm months, the macks are often below the surface. They might be just above the bottom, midway in the water column or just below the surface. They often swarm three feet under and you can see clouds of them as they pass below on their way somewhere to eat.

*Look for changes in the water color, indicating fish below reflecting light.*

To do a countdown, cast the spoon and begin counting slowly when it hits the water. One, Two, Three, Four, etc., until it hits the bottom. Bring it back and clean the dirt off it. If the count was six before it clunked in the dirt, cast it out, count to three, and begin retrieving the spoon. It will be approximately halfway down the water column. Do it again, this time counting to five. Retrieve the spoon just above the bottom. Do the same thing and this time count only to one and start retrieving. Also pick up the rod tip, let the spoon sink, reel a bit, pick up again, and do it over and over, forming a shape as the spoon comes back to you. It will find mackerel if they're there.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/spanish-mackerel#sthash.sTsigNSt.dpuf>

## The Top 10 Spanish Mackerel Tips

Every year there are prime seasons for catching Spanish mackerel around the southeast. When the fish are in, they're found in schools by the hundred, and are very easy to catch if you know how. Although oilier than most fish, if prepared correctly, Spanish mackerel is excellent table fare. Here, we list the top 10 tips for catching Spanish mackerel.



*Spanish mackerel use their numbers to "ball up" their target prey.*

### 10 Things to Remember When Spanish Mackerel Fishing:

## 1.Look for the birds.

Sea birds are lazy animals, and take advantage of the Spanish mackerel's hard work schooling the baitfish to the surface. Wherever you see diving birds, chances are there is a school of predatory fish underneath, which will commonly be Spanish Mackerel.



2.Look for the boats!

3.Fish over structure offshore.

4.Use metal lures.

5.Try strips of natural bait for fast retrievals or trolling.

6.Use high gear ratio tackle for fast retrieval.

7.Use wire leaders if you're losing fish.

8.Use braided line when casting far.

9.Use conventional tackle from beaches and piers.

10.Use long rods.

Although the Top 10 Tips presented here certainly do not cover everything in the book, they are the main tips to get you started as a Spanish mackerel expert. Always keep an eye out on the forums for what others are doing in your area, as these tips only go so far, and local knowledge will give you a great advantage.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/spanish-mackerel/10-spanish-mackerel-tips#sthash.lmLA0FiU.dpuf>



# Line and Leader for Spanish Mackerel

Line and leader choice for Spanish mackerel is a battle between how many fish you want to catch, and how many lures you want to lose. The reason for this conundrum is that Spanish mackerel have some of the sharpest teeth out there, making wire leaders recommended by many, but these fish also have excellent eyesight, making catch rates much higher on fluorocarbon leaders over wire.

## Fishing Lines for Spanish Mackerel Fishing

The sharp teeth and good eyesight combination makes the leader choice the most important part of choosing a setup for Spanish mackerel. The main line is important as well, as you will need to be able to cast far distances and often set the hook from fairly far away. Here, we'll discuss the different options you have and what is recommended. In general, the fish are between 5-and-10 pounds, allowing you to use between 6-and-12 pound test line. However the leader is the most important because of those teeth, with 30-to-60 pound test line required if not using wire.

## Monofilament Line for Spanish Mackerel Fishing

For either your main line or the leader, monofilament line works fine for Spanish mackerel. One of the benefits of monofilament is that it floats. This can be beneficial when casting into schools of fish busting bait at the surface (if the fish are feeding at the surface, you don't want to cast too deep).



*Monofilament leader should be from 30-to-60 pound tests.*

The extra stretch in the line will make setting the hook a bit more difficult from far distances, so it is not recommended to use from the piers or beaches. As a leader, you want to use somewhere between 30-to-60 pound test line, because the teeth on these fish will tear right through a 20-pound leader.

## Using Fluorocarbon for Spanish Mackerel Fishing

Although spooling an entire reel with fluorocarbon is expensive (you need to often cast far, requiring lots of line for Spanish mackerel), fluorocarbon line is the best material to use as a leader for live bait fishing, and is also especially good as a leader for lures. The reason it is best for live-bait fishing is that it is virtually invisible underwater. When retrieving fast lures, the leader invisibility is not as important, but when the bait is sitting quite still, sometimes a monofilament and especially a wire leader will deter the fish. Fluorocarbon line is also more resistant to abrasion than both monofilament and braided lines, so it will resist cut-offs from those sharp teeth.

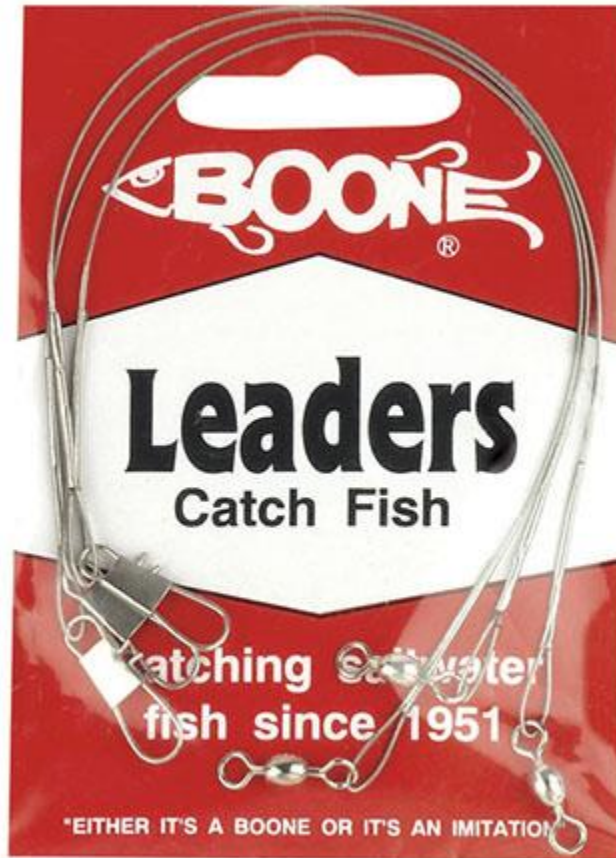
## Braided Line for Spanish Mackerel Fishing

Braided line is recommended for just about any situation – fishing off the piers and beaches, or when trolling, and even when casting off a boat. Braided line has a smaller diameter than monofilament or braided line of the same strength and will give you a farther cast, which can make the difference between reaching the school or not when fishing the beaches and piers. As you get that far cast, braided line also gives you a stronger hook set from far distances, because it has virtually no stretch in the line.



# Wire Leaders for Spanish Mackerel Fishing

Some anglers say that wire leaders deter Spanish mackerel from biting, whereas others only use wire as their leaders. Since the fish do have excellent eyesight, wire leaders more than likely lower your catch rate, but for every bite you get, you're almost guaranteed to not be cut off.



Cut offs are very common on monofilament or fluorocarbon leaders, so it is really a matter of how many lures you feel like losing that day to make up for the increased catch. Don't use wire leaders for live bait fishing though, as the fish will see the leader clear as day when sitting still.

## Final Notes About Spanish Mackerel Lines and Leaders

The two main challenges to overcome are the sharp teeth and good eyesight of Spanish mackerel. Use wire leaders if you don't mind catching fewer fish to keep all of your lures, but only for fast-retrieval lures. Thick (30-to-60 pound test) monofilament or fluorocarbon lines work well for leaders, but still may result in a few lost fish (and lures).

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/spanish-mackerel/best-line-leaders-spanish-mackerel#sthash.lwHO2jQn.dpuf>

# Natural Baits for Spanish Mackerel

Spanish mackerel are not very picky. In fact, they will pretty much eat anything you can throw to them. Some baits are better than others however, especially for staying on a hook when casting far distances or trolling behind the boat.

## The Best Baits for Spanish Mackerel

What you want to look for in a live bait for Spanish mackerel is of course the ability of the bait to attract the fish -- but also to stay on the hook when reeling fast. The best baits overall are the shiniest ones, which are sardines, herrings, etc., although they often don't stay on the hook for far casts. Other baits such as mullet and pinfish stay on a hook much better for casting live, and natural cut strips from a big mullet work very well for casting and trolling.

### *Sardines -The Smaller the Better*

The shiniest of the shiniest, sardines (Scaled or Spanish) are the best baits when you can cast close to the fish. This will most often be on a boat, where you can drift close to the school, sometimes even right over the school when the fish are concentrated over a reef or other structure. Due to their limited mouth gape, choose the smallest sardines (and other baits -- even artificials -- you can find).



*Shiny sardines are a good choice  
for Spanish Mackerel bait.*

## Mullet

Mullet, preferably the White mullet over the Striped mullet, work very well for Spanish mackerel. Mullet stay on the hook better than most any other baitfish, making it the recommended bait for casting far distances such as casting off of piers and beaches. It is also great for casting off boats and reeling in very fast. Mullet is very useful for using as strip bait – simply cut fillets off of a big mullet, and then some thin strips about three inches long.

## Shrimp

Although not really a large part of the Spanish Mackerel's natural diet, shrimp work very well as natural bait. As we've said before, there aren't many fish out there that don't eat shrimp. They can be cast far, especially when hooked under the horn of the head, and will be gobbled up by hungry mackerels.



*Hook the shrimp under the Horn*

## Other Baits For Spanish Mackerel

White, shiny baitfish will always work for catching Spanish mackerel. Depending on the area you are fishing, the bait available for catching or buying at your local bait shop may include different species, but they all work well, including Threadfin herrings, Atlantic and Gulf menhadens, mojarras, and many more.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/spanish-mackerel/natural-live-bait#sthash.prmd9KPW.dpuf>

# Artificial Lures for Catching Spanish Mackerel

Spanish Mackerel may be the easiest fish in the ocean to catch on artificial lures. They are very fast swimmers, chase down baits at incredible speeds, and strike faster than you can blink. Because of this, they often fall for the simplest of lures – sometimes even just a piece of drinking straw on a hook. Since they are so fast, they often don't even go for the slow live bait, but rather chase down the frantic-looking lure during a really fast retrieve.



*Lady with fly-rod catches up with fast Spanish Mackerel.*

## Lures for Catching Spanish Mackerel

There are a few things that make a lure effective for Spanish mackerel. The first, and probably most important, is that it has to be eye-catching. This usually includes being shiny, such as a silver spoon, but can also include bright colors such as blues, pinks and yellows. The second thing to look for is a heavy lure.



[Gotcha Lure](#)

Heavy lures allow you to cast far distances, so distant schools can be reached without spooking the fish by coming too close in a boat. Finally, the lures have to be able to be reeled in quickly. Be careful when using some of the soft plastic lures because they have shapes designed for a slow retrieve, and if reeled in too fast will start spinning in circles.



[Johnson Minnow Spoon](#)

## Hard Metal Lures for Spanish Mackerel

The best lures for Spanish mackerel are the hard metal lures. They come in a variety of types, but being heavy and metal both have great advantages. For one, weight equals distance, and allows you to reach the schools without spooking the fish. This is especially important if fishing off a pier or in the surf, where you don't have the ability to get closer. The other major benefit of metal lures is that they are tough. Spanish mackerel have a nice set of sharp, triangular teeth that can slice right through soft plastic lures. With a good metal spoon or other lure, you can catch fish again and again without losing the effectiveness of the lure.

Relatively heavy lures like spoons and the Gotcha' cast very well, and can benefit from a rod with somewhat of a medium action. You don't need the sensitivity offered by the fast-action rods we recommend for fish like redfish, and you're going to gain some casting distance for the somewhat minimized backbone.

# Soft Plastics for Spanish Mackerel

Soft plastics work great for Spanish mackerel. The type of lure chosen must be able to be reeled in fast, and must be a good shiny color. Several of the lures made by D.O.A.™ have a nice piece of lead inside them, allowing you to cast them far, without a big hunk of lead sticking out of the nose like the classic appearance of a jig-head. However, most of the leaded baits are too large for the limited mouth gape of the Spanish mackerel, so use the smaller TerrorEyz, which is the right size.



[DOA Terroreyz](#)

The downside to using soft plastics on Spanish mackerel is that they get easily torn up. The real benefit of artificial lures in the first place is that they are an investment: buy this expensive lure and you get many uses out of it. If a fish has sharp teeth like Spanish mackerel however, the lure may not last very long.

# Artificial Flies for Spanish Mackerel

Spanish mackerel love to munch on the small anchovies commonly called “glass minnows” that live along the beaches and inside estuaries. Small white, shiny flies mimic these anchovies quite well and are very deadly in a school of hungry Spanish mackerel. There are also many larger flies mimicking large baitfish such as scaled sardines, Spanish sardines, threadfin herring and many others, and these can be thrown as well. Try a fly such as a surf candy, with a more durable coating on it in conjunction with a durable leader.





### [Merrimack River Flies](#)

Small shiny flies that mimic the small anchovies that Spanish mackerel love to eat, are perfect for catching Spanish mackerel near the beaches.

## A General Statement about Spanish Mackerel Lures

In general, Spanish mackerel fishing involves a lot of fast retrieval and often, many lost lures. The best lures are the hard metal lures, which allow you to cast far and take the toll of sharp teeth all day, but soft plastics do work very well if you don't mind losing a ton of them. If using flies, use small shiny ones mimicking the small anchovies and herrings Spanish mackerel love to eat. Whatever lure, make sure to cast far and reel fast.

- See more at: <http://theonlinefisherman.com/spanish-mackerel/artificial-lures-jigs#sthash.cgaVdtKq.dpuf>