

# HOW TO CATCH SNAPPER

April 2020 - Pete Lamb



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## FIND THE FISH FIRST

The most important factor in catching snapper is finding the right location. The fish have got to be there for a start. Once you have found a location then use good quality bait, berley, lures and tackle to catch them.

A good spot is generally away from civilization, with minimal commercial and recreational pressure or has a good food source and is a traditional snapper spot.

Snapper will often patrol a sandy/shingle area for shellfish, worms and crustaceans or hang out around a rocky location feeding on shellfish, crabs and small fish. Fishing the edge of a reef can be good, but often out on the sand is good too. Try fishing an area for 30 – 45 minutes with berley and then move if you haven't caught any. Once you find the fish it's all on. They will move around a bit from day to day and week to week. When the water goes colder they can move into deeper water.

Water temp can't be too cold. 14 degrees is normally the minimum with 16 – 18 degrees the best. Sometimes you can throw the temp gage away when the fish are really hungry. This is normally the case during winter.

With strong Southerly winds the snapper can go off the bite or go into deeper water where the temperature stays more constant. With strong northerly winds the snapper move closer to shore and seem to be much more likely to feed aggressively.

During spawning time which is normally when the water temperature reaches around 18 degrees, the snapper move into an area with the right ground for laying their eggs. This is normally nutrient rich areas in or adjacent to large harbours and estuaries. This happens at different times of the year in different parts of the country normally from October through to March. In Wellington it's around Feb/March.

February / March is normally the peak of the snapper fishery in Wellington with the west coast firing earlier than the harbour and the harbour sometimes fishing well into May. Lately there have been some excellent winter runs of snapper in 50-70mtrs off places like Boom and Hunters. Also down towards Ohau point in 20-30mtrs has seen good snapper through winter months.

In the upper North Island the snapper are around all year round and often bite better in the winter than the some especially the bigger specimens. I have fished deepwater rock ledges like Cape Brett, Cape Kari Kari, North Cape in the past through the winter and it's incredible the amount of big fish hanging around close to the rocks.

For surfcasters XOS snapper move in close to beaches south of Wanganui and in Hawkes Bay in late October and early November (pre spawning time). Mid January to late February has seen very nice snapper caught from Paikariki through to Tehoro mainly on the turn of light and after dark.



## TACKLE

The lighter your line, smaller your hooks and lighter the sinker, the more fish you will hook up and hopefully land. The problem is that you might bust off or pull the hook out of a fish using the light gear.

On the sand, shingle or mud you can use light tackle and catch some big fish. In the rough ground you will need to gear up to avoid losing too many fish. As you gain experience you will be able to land bigger fish on lighter line.

## Braid or nylon?

These days many anglers are using braid instead of nylon because it has little or no stretch, is half to a third of the diameter of nylon and it's got high anti abrasion qualities. When using braid you need a flexible rod tip to act as a shock absorber and also you may need to use a bit heavier line (I use 50lb braid like I do 35lb nylon) than you would if you using nylon. Knot strength is not usually as good in braid as it is in nylon but if you double up when tying the knot it's pretty good. Nylon comes in a thin or thick diameter, soft or hard, low or standard stretch, so it pays to spool up with the right kind for the right job. Thin diameter is good for fishing deep water off the boat or for distance casting off the shore, hard thicker diameter (hard) is better for narly rock locations.

Many people start with 10-15kg line and then experiment with lighter or heavier stuff depending on conditions and the size of fish around.

Light tackle is good to catch 'cagey' fish as they don't see the line and it appears more natural. Breaking strain of about 3 – 6kg is classified as light. Medium tackle (6 – 10kg). Heavy tackle for big fishing rough ground is 10 – 15kg or even heavier. For XOS snapper in rough ground I use 50 – 80lb braid.

**Hooks** There are two main styles of hook these days. The self setting hook and the striking hook. Recurve, circle or mutsu hooks are all self setting and normally hook the fish in the corner of the mouth. The other style of hook is the beak, octopus or suicide hook. Sometimes these hooks will gut or gill hook a fish, especially with a two hook rig. For smaller snapper I use a 3 or 4/O recurve hook and for bigger fish a 6 – 8/O recurve.



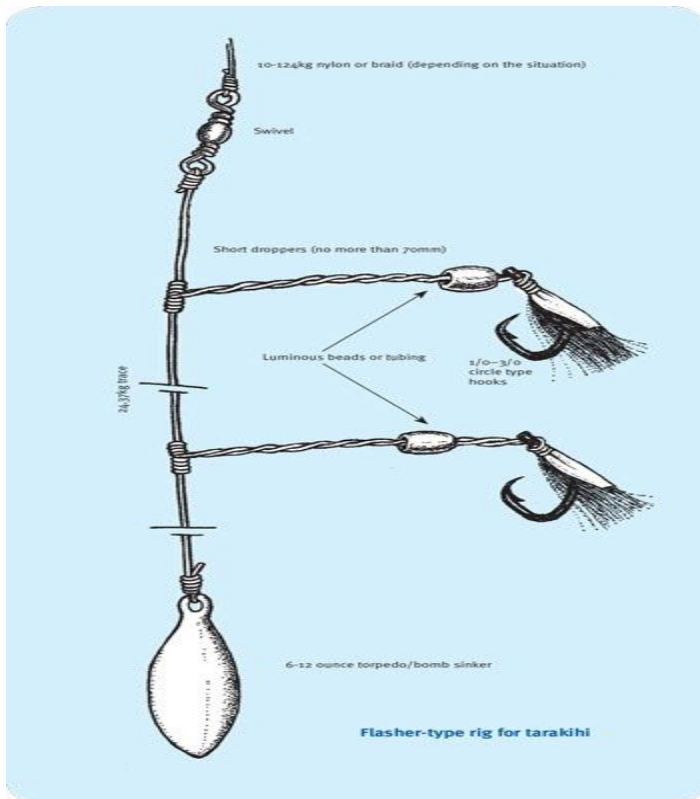
## Traces and Rigs

For making up traces I use good quality nylon or fluorocarbon. 40 – 60lb is pretty good for most fish but 80lb for XOS snapper and 20 - 30lb for school (smaller) fish. The fluorocarbon is hard for the fish to detect as it's got a similar refractive index as water but is expensive. Most people use around 50lb traceline like Black Magic or Sufix supple trace.

Swivels are good stop line twist and a clip swivel is good for replacing traces quickly. Size - #3 to #5 for small to medium fish, #1 - 2/O for big fish and #6 Ball bearing swivels for XOS snapper

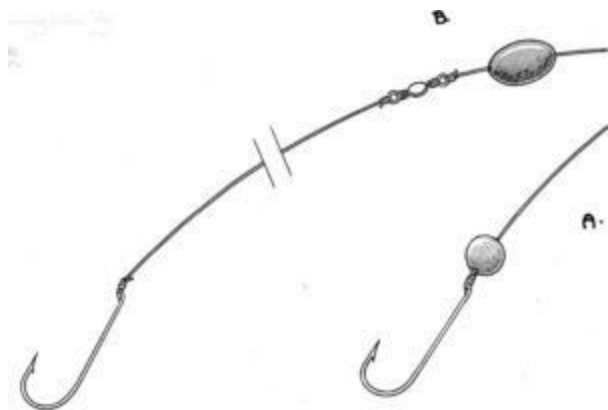
**Strayline** - This is my favourite rig if there is minimal current and small 'picker' fish about. I'll use a 30 - 50lb fluorocarbon leader and a hook snelled onto the end. This is simply a hook at the end of your line

**Ledger (dropper) rig** – My favourite rig for surfcasting (4-5oz torpedo sinker) and boatfishing (4 – 16oz sinker) in current



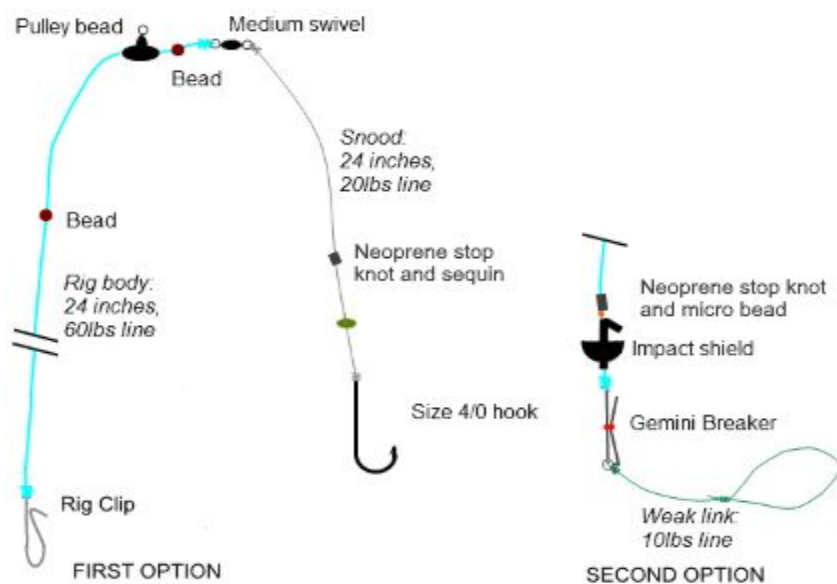
**Running Rig** – This is the traditional “snapper” rig and is still one of the best as it allows the fish to grab the bait without being spooked by feeling a lead sinker on the end. The sinker needs to be heavy enough to get the bait down to the bottom, that's a key factor. I would start with a 1/4oz (for rockfishing) and work my way up to a whopping 20oz when the tide is running hard in deeper (40-60mtrs). The sinker runs up and down the line and can be on top of the hook or on top of the swivel. Trace line can be anything from 20lb up to 80lb depending on how rough the ground is and how big a snapper you want to catch. Hook size can also vary from a 3/O up to a 10/O and be either recurve or beak (octopus) style.

My go to running rig is 75cm 50lb trace with a 5/O recurve and a 1oz ball sinker sitting on top of a #1 barrel swivel.



You can have a 2<sup>nd</sup> hook running on top the main hook or have it fixed with a snood knot a inch or 2 up from the main hook

**Pulley rig** – the best ultra distance rig for surfcasting. It’s a ledger rig which works a bit like a running rig, very cunning and effective. Attach the hook to the bait clip or impact shield (above the sinker)



## TECHNIQUES

The bigger snapper often hang back and let the smaller fish have a feed first. If you cast back a bit further down the berley trail, away from the rocks, beach or boat, it will sometimes help you hook the big one.

**hooking up** - There are two schools of thought. 1 - let the fish bend the rod over and strike or just start winding. The hook should set in the corner of the mouth 2 - let the fish run a bit to take down the hook then set the hook. I prefer striking straight away and 'lip hook' the fish. If you let it run before striking, it may feel the hook and spit out the bait. The method of setting the hook particularly a recurve or circle hook is to let the weight come on solid, then start winding. The hook will set itself in the corner of the mouth.

With standard beak hooks you'll need to strike to set the hook then keep the weight on.

**playing or fighting the fish** - Keep the weight on all through the fight (keep it tight). Have the drag set to 1/4 or 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the breaking strain of the line. If the fish takes you into the weed or rocks, back the pressure off. The fish may swim out of the foul. If you leave the pressure on with a fish in the rough it will cut the line.

**landing the Fish** - A large landing net for fish over 3kg is a good ideal. Lead the fish to the net and scoop it up. Take it easy at the beach, rocks or boat, back the drag off a bit and lead the fish rather than force it, as the hook may fall or tear out. If you gaff the fish, go for the head for a kill shot and through the lip for a release job. Place the gaff in the water and let the fish swim over it before one swift jerk on the gaff. A sharp gaff prong is imperative.



## BAIT

Snapper will take just about anything but the most consistent baits seem to be pilchard, skipjack tuna and Squid. Softbaits have proven to be very successful, piper and mullet are good performers especially in the mid to upper North Island while octopus, mackerel and kahawai all work well in particular places and times. Whatever you use it must be the best quality available.

My favorite baits for big snapper - The whole or half skipkie head or 4-5 pillies threaded on a hook. Many of the big snapper I've seen and caught have taken pilchards, fresh kahawai has been good as well as mackerel, tuna, spotty and blue cod heads (the later two particularly in the Marlborough Sounds) Big baits = big fish and stop the smaller fish annoying you as much, however it's nice to catch a feed as well and smaller baits do the

business on many fish.

## **Skipjack tuna is one of the best snapper baits along with pilchards**

**Straylining deadbaits** - whole fish or cubes. I hook a pilchard through the eye socket with a 5 or 6/O hook and throw it out. Sometimes I thread the hook back through the pilly about half way down the body. Also tying the bait on with cotton is good for extra durability in casting. Having a small running sinker say 1/4 to 1oz is good to assist casting and to get the bait away from the seagulls that often hang around. Occasionally when the fish won't take a bait try a single cube with a smaller hook and possibly a lighter trace.



**BERLEY** (or ground bait) - Good berley really brings the fish on the feed and keeps them feeding.

Minced and chunks of tuna, pilchard, flying fish, kina, crab, crayfish body and paua gut are my favourites. As long as we are using at least one of those I am happy.

It is one of the most important things for snapper fishing after finding where the fish are. Use good quality berley and plenty of it. The best stuff I reckon is pilchard followed closely by skipjack tuna, smashed up or minced kina, paua gut and crayfish bodies.

My best method of berleying is making up a bucket brew and ladling out small or large quantities on a regular basis into the water, preferably a gut with backwash. This helps disperse the berley. While doing this I keep a good watch on what is swimming through the trail.

Putting berley into a tough berley bag, tying it onto a rope and dangling it into the water is another good berley method for rockfishing or boatfishing shallow and/or water without too much current and works in combination with the bucket brew very well. It is important to ration the berley for the day and have a bit spare for when the fish turn up. If nothings happening you can 'berley up a storm'.

Specifically for boatfishing with the tide running I use some kind of dispenser to get the berley to the bottom and I also throw pieces of berley in and let it float down too.

This is our favourite berley dispenser in Wellington (right). We use one with larger holes if there are no blind eels around. I weight the pot with a sash weight or 4 x 30oz sinkers to get the dispenser to the bottom (using 4mm cord).

Placement of the berley pot is vital to catching fish. The tide may not always be running where you expect it too especially if the wind is running a different direction. I normally wait until the lines are down then check the angle, then deploy the pot in the right place to set the trail right through the lines.

I like to use a 4 or 10litre bomb inside an onion sack to get the fish going. This creates a nice cloud of berley, then dispenses a bit every now and then. If the fish go off the feed, throw some more berley in. The chunkier, shelly bits last a bit longer and sink down to where the bigger snapper lurk.

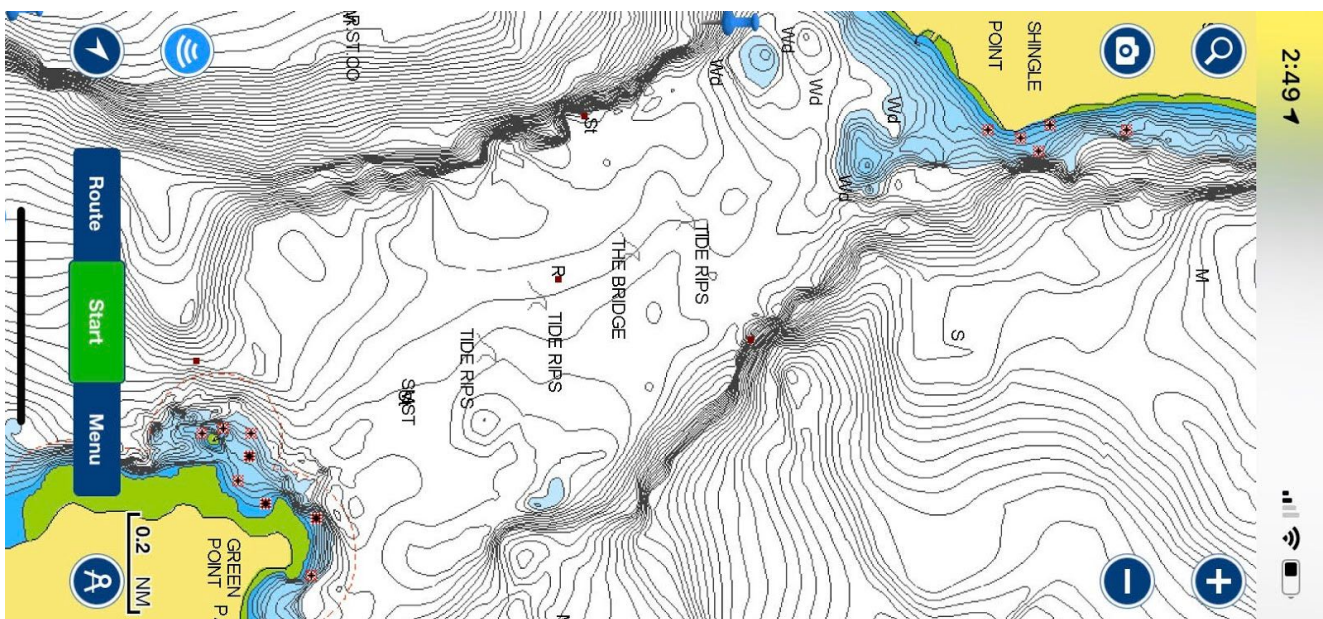
## BOAT SPECIFICS

**fishing current** – I fish in 30 – 60mtrs of water depth with no more than about 1.5knots of tide running. If the tide is too strong do drifts or fish in closer to chore out of the tide. I use a dropper (ledger) rigs with 2 – 3 hooks and a 10, 16 or 20oz sinkers depending on the tide. We are normally fishing on the edge of a reef, sometimes just out on the sand a bit. I also fish the 15 – 25mtr sandy areas where we anchor up in the area and berley the fish to us. It might be on the edge of a reef or sand bank or hole.

Keeping your baits in touch with the bottom is important at all times.

**Anchoring up** - When I have pre-marked spots on the gps, I steam up to the mark, stop the boat, see which way I'm drifting then steam up current or wind from the spot and drop the anchor. If I don't catch fish within about 45 minutes I will let more rope out or re-anchor the boat.

**Navionics App (AU + NZ)** Certainly one of the best pieces of technology I've come across to help you catch more fish in the boat. The good spots are often where there are circle/lots of black lines/squiggles/fingers. You can mark spots, track where you've been and check other peoples spots they have 'gifted' to the public. For a \$35 investment it is the best money you will spend on your fishing.





# LANDBASED SPECIFICS

**Prospecting the rocks** – fish a gnarly looking location which you wouldn't normally fish with lots of rocks and weed. Fish for about 15-20 minutes, then move 100mtrs along the coast, fish for another 15-20 min and then move along again. You will often find a 'pocket' of resident snapper in a particular area.

If you want a monster use heavier line in deep rocky areas - 50lb nylon or 80lb braid. Or 30-40lb mono for rough ground when a bigger cast is needed. Use 15-25lb line in sandy area where a bigger cast is an advantage. Tie your sinker on with lighter line so it snaps off if snagged. 12-14ft surf rods are good off the beach and 8-10ft stiffer action rods are better off the rocks. Breakaway sinkers are good for the sandy beach with pulley rigs. 4-5oz torpedo/scud or upside down pyramids are good sinkers depending on how rough the bottom is and how much wind or swell you've got.

Use a boby float (running float) for the really snaggy areas you wouldn't normally consider fishing. Set a uni knot on the leader 3 – 4 metres up from the hook so your bait is positioned just up out of the weed. This technique can be deadly on cagey 'rock mooching' snapper in really shallow water..

Reading the beach - this can be tough fishing for the novice. You need to see where the waves ease back a bit indicating deeper water. You will see rips and holes off the beach where there is no wave action. Also you can climb up a bank and look with your polaroid sunglasses for darker patches particularly rocky or weed patches. Fishing the edge of a weed patch can be very productive at times.

If you're not catching fish, use a smaller hook and lighter line and try altering your casts with long casts, short casts and casting at different angles. When you find fish mark them with a GPS so you can find the spots next time, particularly when it is dark.



# LURES

Catching snapper on lures is a heap of fun. It can take a bit more skill but can really produce the goods and it's well worth leaving the bait at home occasionally and just going lure fishing.

Top Wellington fishos have been doing well on lures over the last couple of years so here's the lowdown.

## SOFTBAITING



### Shallow water (5-10mtrs)

Boat - Softbaits can be very effective on snapper but rather than anchor up and set a berley trail to bring them to you you need to find the fish and put a softie in front of them. Use a light jig head of about ½oz or under with a 3- 5" grub or jerkshad softie. I suggest using 10-15lb braid on a small but powerful 2500-3000 spin reel and a 2-3mtr leader of around 20lb flourocarbon with a 6 - 7ft 5-10kg graphite or nano spin rod.

Cast your softbaits into or along the rocks along the shoreline or near reefy on the sand or on the reef. Let the bait sink to the bottom and then do a slow retrieve giving the rod tip the odd flick. Leave the bait to rest occasionally.

Work your way along the shoreline casting into guts, white water and around any rocky headlands. Keep an eye out for submerged rocks as you don't want to end up hitting one with the boat. .

Shore - If your landbased fishing you don't have to worry about that of course. You can prospect various spots along the coastline looking for guts and channels and you can also berley up and throw softies into the trail. I have had good fishing using both methods.

### Deep Water (10-30mtrs)

Fishing softbaits in open water from 10-30mtrs is also a very productive method on snapper. Look for bird workups or fish sign on your sounder such as bait schools and fish sign hard up against the bottom. Set up a drift across good looking ground and cast ahead of the drift line. Don't anchor the boat when softbaiting unless your bait and berley fishing and want to try something different softies. To help slow the boats drift down use a sea anchor. If you havnt got a sea anchor try reversing up into the wind or the tide everyso often without running over your lines. Using a bigger sea anchor than you think is often the rule of thumb as bigger is better to slow the drift down.

Because of the greater water depths and current you will need heavier jig heads. Use 1 - 3oz jig heads and make sure the lure is on the bottom. If the angle of the line is too great at the back of the boat, retrieve and cast out ahead of your drift again. You are constantly working the softbait along the bottom back to you as the boat drifts towards your cast and then past it. The longer the softbait is worked along the floor, the more strikes you will attract.

If you catch fish or get strikes, start up the engine and drive back up your drift to go over the same area again. You can use your GPS and follow the boat's snail trail to help determine the path you took. Sometimes the fish will miss the softbait on the first strike, so drop the rod or free-spool it back quickly and they usually bite again.

Larger softbaits in deeper water such as the Gulp 6" Squid Vicious or a 5-6" nuclear chicken jershad or 7" Belly Strips from Gulp. release fish easily and they have a better chance of surviving the encounter.

I've had good success using a softbait and a pilchard or tuna bait on the same hook. It's outfished standard softbaits a few times for me - I either run a standard dropper or running rig with the softbait and the appropriate sinker for the current running and water depth. Chatruce 3" mullet has been my best snapper catcher although most work when the fish are biting. The snapper come in and nail the pilchard and if you don't hook up then they often come back a 2<sup>nd</sup> time to nail the softbait.



**Micro-jigs and slow pitch jigs ---->**

## SLOW JIGS



### **Kaburas (sliders) and Inchiku jigs.**

Both kabura (left) and inchiku lures (right) are good on snapper. The method is similar to softbaiting when setting up drifts but with these lures you just drop them down to the bottom and do a slow wind up a few meters then repeat the process a few times until you're out of the snapper zone. The same as softbaiting, you need to do drifts with a sea anchor out in 20-40mtrs and sometimes 50-60mtrs.

This method has proved successful just inside Hunters bank in 50-60mtrs. At the Wairaka rise in 30-50mtrs and out from pukerua bay in 20-40mtrs. Out from Raumati and Waikane in 30-50mtrs is another proven location. I'm sure they will work up and down the coast as well as in the harbour in the deeper holes like point Gordan and sth of Somes.

### **USING SLOW PITCH JIGS IN WORKUPS**

These jigs are super deadly and sport bigger, stronger hooks on stronger braid so you can afford to be a bit more aggressive on big fish.

There is a key technique change needed in workups to improve hookup rates. Rather than working the jig actively from the bottom and keeping it moving as you would normally with a slow pitch jig link the trick in a workup is to stop the lure completely.

Literally leave it on the bottom static for several seconds and you will find snapper will just pick it up. In the frenzy fish are often just cleaning all the big easy scraps off the bottom and don't want or need to work too hard chasing a lure. That's why the kaburas work so well.

### **MICROJIGS**

Light gear is the idea, the best setup being a small medium action spinning rod and small spinning reel; around 2000 – 2500 spooled with 3 – 6 lb braid. Fish a micro jig much like a soft bait. You are on the drift (with a sea anchor deployed if there is any wind) and casting in the direction you are drifting.

Allow the lure to flutter to the bottom, staying in touch but without dragging on it. This can be done by gently controlling the line coming off the spool with your fingers before engaging the bail arm. Leave the lure on the floor for a few seconds, this is commonly where the strike will happen.