

Tackling an ages-old debate: What's the best hook for fishing?



The basic shape of fish hooks hasn't changed since prehistory. These bone fish hooks excavated in Fulton County are estimated to be 1,000 years old.

The Right Hook

(Collection of the Illinois State Museum—Doug Carr, Museum Photographer.)

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

If the point of fishing is to actually hook a fish, why do so many fishermen know so little about hooks? Anglers love to micromanage every detail of their tackle, yet so few anglers bother to examine that one, specific piece of hardware that really catches fish.

Could it be that all hooks are created equal? Will any hook work under all circumstances? Why so many varieties?

A bit of hook history is helpful. From its humble origins in prehistory, the fish hook as we know it today really isn't all that different than the device some clever fish hunter invented years ago. Whether it was a carved piece of bone or a sharpened bit of copper, early fish hooks archaeologists have recovered in the Midwest were all, well, hooks.

"There's only so much you can do to a fish hook before you render it useless," explained hook expert Matt Gray, product manager for the Colorado manufacturer of hook brands Eagle Claw and Lazer Sharp. Gray pointed out that, while the much-improved fish hooks of today are made from engineered metals far superior to primitive hook materials,

new twists and barbs and fancy packaging can never change a fundamental need of any hook: It must hook fish.

Thousands of years ago, Native Americans basically came to the same conclusion.

"The appearance of fish hooks in the archaeological record dates back to the Middle Archaic (approx. 8,200-4,400 years before present)," explained Hal Hassen, archaeologist for the Department of Natural Resources. "But a fish hook that's thousands of years old still looks like a fish hook today."

Just as new styles and twists appear on today's market, early anglers probably experimented with other fish-grab-

Want to catch more fish? Downsizing hooks can prove that bigger isn't always better—especially when fish are finicky.

bing designs. But the surviving evidence indicates the original invention of the classic, curved fish hook is as timeless as the wheel.

Back to our puzzle: How come there are so many hooks on the market today? Gray points out fishermen themselves created the need for new hooks. Some anglers are specialists, employing a unique arsenal of tackle for their specific strategy: A monster-size blue catfish hunter requires hooks capable of pulling more than 100 pounds, while scrappy panfish anglers opt for comparatively frail hooks.

Still other anglers attempt to catch fish without hooking them for keeps.

“Conservation fishermen who practice catch and release want a hook that tends to hook in the mouth,” Gray explained, adding that barbless hooks also can aid in easy releases. “One of our most popular hooks today is the circle hook, which usually doesn't hook fish deep.”

An ironic twist: “The circle hook is ancient,” Gray said. “It's been around for thousands of years.”

What about all of those hook numbers? What's the difference between a No. 4 hook and a No. 18 hook? Hook numbers are like shotgun numbers—the larger the number, the smaller the diameter at the business end. Just as a 20 gauge shotgun has a smaller diameter barrel opening than a 10 gauge, a



No. 18 hook has a smaller opening between the hook tip and hook shank than a No. 4 hook (see illustration).

Yet don't underestimate the hooking power of a tiny hook. Wary fish sometimes nibble at baits, and a tiny hook can fool the finicky ones. And tiny hooks with short shanks can lift a surprisingly heavy fish.

But sometimes the shank of the hook needs to be relatively long—and bent—such as for “worm hooks,” which offer the advantage of securing plastic worms while maintaining a natural bait appearance. Many anglers like a colored hook, such as a gold hook, which has been shown to attract crappie to its sparkle (on two different occasions this writer has caught crappie on a bare gold hook after momentarily setting down a fishing rod to reach for the minnow bucket). Also, since crappie mouths are proportionately huge, hook size selection can favor a big hook.

“A No. 4 gold hook is all I ever use when crappie fishing with minnows,”

Chain O' Lakes angler Ron Scott insisted. He also revealed a tried-and-true crappie hooking technique. “I hook minnows differently than a lot of fishermen. Instead of hooking the minnow through the jaw and up through the snout, I hook the minnow from the snout down into the jaw. If you hook the minnow that way, nine out of 10 times you'll hook the crappie in the roof of the mouth.”

Finally, sharpness is a vastly overlooked detail.

“If there's one thing I can recommend to help you catch more fish it's keeping your hook sharp,” advised Illinois bass tournament angler Fred Washburn. “Some hooks are so dull—even brand-new hooks—they wouldn't penetrate anything.” Washburn always keeps handy a hook sharpener and uses it often, even when tying on a new lure for the first time. As a test, dragging the point across a fingernail should not be possible with a sharp hook; the point should grab and dig in.

Despite today's endless hook varieties, a fundamental truth hasn't changed.

“It's got to hook fish,” Gray concluded. “That's one requirement that never changes.”



Each hook style was created for specific tasks. Treble hooks are great for holding lumps of bait for catfish but are poor choices for use with minnows.

