

CHAPTER 5

Tactics and Equipment

Many spin fishers and bait casters who target snook are intrigued by the idea of fly fishing. Unfortunately, they are sometimes intimidated, and thus hesitant to try it, because of three major misconceptions:

1. Fly fishing means handicapping yourself.
2. Techniques are complicated and difficult to learn.
3. Equipment is esoteric, expensive, innumerable, and arcane.

All these statements are far off the mark. In most situations, fly fishing is at least as effective as any other method of catching snook. In fact, knowledgeable fly fishers who adapt their gear and tactics for different locations and conditions can often outfish bait fishers and plug casters.

A classic example is my favorite kind of snook fishing: sight casting along beaches during the summer spawning season. On clear-water days with little wind, beach fish can be incredibly spooky. Any advantage is a plus, and this is where flies truly come into their own. The basic physics and mechanics of spin fishing and bait casting require weighted baits, either artificial or natural. This means they always land with a splash, a splat, or a plop, and in clear water, that means good-bye snook.

One day, about a mile from my house on Sanibel Island, I walked down the beach past a spin fisherman standing in the water up to his thighs and casting a lead-head white curly-tail jig while his wife watched from a beach chair. The snook were cruising the shoreline in large numbers, as they do only during the summer spawn, and they were ripe for

the catching. But every time he cast to a single, a pair, or a school, the fish spooked.

I walked 50 yards past him and, in half an hour, casting a No. 2 Schminnow, landed nine fish, lost half a dozen others, and had at least ten follows. Because I had an appointment in town, I had to leave, even though the fish were still cruising and hitting. When I walked back past the couple, the wife spoke up. “You must have been in a perfect spot down there,” she said. The husband, still fishless, gave her a withering glance. As gently as I could, I explained that I was casting to some of the same fish that had swum past them.

One fault with his tactics was that he was standing in the fish’s cruising lane instead of on the shore. Some of them were passing behind him, between where he stood and the sloping beach. But the key reason for my success and his lack of it was that my Schminnow was landing as softly as a feather in the snook’s feeding zone—2 or 3 feet in front of the fish—whereas his jig hit with a clearly audible *plup*, causing a tiny geyser and

In clear water, summer snook often cruise within a few feet of shore.



a ring of wavelets. As soon as the lure landed, the snook headed for Cuba. The same “soft landing” advantage applies when fly fishing on shallow grass flats and under dock lights when the fish are near the surface.

The basic techniques of fly fishing for snook are no more difficult to learn than any other kind of fishing. Most important is the cast. In my experience, even rank beginners can master the basic skill required—the ability to throw 30 to 40 feet of line and leader—after an hour or less of instruction. The rest, as they say, takes a lifetime.

Becoming a good caster—a combination of accuracy and distance—increases one’s chance of success with snook. This comes with practice and time on the water. But in my experience, the difference in numbers of fish caught by good casters and exceptional casters is minimal. Although double hauling provides the distinct advantage of added distance, it is not a prerequisite. It is not necessary to cast half a mile like the celebrity anglers on television. Likewise, tournament-level casting skills, such as being able to cast the whole fly line and make trick casts, while great for wowing the crowds at industry expos, do not have a close correlation with snook angling success.

After the cast, the retrieve is the next most important factor in technique. There are three basic retrieves, depending on the type of fly: streamer, weighted streamer, spoon fly, slider, gurgler, or popper. For the most popular streamers, such as Deceivers, Clousers, Schminnows, Cockroaches, Snapping Shrimp, etc., the standard streamer retrieve of strip-pause-strip-pause is highly effective. Some of the other categories of flies have their own ideal retrieves, which are generally variations on the standard.

Just as in other types of fly fishing, the list of essential equipment for snook is straightforward and short: rod, reel, fly line, backing, leader, and flies. Additional, optional items, such as stripping basket, vest or fanny pack, and wading boots, are useful in different situations but not essential. A rundown of the basic equipment is presented next, followed by tips for landing snook. Flies are covered in chapter 6.

RODS

As in all fly fishing, the most important piece of equipment is the rod. The best all-around design for snook is a 7- or 8-weight fast-action model that measures 8½ to 9 feet long. Rods with these specifications are available

from all the major manufacturers. The stiffness of a fast-action model allows for more effective casting (especially tighter loops) under windy conditions and provides superior fish-fighting power over slower, softer rods.

Power and stiffness combined with light weight are the keys to deriving the most pleasure from the sport, and there is no question that this means high-modulus graphite composite construction. Some of the newer rods with added elements, such as titanium or boron, provide even better strength-to-weight ratios than graphite alone. The few fiberglass rods still on the market—heavy, soft, and frustratingly sluggish—are technological anachronisms and learning handicaps. Bamboo, although an intriguing part of our fly-fishing heritage, should be avoided. The slow action, delicate presentation, and aesthetic elegance of bamboo that endear it to many traditional trout fishers have no place in saltwater angling. Despite their elegance, comfort, and quality of design, using bamboo rods for snook fishing would be like running a track event in Armani loafers.

Anglers who fish mainly mangrove shorelines sometimes favor 9- or even 10-weight rods, arguing that these are better for turning a fish that heads for structure, such as roots or dock pilings. But in most cases, the extra heft and backbone are unnecessary if the proper tactics are employed. (Most important is keeping the rod tip in the water and pulling at a 90-degree angle to the fish's direction to turn its head.) One big negative of a heavier rod is that the extra weight (of both the line and the rod) increases the angler's fatigue factor. This is an especially important consideration when blind casting in mangrove estuaries, when it is not unusual to make hundreds of casts during a day's outing. Most people who have suffered from the fly fisher's version of tennis elbow (the medical term is lateral epicondylitis)—an ailment that is unfortunately all too common—are eager to adopt any measures that reduce the chance of a recurrence. Heavier rods and lines also put more stress on the casting shoulder and muscles.

Another major reason for choosing lighter gear is the stealth factor. Especially under sight-fishing conditions, a lighter line lands more softly, decreasing the chances of spooking fish. The sporting aspect of lighter rods is an additional plus. Not all the snook you catch will be 30 inches or more; in fact, the majority will measure 18 to 24 inches. Just as using a 7-weight would take much of the fun out of dapping for 6-inch brook trout, winching in 20-inch snook with a 10-weight outfit would be a less

satisfying experience. It must be acknowledged, however, that a heavier rod and line combination generally provides greater casting distance and better control in windy conditions.

Performance is important, but for most anglers, price is also a consideration. Top-of-the-line outfits—rod, reel, and line—start at around \$800. But for neophytes, it makes sense to begin more modestly. Many major manufacturers, angling supply companies, and outdoor equipment catalogs (L. L. Bean, Bass Pro Shops, Albright, Orvis, Cabela's, and others) offer good-quality entry-level outfits for around \$200. Once anglers learn the basic mechanics and techniques of the sport, they will be better able to judge their own personal skills and equipment preferences and upgrade their gear accordingly.

REELS

I admit to a deep-seated bias in favor of inexpensive reels. The old saw that a reel is merely a place to store line has more than a grain of truth to it. This is not to say that snook anglers should buy junk. The most important factor when choosing a reel is that it should be designed and manufactured for use in salt water. This means that the internal components are constructed to be more corrosive resistant than those in freshwater reels. In saltwater reels, the gears, spindles, drags, and so forth are usually made of stainless steel, brass, nylon, or other synthetic materials.

Cast or machined aluminum alloy is the material of choice for the spools and casings of many saltwater fly reels. But in recent years, composite polymer graphite reels have come into their own. They are even lighter than aluminum, again reducing the arm, joint, and shoulder strain associated with frequent and arduous fly-fishing outings.

One of the most important qualities for a snook reel is a reliable disk drag. Although snook do not have the breathtaking speed of bonefish, they can make multiple swift, powerful runs. As with other powerful saltwater gamefish—stripers, redfish, bluefish—the drag is an important tool for wearing them down so they can be landed within a time frame that enhances survivability. It is possible to use a click drag reel by palming the spool during runs (also an effective adjunct tactic any time), but a disk drag is more straightforward and dependable, especially for beginners.

Reel spool size is another factor to consider. The three basic choices are small arbor (traditional), medium arbor, and large arbor. I favor

medium- and large-arbor models because the spool's greater diameter enables faster line retrieval than conventional models. The one disadvantage to large-arbor spools is that they do not hold as much line and backing. Medium-arbor spools provide a compromise; they allow more space for line storage while facilitating a somewhat faster fight and retrieve than the traditional models.

Good, standard-production saltwater fly reels start at around \$50 and range up to hundreds of dollars. For custom-built reels, the sky is the limit. Choosing a reel is partly a matter of weighing the relative importance of initial expenditure versus durability. In general, the higher the cost, the longer the life expectancy of the reel. Higher-end reels are engineered to last—with proper care—for a lifetime of normal fishing.

FLY LINES

For beginning fly fishers, the decision of which line to buy can seem especially daunting. The choices may seem endless, and the myriad specifications and intended uses baffling. Should they pick floating, intermediate sink, full sink, sinking tip, clear tip, weight forward, double taper, triangle taper, level, etc.? Fortunately, for snook anglers, the choice is easy: a weight-forward, floating line that matches the rod weight. Because snook are inshore, shallow-water fish, sinking lines are necessary only in limited situations.

The characteristics of a weight-forward line—thicker and heavier at the casting end—provide the best control for casting saltwater flies greater distances accurately. They also help overcome one of the most common saltwater fly-fishing bugaboos: wind.

Because they are thinner and lighter at both ends, double-taper lines, the choice of many freshwater trout anglers, are not well suited for snook fishing. The extra stealth provided by a finer line that lands more softly—especially advantageous for dry-fly trout fishing in small, smooth waters—is not exactly superfluous for snook (there is no such thing as too much stealth), but it is outweighed by the disadvantages of the slim taper in casting large flies under breezy conditions.

Because most snook fishing takes place in shallow water, a floating line is the best choice more than 90 percent of the time. In those few situations when it is necessary to get the fly down a bit more (e.g., pot-holes on flats, deeper mangrove pockets), the extra depth can usually be achieved by using a weighted fly such as a Clouser. However, experienced

snookers usually carry an extra spool with an intermediate- or full-sink line for those rare occasions (pass or channel fishing) when greater depth is required.

These days, fly lines come in a mind-boggling array of colors, from comparatively drab tans and beiges to bright yellow and hot pink. The common argument is that the brilliant colors provide greater line visibility for anglers. This is a specious argument. Neither I nor anyone I know has ever had trouble spotting his or her line on the water. Neutral colors are by far the best for snook fishing: light blue, tan, beige, off-white. Despite the advertising claims, brilliant colored lines are more effective at catching fishermen than fish. And I am convinced that in some conditions—such as sight fishing in clear water—their heightened visibility can spook the fish both in the air (during false casts) and in the water. Brightly colored lines also necessitate longer leaders, making casting more difficult at close distances. Several companies offer clear sinking lines, and it is a shame that there is currently no clear floating line on the market.

BACKING

Backing is the line loaded onto the reel spool first, to which the fly line is tied. Because fly lines are short—generally no more than 110 feet—backing enables anglers to successfully fight and land big fish that run great distances.

A good saltwater fly caster can cast 70 or 80 feet of fly line. Without backing, even a medium-size snook would soon reach the end of the line, and that would often be the end of the fight, because the leader tippet would break under the full, direct power of the fish's pull. Many people, however, overload their reels with more backing than necessary. In my experience, 50 yards of line is enough for all but the largest snook. One hundred yards is adequate for most of these, and 125 yards provides an extra margin for extenuating circumstances, such as heavy current.

Braided Dacron line is the best backing choice. Again, I prefer a common, dull color such as white or beige. Some brightly colored braided lines, such as chartreuse or blaze orange, contain dyes that can discolor the fly line. Dacron provides a good test strength-to-diameter ratio. An 18- to 20-pound-test line is heavy enough for excellent fish-fighting performance and thin enough to permit a full-length load while allowing plenty of spool space for the fly line. A reel that is overfilled, with the fly line bumping the struts, is an aggravation and a hindrance.

LEADERS

Snook leaders should be good-quality tapered monofilament or fluorocarbon. They should be a minimum of 7½ feet long with at least 10-pound tippet strength. The exact specifications vary with the type of snook fishing. In clear water, the leader should be 9 feet or more, and the tippet strength should be on the light side for greater stealth. In dark water and around structure, shorter leaders and higher tippet strength—up to 30 pounds—are called for.

Finished leaders can be purchased in extrusion tapers—one continuous length of material that tapers from the butt to the tippet—or knotted tapers—materials of different strengths tied together in a series, from heaviest to lightest. Many anglers prefer to tie their own leaders, both to save money and to ensure that the specifications are exactly what they want.

Snook leaders can also be used for spotted seatrout, redfish, jack crevalle, bonefish, and many other subtropical and tropical saltwater species. But for snook, there is one extra element that is indispensable: a bite tippet. Unlike the piranha-like choppers of bluefish, Spanish mackerel, and other species, snook's tiny, sandpaper teeth are deceptively benign, but they are so abrasive that they can quickly cut through light- or medium-weight tippet material. Snook also have razor-sharp gill plates that can slice through a light tippet in the blink of an eye when they jump or make a sudden sharp turn.

When I first started snook fishing, I foolishly ignored the counsel of a longtime snook fisherman to make sure to tie a short length of heavier line to the end of the leader. I was using a tapered leader with a 12-pound tippet, and it seemed more than adequate to fight and land the fish I had observed cruising the beach near my house. But my angling hubris was quickly dispelled. The first fish I cast to and hooked made a short run, jumped, and popped the tippet. So did the second and the third. Finally, I had to admit that my acquaintance's advice was valid. I added a 1-foot section of 30-pound-test monofilament and began landing fish.

Tests have demonstrated that fluorocarbon is less visible than monofilament under water, but, having used both kinds of leaders extensively, I am not convinced that this makes a difference in the number of snook caught. And the price difference—fluorocarbon costs at least four times as much as monofilament—is significant. However, fluorocarbon's excellent abrasion resistance makes it the ideal material for bite tippets. My leader



Large schools of cruising fish cause many a case of snook fever.

rig of choice is a tapered monofilament leader with a tippet strength of 16 pounds and a 1-foot piece of 25-pound-test fluorocarbon bite tippet on the end. I prefer to attach the bite tippet with a blood knot (less visibility), but some anglers use a loop-to-loop connection to make it easier to change tippets.

One cautionary note: Because fluorocarbon is so much harder than monofilament, knotted fluorocarbon is more difficult to compress. This means that fluorocarbon knots do not tighten down as easily as standard monofilament does. It is important to lubricate fluorocarbon knots well (with saliva) when tying them and to make doubly sure that they are pulled snug. More times than I care to admit (usually in the excitement of pursuing big schools of moving snook on the beach), I have tied on a fly with a hasty loop knot and lost both fish and fly when the knot pulled loose. Another important consideration is checking the end of the bite tippet after every hookup. If it is frayed even a little bit, clip it back and retie the fly. It will save you lost fish.

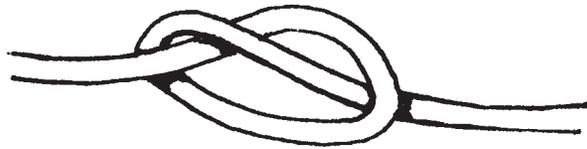
KNOTS

When it comes to knots for snook fishing, I follow that good old military acronym KISS—keep it simple, stupid. Only four basic knots are required. In order of importance, they are the loop knot, the improved clinch knot, the blood knot, and the nail knot.

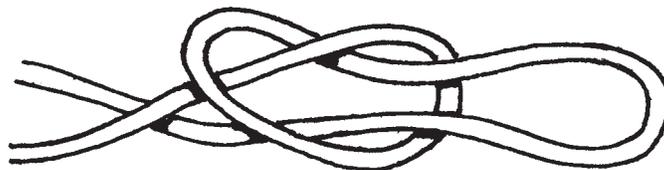
Loop Knot

The loop knot is ideal for attaching the fly to the bite tippet. The most important reason for using a loop knot is to allow the fly to swing and dance freely with a natural baitfish action when it is stripped. Some anglers also like to tie a loop knot on the end of a tapered leader and attach the bite tippet with a loop-to-loop connection. This makes it a simple matter to change the bite tippet when it becomes too short or frayed. The leader can be attached to the fly line with a loop-to-loop connection as well.

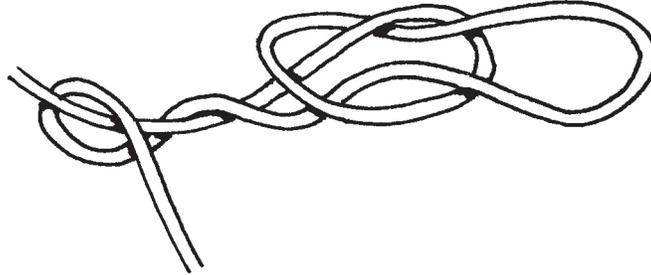
There are several good loop knots that are simple to tie and relatively slip-free. Choose the one that is easiest for you to remember. Be sure to tie small loops so that they are less visible to the fish.



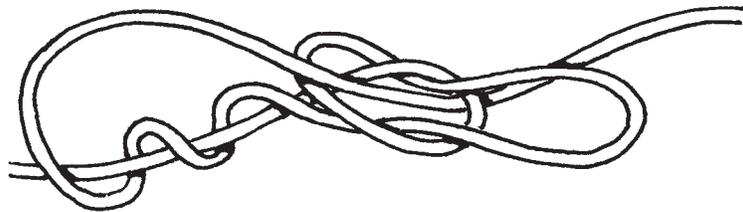
1. Tie a loose overhand knot in the leader tippet a couple of inches from the end.



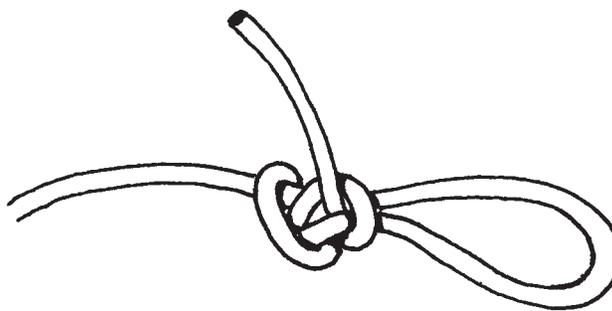
2. Insert the end of the tippet back through the overhand knot to form a small loop below the overhand knot.



3. Wrap the end of the tippet toward you, making two turns around the leader above the overhand knot.



4. Insert the end back through the overhand knot once more.



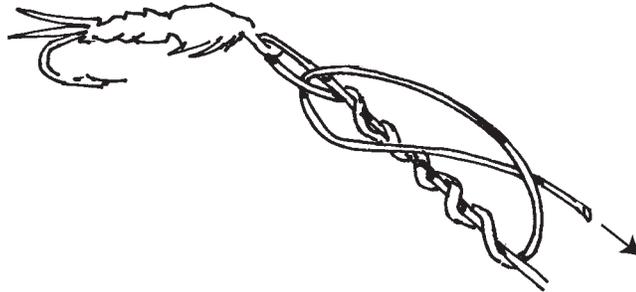
5. Lubricate with saliva and pull tight. Clip the tippet end close to the knot.

Improved Clinch Knot

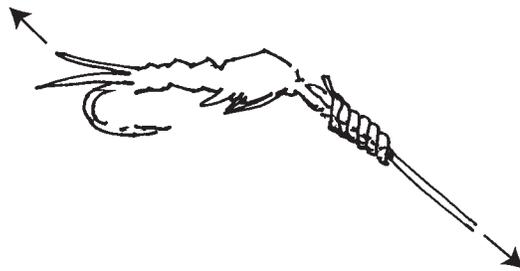
The improved clinch knot, the old standby for dry-fly trout fishing with fine tippets, should be used sparingly by snook anglers. Because of its stiffness, a standard 25- or 30-pound-test fluorocarbon snook bite tippet severely restricts the action of a typical No. 2 snook streamer if it is tied to the fly with a clinch knot. Once in a great while I use a clinch knot to tie on a popping fly.



1. Insert the leader tippet through the eye of the hook to form a loop. Wrap the leader end five times around the line away from the hook eye. Insert the leader end back through the initial loop.



2. Insert the leader end through the second loop. Lubricate with saliva and carefully pull tight.

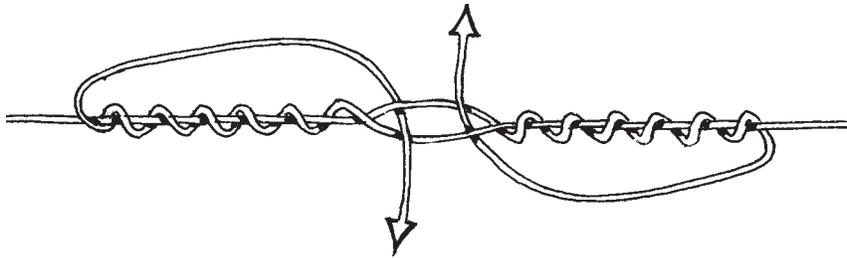


Blood Knot

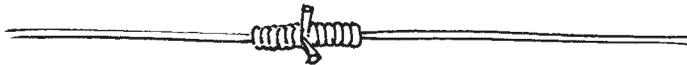
The blood knot is used for tying knotted tapered leaders. It can also be used to attach the bite tippet to the tapered leader.



1. Hold two lines or sections of leader side by side, with the ends pointing in opposite directions and one line laid across the other. The lines should overlap each other by about three inches.



2. Wrap the ends of the lines in opposite directions away from the point of initial overlap. Insert the line ends back through the center loop in opposite directions.

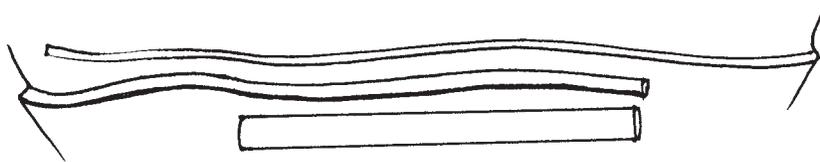


3. Lubricate with saliva and carefully pull tight. Clip the line ends close to the knot.

Nail Knot

The nail knot is most useful for attaching the leader to the fly line if there is no loop on the end of the fly line.

All these knots should be lubricated with saliva during tying. Otherwise, they may weaken from overheating and stress when they are pulled tight.



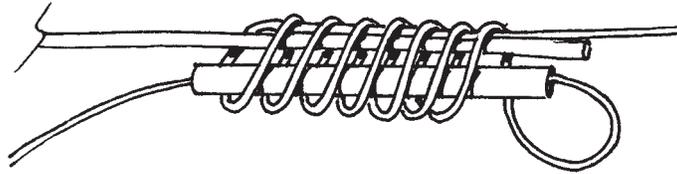
1. Lay the leader butt, fly line end, and nail (or toothpick, knitting needle, hollow tube, etc.) side by side, with the ends of the leader butt and the fly line pointing in opposite directions. The ends should overlap by several inches.



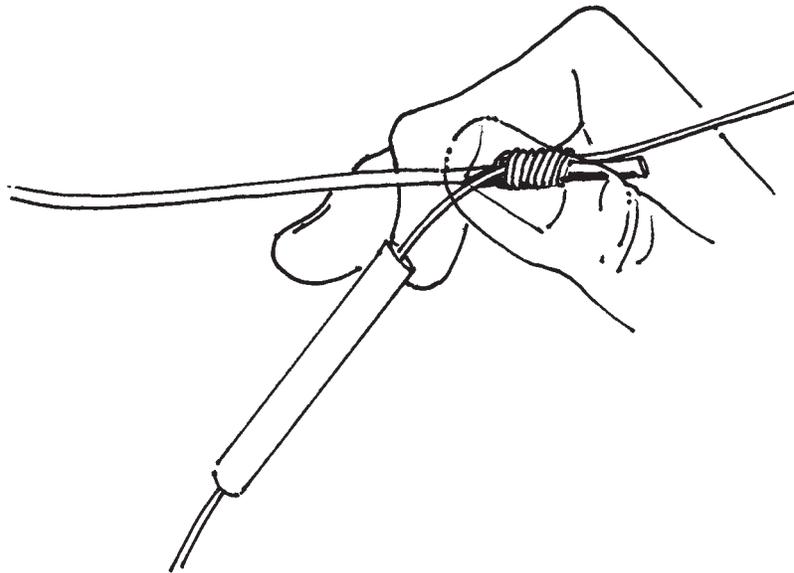
2. Wrap the leader butt around the fly line and nail in the direction toward the end of the fly line.



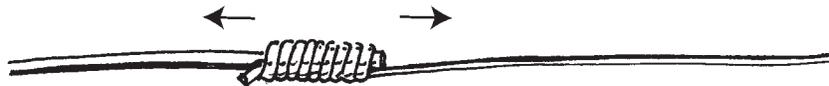
3. Make at least six turns of the leader butt end around the fly line and the nail.



4. Pass the end of the leader butt back through the wraps, running it between the fly line and the nail (or through the tube).



5. Slowly slide out the nail (or tube) while pulling on the long end of the leader so the wraps tighten evenly around the fly line.



6. Lubricate the knot with saliva and slowly pull it tight. Clip the ends of the leader butt and fly line close to the knot.



A cheap and functional stripping basket constructed from a department store shopping basket.

STRIPPING BASKETS

Stripping baskets are rarely necessary in fresh water (steelhead and salmon fishing are two exceptions). But because of the longer casts and run-and-gun techniques required, they are an important item of gear for many kinds of saltwater fly fishing. For snook fishing, they serve two main purposes: storing line so it can be “shot” out quickly with one or two false casts, and keeping the line out from underfoot.

Stripping baskets are almost indispensable for casting from shore or the shallows, where sand, rocks, shells, driftwood, seaweed, and other

materials can dirty, damage, or foul the line, and even small waves can tangle the line around an angler's legs. Stripping baskets are also very practical for use in boats, especially boats that are not specifically designed for fly fishing. Such craft often contain exposed hardware that can snare a fly line. Even when fishing from clean-hulled flats boats, many anglers use stripping baskets. These devices store the line neatly between casts and preclude the aggravation of stepping on it in the excitement of the hunt.

There are two main styles of stripping basket: the rigid plastic box style and the mesh basket style. Both have their advantages and adherents. The most basic rigid plastic version is the so-called New Jersey style: a square, plastic dishpan with holes drilled in two sides and strapped around the waist with a bungee cord. This style is not only practical but, at less than \$10, also a bargain. Equipment suppliers offer more expensive, more elaborate variations on the same theme. Instead of bungee cords, most are equipped with adjustable plastic or nylon belts and snap buckles that make them easy to put on and take off. Many also have egg-carton-style inserts or built-in conical projections designed to reduce line tangles. Some

The New Jersey-style stripping basket is adapted from a plastic dishpan.





Florida Sportsman editor *Jeff Weakley* swears by *Charlie's Total Control* stripping basket, a nylon mesh design stretched over a foldable wire frame.

have cutouts on the sides that enable a rod to be laid across the basket without rolling off. Others are curved on the side that fits against the waist.

One advantage of rigid-style baskets is also a disadvantage: because they are closed boxes, they tend to keep water out during wading, but if water does get in, it cannot drain out (although a few models have drain holes).

Mesh baskets, in contrast, are designed to drain water immediately. But when wading in deep water, the water flows in just as easily. A mesh basket is of little use when it is even partially submerged. An angler might as well strip the line onto the water surface with no basket. Also, many mesh baskets are irritatingly floppy, sometimes collapsing on themselves.

My favorite stripping basket is a lightweight, box-shaped, nylon mesh model sold by a small Florida company. The key to the design of Charlie's Total Control stripping basket is an internal wire frame that provides the rigidity lacking in other mesh models. Because the frame is curved, it also has the unique quality of folding in on itself to the size of a saucer, making it much easier to store and pack for travel than other stripping baskets. I have never had one collapse during use.

VESTS AND FANNY PACKS

Because most snook fishing takes place in warm or hot weather, lightweight nylon and mesh vests are preferred. Some anglers use fanny packs, but a vest has more storage space for fly boxes and other incidental items, such as leaders, bite tippet spools, flashlight, hemostat, and clipper.

WADING BOOTS

Boots are optional for some snook fishing, particularly along sandy shorelines with few sharp rocks, shells, or detritus. But they are absolutely essential for grass flats, where shells, crabs, stingrays, glass, junk, and jet-sum are hard to spot and can cause painful injuries.

Flats boots are designed with thick, hard soles to resist penetration by sharp objects and, in the standard height—about 9 inches—also offer moderate protection for the ankles and lower legs. I prefer boots with neoprene uppers and nylon zippers because they are easy to put on and remove; however, canvas-top, lace-up versions offer a bit more penetration protection higher up. There are now a few brands on the market with heavy-duty uppers.

Some beach snook anglers wear wading sandals, which protect the bottoms of the feet but not the ankles, lower legs, or toes. In my opinion, this makes them next to useless. Liking the feel of sand between my toes is a vestige of my Cape Cod childhood, but I have cut my feet more than a few times.

It is important to keep in mind that where there are snook there are often stingrays. The larger, free-swimming rays, which are prevalent in large schools along summer beaches, present few problems in clear water, and they avoid anglers if possible. But the small, bottom-hugging varieties are so well camouflaged that they are virtually invisible when lying motionless in the sand. Wading boots offer a good measure of protection from an excruciatingly painful (though usually not dangerous) sting that can quickly end a fishing outing.

Deck shoes or sneakers are the most practical and comfortable footwear for boat fishing, although many anglers prefer to fish barefoot from the skid-free bow platforms of flats boats.

SUNGLASSES

Polarized sunglasses enable wearers to see through the surface glare of the water. They are important for every kind of fishing, but for snook fly

anglers they are indispensable. Those who do not use them are intentionally handicapping themselves, choosing, for all intents and purposes, to fish partially blind. Although the high-end brands provide better vision and lens quality and are more durable, perfectly serviceable wraparound-style polarized sunglasses are available for as little as \$15. As the credit card ad says, don't leave home without them.

HOOK REMOVERS

All fly fishers should carry a hemostat or small needle-nose pliers to quickly unhook their fish and release them as gently as possible. Without this kind of tool, it can be next to impossible to remove a fly that is lodged deep in a snook's throat. A hemostat is preferable because it can be easily clipped onto and removed from a vest or shirt pocket.

SNOOK TACTICS: FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

From start to finish, fighting a snook is a unique experience that requires some tactical adjustments for many fly fishers, especially freshwater anglers.

In the beginning, of course, comes the strike. Because of their fiercely predatory nature, their ability to explode with quick bursts of speed, and their ambush feeding strategies, a snook strike is almost never tentative. They may miss the fly occasionally, swirling behind it or possibly smashing it first in an attempt to wound the intended prey before actually eating it. Occasionally, they chase a fly for distances of up to 40 feet before attacking or turning away, but once a snook has made the decision to get its prey, there is no such thing as a gentle take. In other words, snook fishing has no equivalent to a brown trout's leisurely, educated inspection of the food sources floating past its visual "window," followed by a casual, sipping take.

Snook usually attack the fly from an angle, coming at it diagonally before grabbing it and turning sharply to one side or the other an instant after the strike. As a result, the most common outcome of a snook strike is also one of the best: a clean hookup in the corner of the jaw. Sometimes, however, a snook races up behind the fly to grab it, flaring its gills wide while snapping open its enormous mouth. This creates a powerful vacuum effect that can suck the hook deep down into the gullet.

Redfish devotees know that these fish can be more fastidious feeders than snook. When they take a fly from behind, they sometimes continue swimming forward while chomping the fly to determine whether it is

really food. When this happens, an angler must be very quick on the trigger and set the hook with a superfast strip. Otherwise, the red will spit out the faux baitfish, shrimp, or crab faster than a tobacco chewer spewing a spent plug. In contrast, snook's innate ferocity simplifies the hookup. They almost never short-strike. And because they attack with speed and almost always grab and turn, they usually hook themselves. However, anglers should strip-strike anyway to make sure the hook penetrates the snook's tough lips and mouth cartilage.

To make a strip strike, point the rod directly at the fish and yank back on the fly line hard and fast. The strip strike is as different from the deliberative, rod-raising hook set of dry-fly trout anglers as ballet is from professional wrestling. And because of the differences in tackle strength—specifically, rods and tippets—there is no need to be tentative in snook fishing.

Once the fish is hooked, fight it hard and fast to prevent exhaustion and lactic acid buildup in its body. Both factors increase the mortality rate of fish that are caught and released. Keep a tight drag and, if necessary, palm the reel spool to put even more pressure on the fish. In wide-open areas—beach shorelines, grass flats, and the like—the standard tip-high technique works well. But be careful not to keep the tip too high, or a big snook may break your rod.

Around structure, especially in the mangroves, use the down-and-dirty technique. Keep the rod tip low (in the water is often best), and pull the line at a 90-degree angle from the direction the fish is headed. This usually turns its head and forces it out away from the structure. Apply the maximum force your tackle can handle, for these are make-or-break situations. The alternative to keeping maximum pressure on the fish is a virtually guaranteed breakoff if it gets into roots, rocks, or pilings. Again, be careful not to put too severe a bend in the rod. Even the most expensive graphite fiber will fail if overstressed. This is a major risk when fishing from a boat if a fish makes a sudden dash under the hull.

Once you have landed (or boated) a snook, if you intend to release it, you are responsible for making sure that it swims away to propagate the species and/or be caught another day. In addition to proper fighting technique, a big part of survival success for snook is gentle handling and careful revival. Small snook—less than 20 inches—can usually be whipped and brought to hand quickly enough to make revival unnecessary. Often they dart away as soon as they are unhooked.



A snook that gets into oyster-covered mangrove roots can cut a leader in a split second.

Special care is necessary for larger fish, however. Keep the fish in the water, if possible. If you want to take a photograph or must lift the fish out of the water to remove the fly, get it back in as quickly as possible. A good rule of thumb is not to keep it out of the water longer than you can comfortably hold your breath. The best way to hold a fish for a photo is by supporting it with one hand under the head and the other under the slim part of the body just ahead of the tail. Never lift a large snook only by its lower jaw, especially with one of the grip-type scales. Its body weight will put a terrible strain on the muscles that control the jaw, throat, and mouth, possibly tearing them and making it next to impossible for the fish to catch food. If you are intent on weighing the fish, put it in a net and grip the net's mesh with the scale. Better yet, do not weigh the fish at all. I have measured many a snook during my longtime love affair with linesiders, but I have never weighed one.

Reviving a snook calls for the same technique used with other fish: moving it back and forth slowly in the water so the gills are oxygenated. A unique twist with snook is the "sucking the thumb" revival method. If you

insert your thumb into a snook's mouth up to the first knuckle, the fish generally clamps onto it, enabling you to revive it by pushing and pulling with one hand. The fish usually signals when it is sufficiently revived by spitting out your thumb and scooting away.

It is important not to be in a rush when reviving snook, especially for trophy fish that have fought a long, hard battle prior to being landed. Make sure the fish is breathing strongly and is able to maintain its equilibrium before allowing it to swim away beyond your reach.