

Angler's Mail

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Q I'd like to start fishing for predators, including pike, can you give me some advice?

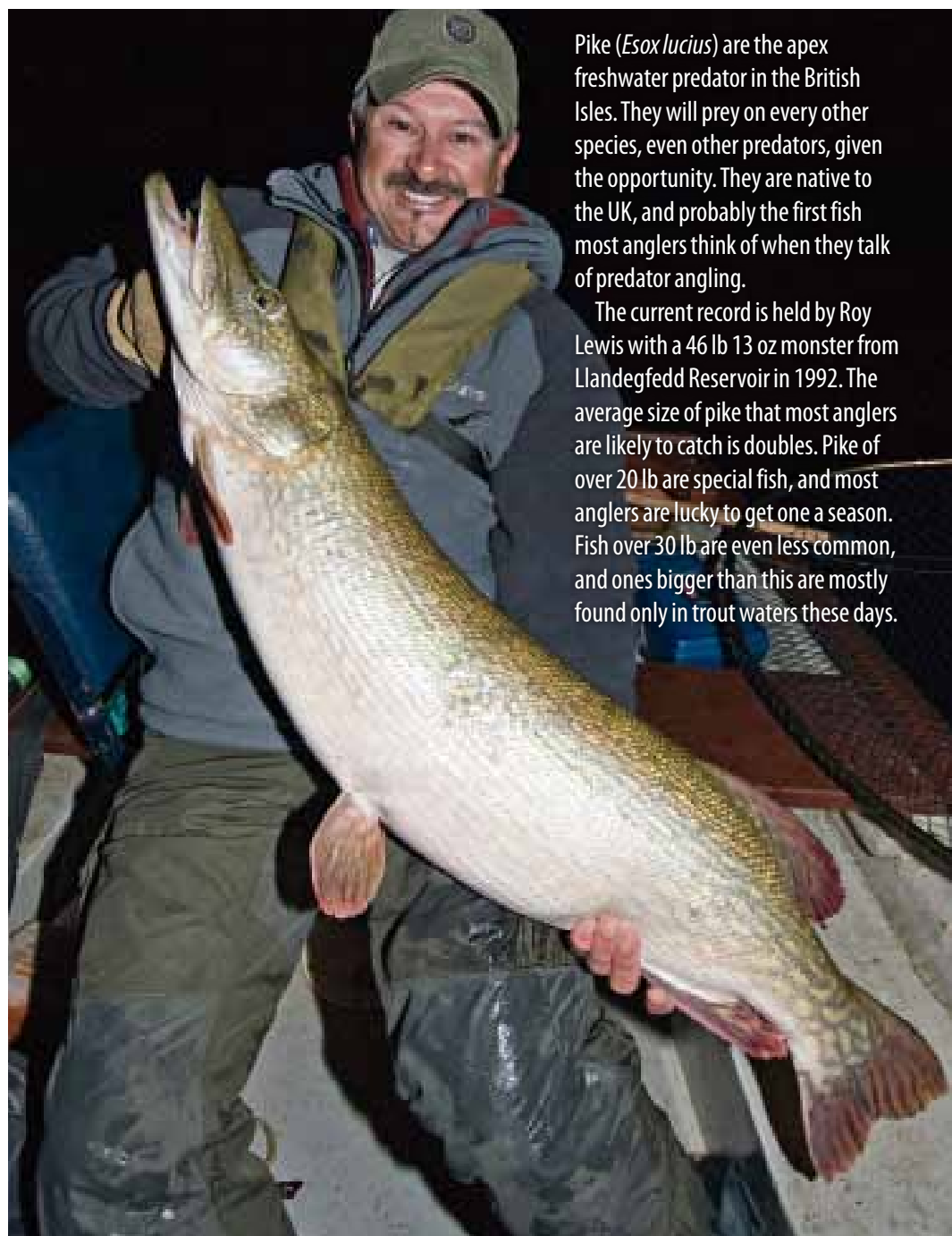
James Gibbs, Redditch, Worcestershire.

Andy Black says...

I love fishing for predators, as they are wonderful fish that provide some stunning sport. But, as with all species, you need to treat them with the utmost care and handle them confidently. Here is a rundown on the UK's predator fish species and the best ways to catch them...

Essential guide to PREDATORS

PIKE



Pike (*Esox lucius*) are the apex freshwater predator in the British Isles. They will prey on every other species, even other predators, given the opportunity. They are native to the UK, and probably the first fish most anglers think of when they talk of predator angling.

The current record is held by Roy Lewis with a 46 lb 13 oz monster from Llandegfedd Reservoir in 1992. The average size of pike that most anglers are likely to catch is doubles. Pike of over 20 lb are special fish, and most anglers are lucky to get one a season. Fish over 30 lb are even less common, and ones bigger than this are mostly found only in trout waters these days.

Habitat

Pike can be found almost everywhere, from little farm ponds to big glacial lakes. They inhabit still and fast moving rivers, in fact they are a species that adapts to fit a niche in most watercourses.

They perform a vital role in fisheries, taking out the weak and diseased fish. In waters where they have been removed, you get an abundance of small, stunted fish, as there isn't anything to thin them out, which is the pike's natural role. Top areas to target include snags, gravel bars, weedbeds, lily pads, overhanging trees, bridges and moored boats.

How they hunt

Pike can be funny creatures when it comes to how they capture their prey. On some waters they are active predators, following, chasing and hunting other fish for food. On other waters they perform more of a scavenging role, picking up dead fish from the bottom.

In truth, pike are a very adaptable species, and will perform both the role of a hunter and of a scavenger, depending on food availability and other environmental factors.

Due to their appearance, pike can easily camouflage themselves amongst weed, to help them ambush unsuspecting prey. The small holes on their head (neuromasts) help them detect vibrations, and the streamlined body, fin positioning and powerful tail

provide them with an extremely quick burst of speed to catch prey. The sharp inward-pointing teeth of pike give little chance for prey to escape.

Tactics

Pike can be caught readily on lots of methods, from deadbaiting, livebaiting and lure casting to fly fishing, trolling, float fishing and legering. They are an adaptable predator, and as an angler you have to be adaptable and use the correct method, or methods, for the water and for the fishing conditions.

For the go-anywhere piker, there are two methods that you really need to have in your armoury. The first is deadbaiting. All pike at one time or another will pick a deadbait up off the bottom, so it's always worth presenting a bait in this way.

If possible I like to float fish a deadbait, as it means that I carry minimal gear and can change the presentation quickly from hard on the bottom to up in the water, to allow the bait to drift. Though deadbaiting can be very effective, on some waters it can be hard going, as pike are more used to catching live prey. This is where lure fishing comes into its own.

With lures you can be very mobile, and cover a lot of water to search the fish out. There are also all manner of lures that will offer different presentations.

It was once thought that lures were only attractive to smaller pike, and the big ones would only scavenge and pick up deadbaits, but nothing could be further from the truth. I've caught ten times more 20 lb-plus pike on lures than on I have on deadbaits.

Tackle

Casting large lures for big pike requires specialist kit, and in most cases you are going to need a specialist 6 ft or 7 ft stiff rod. You need a stiff rod not only to cast large lures, but also to set the large hooks in the mouth of a pike when it grabs it.

Multipliers are the best reels of choice, with heavy braid of around 80 to 90 lb breaking strain. This strength is not to deal with the

fighting qualities of pike, but is used for safety, to prevent break-offs on the cast, and to pull lures out of snags. As a pike has a good set of sharp teeth, you also need a wire trace – I like to use single strand titanium wire, as this won't kink in the way that other forms of wire do, and although it's expensive, it will last for seasons without the need to change it.

For deadbaiting, longer 3 lb test curve rods are ideal. Pike rods are designed for casting deadbaits without pulling the hooks through them. They are also usually through-actioned, to enable you to play and land pike quickly.

Every piker should be equipped with unhooking tools, the minimum requirement being an unhooking mat, long-handled forceps or long-handled pliers and a side cutter tool (to cut hooks if needed).

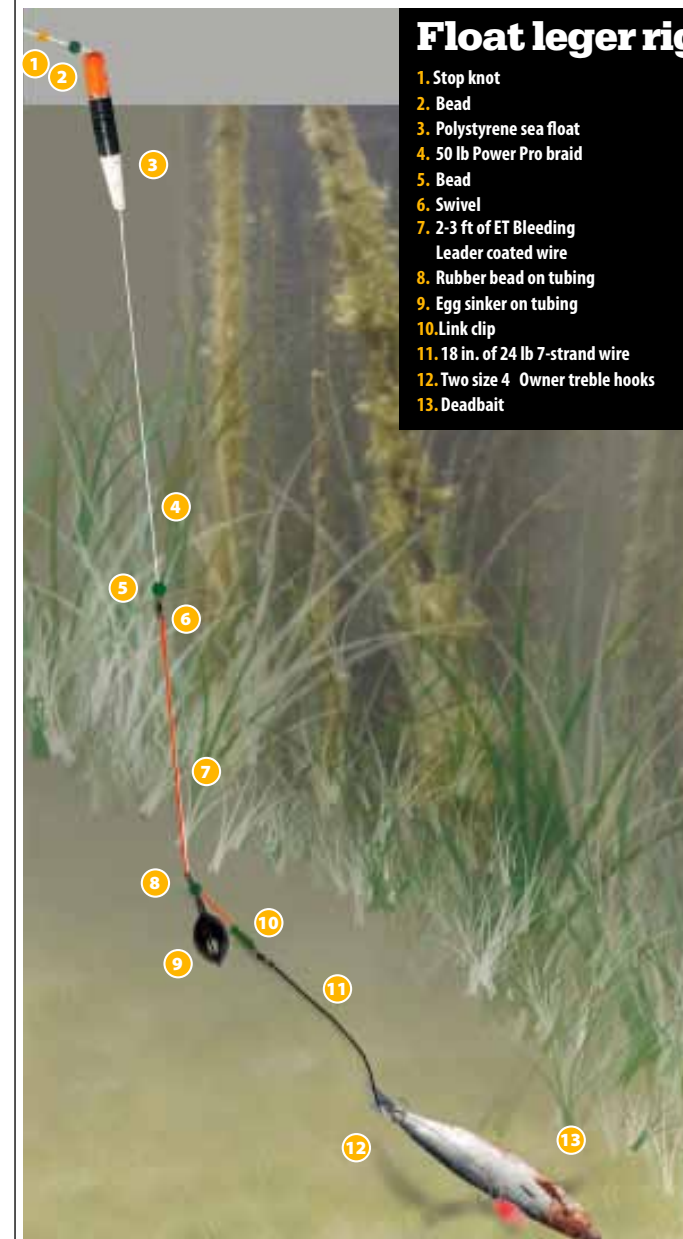
How to unhook pike

- 1 Place the pike on its back on an unhooking mat and gently straddle it.
- 2 Gently place your fingers under the gill plate with your thumb on the outside, and pull the bottom jaw up to open the pike's mouth.
- 3 Use your unhooking tools to remove the hook trace.



Float leger rig

1. Stop knot
2. Bead
3. Polystyrene sea float
4. 50 lb Power Pro braid
5. Bead
6. Swivel
7. 2-3 ft of ET Bleeding Leader coated wire
8. Rubber bead on tubing
9. Egg sinker on tubing
10. Link clip
11. 18 in. of 24 lb 7-strand wire
12. Two size 4 Owner treble hooks
13. Deadbait



Lures are the best way to cover lots of water to search pike.

PERCH



Perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) are one of the UK's favourite fish. They are a uniquely colourful fish for a predator, with an often golden bronze body, dark stripes and blood-red fins – it is this vibrant colour that makes them so liked. The record is currently 6 lb 3 oz, held jointly by two different fish, from Stream Valley Lakes and Wilstone Reservoir, taken by Neill Stephen and Ken Brown in 2011 respectively. Perch up to 3 lb are fairly common, but fish any bigger than this are quite rare, with 4 lb fish and above being monsters.



Habitat

Like pike, the perch is a native predator to the UK and Europe, and can be found in most waters, though it prefers slow moving or still water. Bigger fish usually fall into three categories – those that have got big by eating crayfish on slow-moving rivers, those in commercial stillwaters with an abundance of stunted fish to feed on, and reservoir fish that have access to lots of fry in September, to produce growth spurts.

How they hunt

Perch generally stay in small groups of the same size range and year class, therefore you can often find a big shoal of small ones all of the same size. As they get bigger, the survival rate drops and the shoals will become smaller. When you look at fish of 3 lb and above, there may only be five or six in



Give drop shot rigs a try, as they are a superb tactic for perch.

a shoal, and for 4 lb fish it can be just one or two. Perch generally stay close to snags and other structures on the bottom, and then go out at first and last light to predate on fry.

Tactics

Perch can be caught on most methods, and they are suckers for maggots and worms, but in larger sizes they are more predatory, taking



TOP TIP

Really big perch love a big bait, which is why some big fish are caught by pike anglers on massive lures. To target the big girls, I still use the drop-shotting method, as perch find this irresistible, but I rig it with a big "twitch bait". You can't go wrong with a 5-in. or 6-in. V-tailed bait such as a Lunkey City Fin-S Fish or a Berkley Ripple Shad.

smaller fish when they can, and because of this they are often caught by accident on pike lures. Small livebaits work well, too.

If there were ever a species-specific method, it would be drop-shotting. You can nearly always guarantee that if done correctly it will lead to you catching only perch.

It is also a fantastic tactic for targeting big perch. It's a unique method to set up, and the lure fishes at a set depth in the water, as it is presented above the weight and away from snags and bottom debris.

If you decide to fish more static methods, with small livebaits, worms and maggots, it is good practice to ensure that your set-up is as resistance-free as you can make it. Free running rigs, light indicators and bobbins on a long drop help you to achieve this.

Tackle

To rig up a drop shot, take a length of fluorocarbon (I usually use 8 lb) and in the middle tie on your hook using a Palomar knot.

With the hook pointing up, tie a swivel on the fluorocarbon to attach to your main line, and at the other end tie on a clip for a weight.

It is important to use only the amount of weight that you need, as to work the lure you just gently flick the rod to twitch the weight along the bottom, without it moving up and down in the water column.

This type of retrieve makes the lure twitch and squirm around the main trace body in a way that mesmerises perch.

Specialist rods are available for this type of fishing, as you need a stiff enough rod to set the hook when a perch takes it, but you also need a soft tip to assist working the lure without jolting the weight off the bottom each time.

For more static fishing, rods with test curves of 1-1.5 lb and set up to fish with 6 lb main line to a 4 lb fluorocarbon hook link are a good arrangement, with strong, wide-gape hooks best when you are using livebaits.

ZANDER

Zander (*Stizostedion Lucioperca*) are not native to the UK, but are endemic all over Europe. They were introduced here in numbers in the 1960s, when a few fish were stocked into the Great Ouse Relief Channel, and before that there was a small population on the Duke of Bedford's Woburn Estate. The Relief Channel fish quickly spread, grew, and got moved about, and they are now a target species. They are easily identifiable, with big, glossy eyes, a spiky perch-like dorsal fin, and are silver or brownish-silver in appearance. The British record stands at 21 lb 5 oz – a fish caught by James Benfield from the River Severn in 2007. A double-figure fish is most anglers' target, with one of over 15 lb a true specimen.



Habitat

Zander, being a non-native species in the UK, should ideally have stayed where they were first introduced, namely the Duke of Bedford's estate, and the Fenland system, but since then they have been moved all around the country. Now there are good populations in most of the East Anglian river systems, the Midlands rivers and canals, the Thames, and there are also good populations in several lakes and reservoirs.

At first it was thought that zander would out-compete our native species and decimate stocks of silver fish. That hasn't proved to be true, and where you find zander you can guarantee to find good populations of silver fish, as this is what they feed on. Therefore, it always pays to watch the water carefully for signs of scattering silver fish to locate zander.

How they hunt

Zander feed on smaller fish than pike, and like perch they hunt in small groups of similar-sized fish. When they get bigger, however, they become more solitary and territorial, often staying in the same area for very long periods of time.

Zander were once thought to be totally nocturnal. This is incorrect, and depending on water clarity, they can be caught at any time of the day and night, though they are more adapted to feeding in low light conditions – they have a form of light intensifying vision to accommodate this, making their eyes shine like a cat's in photos.

They are predominately a sight feeder, though they will hunt out food by smell as well. The scent

receptors are not thought to be as well defined as those of pike.

Tactics

Zander are one of the best sporting species to be caught on lures, and they will readily take them, by day or night, as long as they are presented correctly. For 95 per cent of the time this means fishing them within 1 ft of the bottom.

The best method to use to do this is jig fishing, be that vertical fishing from a boat, or casting from the bank. The most important thing to

remember is to make sure that you are fishing tight to the bottom, and when you lift your jig, you let it fall on a tight line in a controlled manner, to look like an injured prey fish.

Nearly all of the hits from zander will be as the lure drops down. They follow it on the rise, and then take it on the fall back down.

Tackle

Jigs come in all shapes and sizes, but for zander I favour shad bodies in the 4-6 in. range. For this size body, a 3/0 or 4/0 jig hook is appropriate, with

the jig head size dependent on the depth and speed of the water that you are fishing.

Stinger hooks are needed on all lures, as zander have a habit of just nipping at the base and tail of the lure, so this is a great place to put one. A stinger is an additional treble hook, rigged on a piece of wire that is attached to the eye of the hook.

Braided main line is a must to feel the subtle bites of a zander. Zander don't have line-cutting teeth, but you could hook a pike, so to avoid leaving treble hooks in them, use a wire trace.



Jig fishing is a top tactic for zander. Make sure you use a stinger hook as they have a habit of nipping the tail.

EELS



Anglers have a love/hate relationship with eels (*Anguilla anguilla*). Some anglers love them and fish solely for the species, but others hate them. They are not as common as they once were, and are now considered an "at risk" species, as the population has crashed in recent years, so much so that anglers can no longer take any to eat or use them for bait. The law states that all eels caught must be returned immediately to the water, with fines of up to £50,000 should you choose not to do so. The record is 11 lb 2 oz, caught by Steve Terry way back in 1978 from Kingfisher Lake. They are a long-lived and slow-growing species, and a fish of 3 lb can be as much as 30 years old.

Habitat

Juvenile eels, known as elvers, travel to the UK each year from what is thought to be a spawning ground in the Sargasso Sea. These tiny fish navigate using the Gulf Stream and travel up most major watercourses in the UK. From here they migrate into interconnected waters. It is thought that they get into isolated waterbodies by travelling out of water across wet ground, but it is still a mystery how they get into lakes that are nowhere near a river.

How they hunt

Eels are a truly nocturnal predator. They can be caught in the daytime on waters that are coloured, but really, for constant results, you need to be fishing at night. At night, eels can be found all over most watercourses, but tend to favour areas around the edges of lakes and islands, where they will patrol around them looking for dead fish in the shallows.

Tactics

It's often said that once in a water, eels develop to feed on invertebrates or to hunt fish, and due to this their head shape will change – fish hunters



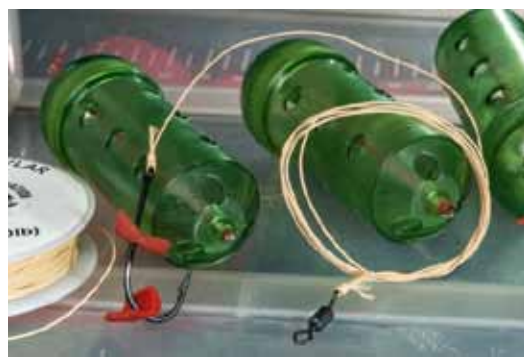
Chopped up fish in groundbait is a great way of attracting eels. Chopped up worms in a block-end feeder with lobworms on the hook is another top tactic.

developing a wider head and mouth. In truth, this does happen, but both types of eel are often found in the same water, so it's always worth fishing with both types of bait. For the really big fish I have found that in nearly all cases these are fish eaters and are caught on small deadbaits. I like to use lots of smelly groundbait to attract eels. To create this I mix up some brown breadcrumb with some fishmeal or halibut pellet groundbait. To this I add a mixture of mashed-up last season's deadbaits, and frozen maggots.

Eels are said to have a sense of smell to equal that of sharks, and they are particularly attracted to free amino acids – Lysine is an eel "magnet". You could tip it into the margins of a lake and expect to see eels there in the morning. I like to add free amino acids such as this to my bait, by dunking or by injecting some form of Minamino in my hook bait.

Tackle

Eels have rough teeth pads that can wear through mono hook links, so



most anglers will use a tough braid, as used in catfish fishing, to combat this. If you are using deadbaits, it is irresponsible not to use a wire trace, as you will pick up pike at some point. For worm baits, I like to use a longish hook link of around 24 in. with a size 2 hook. On the hook I put a couple of lobworms, and hold them in place with a small bit of rubber band. I fish this with a block-end feeder filled with chopped worms. With fish baits, I find that a straight leger is effective, with the hook length incorporating an 8-in. section of wire, and I like to fish with head sections of small freshwater fish. It is important to remember that eels can be fussy with regard to resistance, so use a large weight with a large run ring, and fish an open bail arm to reduce dropped runs.

CATFISH

European catfish (*Silurus glanis*), also known as wels catfish, are not native in the UK, like zander, but are common all over Europe. They were introduced firstly to the Duke of Bedford's Woburn Estate lakes, and then later to the waters around Claydon. From here they were moved to a few other lakes and then it stayed like this until about ten years ago, when people realised there was money to be made from catfish and lots were stocked from dodgy sources. There is now no record for catfish in the UK, though various waters hold very big fish, and cats of 60-80 lb are not uncommon.

Habitat

Catfish have been shown to thrive in nearly all types of waters in Europe, even those where you wouldn't think they would do very well, such as fast-flowing spate rivers. They are another adaptable predator, and unfortunately there are some populations in various UK rivers, from the Trent and Ouse to the Thames. Catfish usually lay up next to snags, in weeds and under trees during the day time, and then come out at night, and will travel considerable distances during a feeding spell.

How they hunt

Catfish are predominately a nocturnal feeder in the UK. They can be caught in daylight, but this tends to be on very coloured waters where light penetration is at a minimum. Catfish, unlike most predators, have fairly redundant eyesight, which is mainly for detecting light levels, so they hunt primarily on the sense of smell and vibrations, and have adapted sophisticated sense organs for this.

The catfish has a number of elongated barbels and has olfaction cells all over these and even over most of its mouth and head. Along the fish there are a number of cells that detect water movement, so that it can home in on any struggling fish, without even seeing it.

Tactics

Catfish hunt in two ways. Firstly they scavenge, and when on the feed they will mop up all kinds of fishy food. Halibut pellets and boilies in large quantities are all attractive to catfish. Secondly, they actively hunt fish, and can take really quite large baits. Fish of over 100 lb can easily take a 5 lb fish in one mouthful, which is why authorities are concerned about them in natural watercourses. There are two main methods used to catch them – fishing a static bait on the bottom, such as a large boilie or a smelly fish bait, or you can fish with livebaits, hoping that the vibrations from them will attract the fish.

Tackle

Catfish are without doubt the hardest fighting fish in the UK, and you need the tackle required to land them when targeting them. I use 3.5 lb test curve through-actioned rods to help tame these fish. Main line is usually 50-60 lb braid, and hook links need to be made from Kevlar to resist the rasping, sharp, sandpaper-type teeth pads of catfish.

I believe the best bait for catfish is a sub-surface livebait. Tie your hook link with a knotless knot, make the hair elongated to about 5 in. and put on a suitably sized polystyrene ball. Then fish your livebait directly to the hook. I like to tail-hook the bait, and keep it on the hook with a small bait flag or a bit of elastic band. This long hook link of around 3 ft is fished on a running leger. Once you've cast in, tighten down to the trace, and then release line from the reel to fish the bait at the required depth off the bottom. I usually find that 1 ft from the surface is a good starting point, or tight to the bottom is another good spot when fishing over groundbait.



A polystyrene ball enables you to fish livebaits up in the water.

