

My father called recently to inform me that he was taking up the sport of lure fishing. His first question was probably the most common question anglers new to the art of lures pose to more experienced anglers. "What's the best lure to get?" In most cases folks are really looking for a "magic bullet" lure that separates the 10% from the 90%.

Normally, I would probably respond that a soft plastic is the most versatile lure and my highest percentage producer of strikes. I would probably recommend a particular manufacturer and color. While this is a truthful answer, and probably the one most folks are really looking for, I felt like I owed my father more.

I don't recall much about attending elementary school in the 1980's, but I recall with great detail the times he took me fishing. I can still recall the various drive-in locations around Surfside where we would soak bait, the characters working the bait stands and even the songs on the radio. Those trips set the stage for a life-long fishing obsession on my part and I am always grateful. I provided the answer I felt to be most sincere and accurate.

"Depends". Answering the inevitable follow up question "Depends on what?" during the course of a phone conversation isn't really possible, so I told him I would put some thoughts in writing over the course of a few days and email them to him. What follows is part one of a two part write-up outlining my philosophy on choosing the right lure for the moment when fishing for speckled trout.

Selecting and presenting the "correct" lure depend upon the feeding mood of the fish, which is largely influenced by observable environmental conditions. I've witnessed exceptions to nearly every "rule" but what follows are what I believe to be general truths regarding fish behavior and lure selection.

The feeding mood of the fish, or what we call "the bite" can be basically boiled down to three conditions: aggressive, neutral or negative.

"Aggressive" means actively feeding fish in seek and destroy mode. They are feeding higher in the water column, have a large strike zone and will hit nearly anything you throw. Baitfish are fleeing for their lives and hits are violent with high hook-up rates. I believe this condition occurs about 5% of the time. You have rare days where they seem to feed for hours and other times you get a single ten minute window in a span of four days. Most days you get a few short windows of opportunity at aggressive fish.

"Neutral" means fish are sitting around not actively feeding, but being the opportunists they are, won't pass up a meal if it can be won without much effort. This is by far the most common mood of the fish, seemingly occurring about 75% of the time. Bites aren't very aggressive and hookups can be somewhat inconsistent with lots of hookups occurring outside of the mouth in locations like the top of the head or under the chin. You usually see the presence of bait but its activity doesn't appear to be stressed. Neutral fish means keeping the lure lower in the water column and more subdued presentations. I figure in these instances you have a strike zone of a few feet.

"Negative" means the fish don't want to eat, period. "Lockjaw" we call it. Negative fish tend to stick to the bottom and in some instances literally bury their head in the grass. Bait may be in front of you but it is usually non-active. Lure selection calls for something on the bottom and "just enough" for the fish to be aware of its presence. "Too much" lure and you risk spooking them. Chances are, you're only going to get bit if you drag it across a fish's nose, so these situations are what we call "grinds", where you cover every inch of water in an area where you anticipate fish to be. Bites characteristic of negative fish are light taps or none at all, or what I call "reaction strikes" where fish seem to slap at a lure in mid-twitch. Because of the non-committal nature of the bites, hookup percentage is usually low.

Understanding how environmental factors influence fish behavior is a key to anticipating which lure in your arsenal has the highest percentage chance of being the "best" for the moment. I call these environmental influences "bite triggers". Here is a brief rundown of the major "bite triggers".

First light and last light. The number one food source for mature speckled trout is mullet. Science has determined that the eyes of trout adjust to changing light conditions much more quickly than mullet. It is during the window of changing light conditions that speckled trout have the greatest advantage over their prey. For this reason, your best bite of the day often occurs around dawn or dusk.

Lunar influence. There are two aspects to the moon's influence on the bite. One is how it affects their mood on a daily basis, and the other is related to how the lunar phases affect fishing during a given month. The feeding tables you see in newspapers and magazines are using lunar tables to predict the bite. It works like this: "Minor" feeds occur when the moon is rising or setting. "Major" feeds occur when the moon is overhead or underfoot. In my experience, a moon rise or set has more influence on the bite than the moon being overhead or underfoot, so it's my opinion that the chart people have the terminology backwards, but regardless, either condition often initiates a bite. The lunar phase during the course of the month has a very strong influence on the bite. The best days of the month are the ones which occur around a new moon or a full moon. We refer to these as "strong moon" days. There is a myth among old salts that suggest fishing is poor during the daytime hours occurring around a full moon because "the fish feed at night". After fishing many full moons and discussing this with others, I don't buy this; in fact, I believe the opposite is true and science backs this up given some of the advantages predator fish have over prey fish include superior low-light vision and movement sensing lateral lines. Some of my best daytime trips have occurred during the full moon phase and some of my best night time trips occur during a new moon when you can't see your hand in front of your face. Regardless, the best days of a month to be on the water are around the full moon and new moon period.

Frontal passages. Some of the strongest bites of the year occur during the hours leading up to, and just after a frontal passage. During the days leading up to a front, the

pre-front condition usually consists of strong southeast winds that build until the few hours just before the actual frontal passage. At this point the wind begins to lay and the barometer drops. It seems that during this period of declining winds the fish begin feeding, with the bite increasing and peaking at the very moment the front passes. Some of the best bites of the year occur when the frontal clouds are rolling in over your head. Once the front sets in, the barometer quickly rises and the fish shut down, giving us some of the toughest days of the year. The worst days of the year seem to be the "blue-bird" clear sky days behind a frontal passage. As the front pushes through and the winds return to the southeast, the cycle begins again.

Wind. This can be very location-specific, but generally the worst wind condition for the bite is dead calm. You can throw for hours during a calm condition and the moment the wind picks up, the fish turn on. One thing I've observed, it's usually an "either/or" situation. If the fish happen to be feeding during the dead calm, you can bet they'll probably stop once the wind starts, or if they're feeding during a windy period, they'll shut down if it goes calm. Changing wind direction also seems to follow this "either/or" situation. I don't believe that high wind necessarily shuts down the bite; it just makes it increasingly difficult to catch fish on lures. Higher wind often relates to declining water clarity and increased wave action which creates noise that makes your lure harder to detect. It also makes the physical process of lure presentation more difficult in general. Wind can be used to your advantage when it comes to pushing tides around structure which can position fish. It can also help mask your presence when wading in shallow, clear water, allowing you to get much closer to trout and reds without spooking them.

Tides and tide level. Lunar driven tides can mean everything to the bite around coastal passes. Periods of slack tides often coincide with negative fish. In bays which are far removed from an offshore tide source, like Baffin for instance, lunar driven tides don't mean nearly as much. Tidal movement in these bays is mostly wind-driven. I believe the overall tide level in these instances can be more important than moving water. In general, higher tides tend to scatter fish and push them up in shallow areas, whereas lower tides tend to concentrate them in certain areas, like the bases of structures and drops.

Cloud cover/water clarity. Typically, overcast skies tend to relate to a better bite, especially in clear water. Sunny days and ultra-clear water tend to push fish into a more negative condition and sometimes seems to cause them to leave the shallows altogether after the early morning bite.

Time of year/water temperature. It's generally believed that extreme high or low water temperatures push fish into a negative bite. Some of the things we witnessed this past winter, which was the coldest one in the 16 years I've lived in Corpus, have shaken this theory. We witnessed aggressive feeding in water temperatures as low as 40. Prior to this, I would have told you that 40 degree water would cold stun and possibly kill

trout, but this proved otherwise. In actuality, how acclimated trout are to the cold matters much more than the actual temperature. 48 degree water following many days of 70 degree water affects trout more adversely than 40 degree water following days of 50 degree water. This is a lengthy discussion to be had, but in general, trout seem to be negative most of the time in water under 48. High mid-day water temperatures like 85+ can send the fish off into deeper areas and push them into a negative mood.

Barometric pressure. A moving barometer or a low barometer seems to coincide with a better bite, whereas a high steady barometer creates a negative mood in the fish.

One thing to remember about these bite-inducing conditions--any of them can initiate a bite, but if more than one occur simultaneously, the better your odds at a good bite. A sunrise is a bite trigger. A sunrise coinciding with a moonset is better. A sunrise on a foggy morning with a new moon setting and an imminent major front is the best possible condition on paper.