

Bait collection and purchase

Those fishing bait over sea-trout will need to collect bait. Few if any these days breed their own maggots: maggots (called ‘chandlers’ in and around Dublin, possibly because the etymology of *chandler* is related to ‘candle’ and therefore, via the waxy, white look of the creatures, to maggots?) are widely available in all tackle shops. Worms may also be bought in some tackle shops – these are often brandlings, sold sometimes under the name of ‘tiger-worms’ - but it’s in many ways more satisfactory to collect your own: lobworms may be collected from damp lawns after dark on summer nights (tread very carefully and use a good torch) and brandlings may be encouraged to breed in compost heaps, particularly if newspaper is layered between the compost and old carpet is placed on top of the heap.

Frozen sandeels are obtainable in airtight packs from some tackle suppliers in Ireland. The best commercial brand I’ve found is marketed under the brand name ‘Ammo’ (a pun on the generic Latin term for the sandeel, *Ammodytes*, and on the fact that such baits are ‘ammo’ – metaphorical ammunition – for anglers, see also <http://www.ammodytes.co.uk/index.php>).

Alternatively, you can collect your own sandeels. From Gene Conway on the Erne estuary in Donegal – the same Gene whose father was instrumental in designing the first Gadget, see pp.xxx-yyy of the hard text here) – I received the following note in 2010, which I reproduce with gratitude:

Vingling (or ‘vingelling’) for sandeels

Hello Chris

I’d like to take you through my first time making and using a vinger tool to collect sandeels. Some time before this I’d wandered around the edge of the tide at low water (Erne estuary) using

a sandeel rake which I'd purchased in the USA. This is a bit like a garden rake but the tines are about 5 inches long and 1/8" in diameter, 1/4 inch apart. The rake's made of good quality steel, and the head has a total width of 8 inches. Using as much skill and knowledge as I could extract from Google I raked the shore of the estuary for about 1½ hours, starting around 30 minutes before low tide and continuing until 1 hour after dead low. I started near the open sea and worked back upstream, raking shallow and deep, first in the water and then on the sand away from the water. It was back-breaking work. When I'd had enough back pain I stopped and tried to analyse my efforts. For my pains I'd caught one nice large sandeel – but with two holes in his back where I'd hit him with the tines. [Guilty feeling.] There *had* to be sandels there. I'd been digging 5 inches deep. Some of the sand was a bit soft and in places it would make you jump back thinking 'Quicksand!' I definitely thought there'd be sandeels there but...no luck. I had my binoculars with me and searched the whole estuary for gulls working on the sandeels: there were no gulls. 'They must all be at Killybegs picking up the easy bits,' I thought...and that was the end of my first try.

I'd read about the vingler device and had seen instructions on how to make one. I got a good strong knife and ground it to the required shape. It looked as if it would work OK. Last September I was with friends on a beach which faces directly towards the open sea. There were lots of seagulls. There was a small river entering the beach at its far end and the gulls seemed to be concentrated in that area. I had a walk to the river and found very soft sand at its edge – the sand was about 6 inches deep. When I was having a sandwich later, one of the girls came to me and said 'Gene, there are worms in the water by the rocks.' I asked Sarah what the 'worms' looked like. 'Silver, with big eyes,' she said. I decided to go and investigate these 'worms'. Armed with my shiny new vingler and a bucket I arrived at the beach before low tide. Having had no experience with the vingler I was a bit too strong at first and I damaged a lot of eels while pulling the blade towards me back through the sand. Still, I needed the experience so I carried on until I got to the soft sand at the edge of the river. My catch was some good eels, though I kept damaging some of them. But my catch improved as my experience improved. I got to learn about different types of sand – coarse – fine – compacted – loose.... The excitement was mounting. I could already see in my mind a 6lb. sea-trout....

It was fun, the vingler, and it was more interesting and was easier to use than the rake. It takes some time to pull the vingler through the sand, just fast enough so that when you feel the blade catch something you can guess that it's an eel and not a piece of shell. Occasionally you'll feel a crab and it will be very angry at being disturbed.

Now for a strange experience. Two boys, interested in my sandeel digging, came to investigate. I showed them what I was doing and they tried to catch sandeels with their bare hands. In a few minutes they had 20 eels in the bucket. I stood up – and saw a sandeel *jumping* 20 feet away on apparently dry sand. I ran over but he was gone already. Then I saw another sandeel lying on top of the sand. It was alive and in good condition. I put him in the bucket. I hadn't noticed that the gulls were getting noisy, but suddenly realised there were lots of sandeels coming up to the surface. They were just lying there as if exhausted (though they were very much alive when I put them into the bucket of sea water). We went to investigate and we actually saw the eels appearing up through a hole they'd dug in the sand. This sand was just damp enough so that when the eels were exiting it the hole retained its shape and the sand didn't trickle back down into the hole. The sandeels were burrowing out I believe because the weather was quite warm. They were getting uncomfortable with the temperature and just had to get out, away from the heat and dryness of the sand. Now I knew why there were so many gulls squawking all along this part of the shore.... I've never read of this happening.

Every writer of fishy stories should have a vingler. I'm now a more complete angler than ever I was and have enjoyed some wonderful days with a vingler and with sea-trout fishing, though that 6lb-er is still swimming free in the estuary.

Gene Conway, 6th May 2010

I was delighted to receive Gene's story and in May 2010 filed it carefully for later inclusion in this text. A week later, and a package arrived at my home in the Netherlands. The parcel bore a Donegal postmark.



Is this a vingler that I see before me?

Gene had sent me the very vingler with which he'd himself vingled: a kitchen knife, with a strong blade, into which a notch (see illustration) had been ground. I was and am immensely touched. To my shame, I have never yet vingled. But given Gene's story, his instructions and his generosity, I shall vingle like a good 'un just as soon as I have the time and opportunity to vingle and to go on a-vingling.