**Spinning and bait fishing**

During some weeks of the early season (April) I use spinning gear in Irish estuaries in order to present natural sandeels or to fish long, narrow, sandeel-representing spoons. I’ve found rods 8-10 feet long, with a casting weight of 5-18g, wholly adequate, though again I prefer longer to shorter rods, largely because they offer more control over the presentation of bait or lure as well as greater control over hooked fish. Because in this form of fishing I enjoy using braided lines, it’s important that the rod-rings are made of toughened material so that constant casting with braid doesn’t wear (cut a groove in) the rings: the tip-ring is particularly important in this respect. Reel-fittings should also be constructed, ideally, of saltwater-proof materials and be light, comfortable and warm in the hand. Reel-seats with aluminium or plastic under the hand can be very cold in the sometimes bitter weather experienced on estuaries in early April.

My most-used spinning rod in Ireland is a four-piece Shimano Exage, an 8-footer, with a cork grip and toughened plastic screw-winch fitting. (I’d prefer to fish a 9- or 10-footer but the 8-footer is easier to travel with on aircraft.) The rod adequately handles baits and lures in the 7-20g range and its tip is soft and sensitive. The rod is compact, robust and easy to clean.

For this kind of sea-trout fishing, fixed-spool reels are satisfactory. I load reels with a minimum 150m. of 10lb. PowerPro (braided line). At the business end of the braid, whether fishing with the natural sandeel or with long spoons, I attach a small swivel, and then a trace which is usually constructed of three or four feet of 8lb. nylon.
Spinning rod, reel and line

Occasionally I fish small (1- or 2-inch) Devon minnows – lures which spin. If using Devons or another favourite spinning lure, the blue-and-silver Mepps (size range 0 through to 4), I attach an anti-kink vane to the end of the braid, thereafter attaching the nylon trace to the terminal end of the vane. My experience is that an extra swivel can with advantage be mounted to the nylon trace in this circumstance: spinning lures do cause the line to twist and anything which inhibits line-twist is a plus.

In very cold spring weather, when fishing spoons, Devons or spinners I attach a small spring-clip to the end of the nylon. One end of the clip can be opened, and the lure replaced, very easily with cold fingers – much more easily than tying a new knot every time the lure is changed.

Methods of rigging the natural sandeel vary from district to district and sometimes from fisherman to fisherman. One well-known method is to mount the sandeel on a large
(size 6) single hook. The hook, knotted to the trace, is first passed through the tail root of the sandeel, the nylon being drawn through with it. The hook is then fastened, with its tip protruding, into the mouth of the sandeel. Finally, a loop – an overhand knot – is formed up-trace, and then drawn tight and secured over the tail of the sandeel. The bait therefore fishes head-down.

Head-down rig for the natural sandeel (1)
Head-down rig for the natural sandeel (2)

Head-down rig for the natural sandeel (3)
The completed head-down sandeel rig

Michael Patton (Ballyshannon), who showed James and me this rig and uses it himself a great deal, claims that the use of the big single hook allows sea-trout to be unhooked easily and thereafter safely returned to the estuary: using forceps, or even a bare finger, the barb of the hook can be pressed out of the fish’s mouth, and the remaining eel and trace extracted with relative ease. We found this to be quite true, though we prefer to debarb the big single before mounting the bait.

A disadvantage of this rig is that sea-trout in the early part of the season – particularly sea-trout kelts, which during April will often be returning from their sojourn in freshwater to feed in the estuary – can often be very hungry indeed and will sometimes wolf the bait, resulting in a deeply-hooked fish. Where the rod is left unattended on the sands and the rod-tip watched for bites, the proportion of deeply-hooked sea-trout rises,
and therefore I feel that the sandeel fished on the big single hook should always be fished while the angler is holding the rod.

My experience is that a second type of rig minimises the risk of hooking sea-trout deeply. A smallish (size 10-12) single hook is attached to the end of the trace. Thereafter, a short nylon link, attached to the bend of the single, leads to a debarbed treble hook (usually size 12), which is nicked into the sandeel’s skin just behind the dorsal fin.
Quick-strike sandeel rig

When sea-trout take sandeels they invariably do so by attempting to catch and swallow the natural eel head-first. The majority of the sea-trout I’ve taken on natural sandeels in Irish estuaries have been hooked on the up-trace single iron.

A reminder about tackle care. Whereas many anglers look after their precious fly-fishing tackle with scrupulous attention, equally many seem sometimes to expect that spinning rods and fixed-spool reels can endure any kind of salt, blown sand and weather
without problems. But fixed-spool reels, in particular, are as vulnerable to the ravages of sand and salt as are fly-reels and like fly-reels, need rinsing in freshwater after each session. After rinsing, the reel and its internal parts are allowed to dry and then a drop of light oil is applied. It’s worth paying particular attention to the bail-arm on fixed-spool reels, since its smooth action can suffer under a sand- or grit-attack.

While rods and reels should be rinsed in freshwater after use in the salt, so too should lures. Returning a salt-damp lure to the lure-box eventually results in a box full of expensive rust, so used lures should be stored separately from unused ones. Used, salt-wet lures should be rinsed in freshwater and allowed them to dry before returning them to the lure-box. Split-rings, incidentally, are particularly vulnerable to rusting, so at the beginning of each season these should be checked and replaced where rust is suspected. (That said, I’m only human – a fact which will come as a surprise to some readers – and have been known wickedly to neglect these chores...though not often. Where the chores have been neglected then like the rest of the angling world I’ve opened my lure-boxes on subsequent fishing trips only to find rusted and stained split-rings and hardware staring back. Ken and James then set me to writing out a hundred times, in Ogham script, I Must Rinse My Lures After Using Them In Saltwater. I Must Rinse....)
I Must Rinse Out My Lures...

The same rods used for fishing natural sandels or smaller spinning lures can be used for bait fishing, e.g. with worms, though a longer rod, or even a coarse fishing rod (something intended for chub or barbel) can also be employed. It’s now many years since I’ve fished for sea-trout with worms so I can only write in a limited way and from memory about it. Three points, however, come to mind.

First, use of a spinning or coarse rod and worms is probably best limited to flood conditions. (As the water clears, I invariably resort to the wet-fly, not because I’m some rabid fly-purist but because it’s more versatile and effective as an angling method.) Judged from the tackle I see in use today, a simple rig, comprising a bored bullet sliding on the line above a trace of nylon, is often employed, though even in years past I much preferred to use link legers formed from pinching more or fewer AA or BB shot onto a small nylon link. That way, the worm could be fished bumping along or near the bottom,
rather then being anchored unnaturally to it: a stronger current = more shot on the link, a lighter current = fewer shot.

Second, baits. Back in the days when I fished the worm, I usually preferred brandlings to lobworms as bait. Depending on the strength of the flood and the turbidity of the water I’d use up to three brandlings on a single hook. If I did use a lobworm for sea-trout, I’d generally use just the tail part of the worm. I’ve never used Stewart tackles on a spinning or coarse rod, though occasionally I used such tackles when fishing worms on the fly-rod (see below).

A sea-trout takes a worm in the same way as it takes a natural sandeel: there are some jabs on the line, as the sea-trout mouths the bait, then the line tightens. At this point there should be a reciprocal tightening from rod and hand. Tighten too soon and the worm will be pulled out of the fish’s jaws. Tighten too late, and the result will be a deeply-hooked sea-trout – something that, in these days of diminishing returns or mandatory catch-and-release, many anglers will be keen to avoid.

Third, brandlings may readily be fished on the fly-rod and this method may be used in clear water. A floating fly-line is used. A leader is constructed from a level piece of 8lb. nylon – 6 feet is standard, though longer leaders (up to 12 feet, possibly longer) can and should be used if the sea-trout are lying in thin or clear water. On the end of the nylon, mount a Stewart tackle (two size 10-12 hooks joined by nylon or hollow braid, a tandem rig whose construction will be found in the main text). Then mount the worm with its head on the upper hook and the tail attached to the lower – the aim is to present the worm as naturally as possible. The reason for the Stewart mount is simply that it’s
very easy to flick the worm off a single hook during fly-casting; a modified tandem grips the worm more securely. There is no further lead or other weight on the leader.

They key to this form of fishing is quietness. During daylight, a stealthy approach is vital. Creeping and crawling are sometimes encouraged, as is slow, careful wading. Each sea-trout, or shoal of sea-trout, should of course be approached from downstream, and the worm cast upstream. Suppose, however, that you’ve worked slowly to within ten yards of a sea-trout shoal without spooking it. Then, and only then, fishing may begin. The worm is cast – gently, with a circular, soft motion of the fly-rod – to where the sea-trout are waiting. Takes will be signalled by a stoppage of the tip of the fly-line and then a pull as the sea-trout seized the bait. Catching a sea-trout on the upstream worm in clear water is immensely satisfying. It’s many years since I’ve done it, but even as I type this sentence I feel an urge to go back to the method, if only because perversely I enjoy creeping about river banks, fishing and getting stung.