

## STRINGERS & BASKETS By TubeDude

There are several ways to keep and carry fish while tubing or tooning. I quit using stringers a long time ago, especially the metal safety pin type. A basket keeps fish healthier and does not allow fish to tangle your legs...as sometimes happens with stringers.

There is also more potential for the fish to become tangled in weeds or brush when kept on stringers. Another problem, especially with cheap lightweight metal stringers, is that big fish can twist free of them by bending the light wire clips.

I do carry a heavy-duty rope stringer in my tube at all times. I use it for the occasional oversized fish too large to fit in my magnum sized fish basket. And, when I elect to keep a big fish that I have to put on that stringer it stays there only long enough for me to kick back in and put it in the ice chest. I don't like getting jerked around by anyone...including big fish.

I tried using the soft mesh bag fish baskets. I didn't like them. They tended to tangle in brush and gear as badly as stringers. And, even with a ring of floats around the top, they were unwieldy and difficult to put fish into with a one-handed dunk. They also restrict natural fish movement, resulting in fish suffocation and greater mortality than with open wire baskets.

There are a whole bunch of different options in wire fish baskets. I don't like the ones with floating lids. They work fine both for floating and for holding fish. But, as with the mesh bags putting fish into them is a two handed operation. If you are catching and keeping a lot of perch, bluegills, white bass or other pan fish these baskets slow down the "harvesting" process.

I usually buy the largest wire mesh fish baskets available. Several suppliers offer one that measures 19" X 30". These are designed as live baskets to hang over the side of a boat or to be tied off for fishing from the bank. They hold big fish and/or lots of fish. I usually keep a few fish for the table and I often bag some big old bigguns. I need a big basket. Even if I don't fill the basket with fish the additional volume of the larger model allows the fish to have more swimming room and they stay alive, healthy and less stressed longer.



*TubeDude's fish basket, with a foam noodle around the neck for floatation. The noodle is held in place with plastic zip ties.*

*Note the wire handles of the basket tucked down inside the noodle to prop up the mouth of the basket.*

*These baskets can hold several large fish. The catfish in the picture was over 30 inches long.*

I usually rig up my basket with a ring of foam floatation around the “neck” at the upper end. This not only keeps the opening above water but also acts as a bumper to keep the basket from coming into direct contact with my craft. I usually disconnect the spring fastener while fishing and I can just reach over and drop fish into the opening with one hand. I also tuck the ends of the wire carrying handles down inside the ring of foam. That raises the opening even higher above the water line.

I used to secure the basket snug up against my tube by using two fastening cords...one at either end of that side of my tube. By adding the foam float bumper, I can let it float out away from the tube a few inches. I simply secure it to an outside D ring with a snap and a short length of nylon rope. That keeps it within easy reach when I want to deposit a fish.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTALLING AND USING A FISH BASKET:**

- Secure the bottom spring-loaded door permanently shut. Use stout fishing line, nylon cord or plastic ties. I have lost fish when they managed to pry the bottom flap open and swim out of the basket. Some of those rascals are both smart and strong.
- Fasten a ring of foam around the top of the basket...to provide floatation and a bumper between basket and air chamber. Those kiddies’ swim noodles work great and add some color to your ensemble.
- For most fishing leave the top door unlatched to remain open. Just undo the spring connection. It can be reattached, if desired, but it is easier to drop smaller fish into the basket if they are not impeded by a stiff spring on the flap.
- Tuck the wire handles down inside the foam noodle while fishing to keep the opening upright and out of the water. As long as the basket is secured with the top propped up above the water line you will rarely have a problem with fish leaping out. They tend to swim downward, toward the bottom.
- Check your basket regularly for bent or broken wires. Baskets sometimes snag on stickups or rocks and can develop a hole without you realizing it. On more than one trip I belatedly found that my intended fish dinner had escaped through an unseen hole in my basket. Always carry some heavy line or zip ties for emergency repairs, if needed.
- If you find a broken wire on your fish basket be sure to bend the ends of the broken wire over to neutralize the sharp points. Otherwise, you may notice air bubbles escaping from a punctured air chamber where the wire points have met your tube.
- If you have spiny fish in your basket, do not let the basket bump your craft if you lift it to show off your catch. Also, keep the basket out away from your legs when carrying it with spiny fish inside...especially if you are wearing waders. That is, if you don’t want to get wet inside your waders on your next trip. Fish spines puncture both air chambers and waders.
- Rinse your wire basket well in fresh water after each trip...especially after fishing in salt water...and dry it quickly. This helps remove odiferous fish slime. It may also prevent finding a basket-shaped pile of rust awaiting you on your next trip. A preemptive spraying with WD-40, or something similar, will also prolong the rust-free existence of a good basket.