

## MINNOWS (By TubeDude)

Almost all fish eat other fish smaller than themselves. Even suckers, chubs and carp will eat minnows, or even the young of their own species. Once any fish gets large enough to catch and eat littler fish, they tend to become focused more on “meat” than bugs or other invertebrates when the dinner bell rings. In short, the largest fish in most ecosystems are carnivores and they love minnows.

You can fish minnows just about any old way you want and still catch fish on them. While they are not “idiot proof”, you can almost always catch something on them, no matter how poorly you rig them and fish them. But, there are a lot of refinements in fishing minnows that can greatly increase both the number of bites and the quality of the fish you catch. And, you can fish them in a whole bunch of different ways.

First of all, since this is being written primarily for anglers in Utah (where it is illegal to use live minnows), most of the ideas and suggestions will be offered with the assumption that you will be using dead minnows. Live minnows are so effective that some states (like Utah) have laws against using them. The good news is that dead minnows can often be almost as effective, when fished the right way. In some cases, a dead minnow lying on the bottom can work better than a live one swimming actively above the bottom.

Let’s begin by discussing some minnow basics. “Minnow” is a generic term applied by anglers to any fish that is small enough to serve as fodder for bigger fish. There is actually a large family of fishes known as minnows, which include such common baitfish as shiners, chubs, dace, etc. It also includes larger fish like the carps, suckers and even the pike minnow (formerly known as “squawfish”).

The latter three members of the minnow family can become quite large. In fact, the Colorado River pike minnow has been known to grow to over five feet long and to weigh over 50 pounds. The Colorado River species is protected, and is illegal to keep or use as bait, but other members of the pike minnow family, in many western states, are sometimes recognized as being harmful to the environment and anglers are encouraged to kill them.

Obviously, carp and suckers (and pike minnows) can get too large to be used whole, but their young make excellent bait when fished like smaller minnows. Larger specimens are great for cut bait. Depending on the size of the baitfish, and the size of the intended quarry, you can use chunks or strips...or even use a whole fillet off one side.

Chubs are probably the most widespread and abundant minnows available in several of the mountain states. In fact, wherever they establish a population, they usually become so numerous that they crowd out trout and other species by competing for the available food resources. It is good to catch and keep as many chubs as you can whenever you find such conditions. If you do not intend to use them for bait, take them home for the cat or bury them in the garden.

If you do harvest some chubs for bait, you should grade them out by size. They will grow to more than 12” in length and weigh over a pound. Chubs of that size are good primarily for cut bait. Smaller pieces will catch trout, perch, white bass and walleyes. Fish larger strips or chunks for catfish.

The next size range would be those in the 6” to 10” range. The ones at the larger end of the scale may only be good for cut bait. However, the six-inch size can be very attractive to several species. Large channel cats love mid-sized chubs. So do big walleyes and trout. And, wherever you find northern pike, fishing chunky chubs can be one of the most effective ways of getting them. As with minnows of all sizes, you can fish these larger chubs on the bottom or under a bobber, depending on the depth of the water and how you want to present them.

Probably the most universally accepted sizes, for all minnows, is in the 3" to 5" range. Wherever you find a lot of chubs, you should be able to harvest large quantities in those sizes. This is probably the best size for ice fishing, although sometimes the fish are touchier, or simply respond better to smaller minnows. And, when they are hitting lightly, smaller minnows (or even pieces of minnows) will result in more hookups and fewer stolen baits.

If you are lucky enough to be able to net a bunch of tiny chubs...1" to 2"...you will have absolutely some of the best "finesse" minnows you could ask for. You usually find them for only a short time after the big spawn in the spring, because they grow quickly into the 3" size. But, if you can get a bunch, and freeze them, they will provide great bait all year.

You can use them for everything from bluegills, crappies, perch and white bass to cats, trout, largemouth and smallmouth. They are ideal for tipping a small jig or spoon, as well as fishing on a small light wire hook, either weightless or with only a tiny split shot for a slow natural sink rate. Even some pretty large predators will eagerly slurp in a small dead minnow sinking naturally to the bottom. With smaller baits, there is no pecking. It is gulp and go.

Another popular bait minnow in Utah is the dace. One variety is commonly (but incorrectly) called the red side shiner. It can be trapped or netted from several popular trout lakes, and from numerous streams and canals. It seldom gets very large. A six-inch dace is about the biggest you will ever catch. The 2" to 3" ones are the most common and the ones most sought after for bait.

Some dace species are brightly colored, with red sides or brightly colored fins. Others have distinct lines down their sides. These characteristics help the visibility and often create a pattern for the larger predators that key in on those baitfish as a primary forage base. In other words, if the Strawberry cutts are chowing down on red side shiners, a gold spoon with a red stripe will probably be a more effective lure than a crawdad colored plastic. Also, fishing with a dead minnow, of the same (colorful) species, is likely to work better than fishing a dead chub of the same size.

Still another prime "minnow" in the west is a baby sucker. Wherever there are suckers, there are young suckers. There are several species of suckers in the west. Some are endangered species and are protected, so be sure you do not capture any of their young for bait. Since young suckers are usually different colors than the adults of the same species, you need to be able to identify the protected ones. If in doubt, go catch your bait somewhere else, to avoid a citation.

Look for sucker "minnows" in the same sizes you would want for fishing chubs, dace or other small fish whole. That means anywhere from about 2" to 6", for most fishing situations. Again, the 3" to 5" sizes are the best for the widest range of minnow fishing applications.

Last but not least, on the list of good bait "minnows", are baby carp. Carp spawn in the warming waters of May through June. The eggs hatch quickly and the fry feed heavily on algae and microscopic organisms. They grow fast and by late June or early July you can find large schools of young carp in the 2" to 3" range around the shorelines of the lakes, and up in the tributaries where the carp have spawned.

This is the time to use cast nets or seines to load up on this size carp. Vacuum seal them in "trip-sized" packages. Freeze up as many as you can hold in your freezer, without getting divorced, and you will have prime bait for the rest of the year. They are especially effective in the fall fling time of year, when fish normally feed heavily before ice up, but when there are few fish still around that are small enough to feed upon.

In waters like Utah Lake, there are no natural prey species, like chubs or dace, which remain small all year. That means that the predators have only a few months in which to eat as many young of larger species as they can. Smaller predators, such as white bass, gorge heavily upon baby carp, suckers, sunfish, crappies, perch, mud cats and even their own young...as long as they are small enough for them to eat. Once the young of the year grow beyond a size that can be utilized as food, the white bass must subsist for several lean months on the fat reserves they build up when the living is easy.

By October or November, there are no more baby carp under about 6 or 7 inches. White bass cannot eat prey that size, so they go hungry. That's why they are so easy to catch on lures, worms and cut bait in the fall months. They are ready willing and able to eat, but they have a limited menu. A thawed 3" minnow, soaking on the bottom or below a bobber, is a windfall bonanza to a hungry whittie.

Actually, all the fish in Utah Lake (and most other lakes where carp are part of the food chain) are eager to accept "leftovers"...remnant baby carplets. If you fish the little tykes harvested in the spring, you never know what you are going to get on your line. You can catch several different species on as many succeeding casts to the same area...white bass, walleye, channel cats, mud cats, largemouth or crappies. Near the mouths of the major tributaries, it is not uncommon to hook up with large trout too.

There are no restrictions on fishing with dead carp minnows anywhere in Utah. They are great fished whole or in pieces for ice fishing on any of the lakes with carnivorous predators. If you can't get chubs or shiners for bait, baby carp are often just as good or better. In some cases, the distinctive odor of the carp can produce better results than the less odiferous minnows.

You cannot use baby "game fish" for bait in Utah. That includes whitefish, crappies, bass, walleyes, trout, etc. It does not include yellow perch. As long as they are dead, you can use them in any waters where they are found naturally. Baby perch are a major food source in many lakes and consequently make good bait.

The major exception is in Pineview Reservoir, where you may not use any WHOLE baitfish, and you may not use even a piece of fish flesh larger than one-inch square. That is to help restrict the harvest of the tiger muskies, which have been established to help control the perch population and would be easier prey for anglers if they were allowed to use whole perch or large strips of perch on lures.

In lakes where the limits on perch are generous, or non-existent, you can harvest a bunch and freeze them for future use, just as you would with any minnow sized fish. Just be sure that you do not possess or use more than the legal limit on waters that have specific limits. The laws are specific, so you need to be aware of the differences in limits on different waters and do not try to second-guess the officers.

## **CATCHING BAIT**

If you want to use minnows, you first need to procure some. The first option is to buy them. Don't buy the bottled ones. They have been preserved in formaldehyde, or other nasty smelling solution. Most fish will not eat them. You can buy frozen minnows in many places. They will work, if you do not have your own. However, if they were not properly cared for, in the packaging and freezing processes, they will be soft and difficult to use when they thaw. More about that later.

Dedicated minnow fishermen usually learn how to capture and process their own minnows. Some only harvest and use what they need on the spot, in the waters they fish on a given day. Many try to gather as many as they can, when the gathering is good, and then freeze up the surplus for trips when catching minnows is not a viable option...like for ice fishing trips.

The ways to find and collect minnows are limited only by your creativity and the amount of time you invest in searching out sources and in working to harvest the minnows. Let's first explore potential locations and then the means you can use to put minnows in your bucket.

Utah is essentially a desert state, with only a few natural streams and lakes. Many of the fishing holes in the state are the result of damming flows and extending irrigation canals and ditches from the impoundments created behind the dams. Similarly, many of the best spots to find and gather baitfish are reservoirs, canals and ditches. Some of the greatest "minnow holes" are small farm ponds, created to water livestock or provide a source of water for irrigation pumps.

There are hundreds of spots around the state that have populations of minnows or small fish suitable for bait. In most cases, the owners or managers of these waters are only too happy to have somebody extract as many as possible. Species like chubs and carp can become overpopulated and run out more desirable species, like trout. Some ponds and creeks have only the smaller fishes and are not suitable for trout or game fish anyway.

You cannot pick up a map and look for waters labeled for their minnow populations. Most good spots are known to only those who have searched them out, or who have been told about them by close friends or family members. Many such spots require that you cultivate the good will of the farmer or property owner upon whose land the pond or creek exists. That generally requires a bit of driving and searching, and a good deal of "schmoozing".

In larger lakes, with relatively clean bottoms (free of brush and rocks), you can prospect with a circular cast net. These are sometimes difficult to learn and master, but once you become adept at using one, you should seldom have to worry about having minnows for bait again. That is, unless you let your net settle into "hostile" territory, and it becomes hopelessly tangled in bottom detritus.

Hopefully, you can see schools of minnows near shore, in shallow water (less than 2-3 feet deep). Being able to throw your net over visible minnows, in shallow water, both gives you a visual advantage and helps prevent minnows from being able to dive and swim out of the encircling net. This happens a lot in deeper water. You throw the net over minnows near the surface and they instinctively dive down and out before the net can trap them.

If you can't see minnows, but suspect they are there, you can make prospecting net throws into deeper water...hoping both to catch some minnows and to avoid snagging your net on bottom debris. When you cast the net blindly, into deeper water, you never know what might happen. You can bag no minnows, a lot of minnows or something unexpected...like larger fish, crawdads, old shoes, etc.

Cast nets can be used in larger streams or small ponds too. Again, if you can't see the bottom, or the actual minnows, you can make some exploratory throws and hope for the best. The best spots to seek out minnows, in flowing water, is in the quieter eddies and backwaters. Most minnows do not favor strong currents. The exception to that are small suckers. They can often be found hugging the bottom in current, grazing on the algae and small invertebrates along the current swept rocks. But, using a cast net in such spots is neither easy nor recommended.

**Minnow traps have been useful and valued tools with minnow fishermen for many years. These are typically cylindrical wire mesh baskets with inwardly pointing conical openings on each end. You tie a line to them, bait them with bread or other goodies and toss them out into a spot inhabited by minnows.**

**The minnows (hopefully) swim into the small openings and are usually unable to find their way back out. When there are a lot of minnows in the area, and they respond well to the breadcrumbs filtering out of the basket, you can get quite a few minnows in a hurry. At other times, minnows that are better educated and more wary will swim a wide path around the minnow traps without going in.**

**Minnow traps are about your only resource for trying to catch minnows in a lake, when they are swimming deep and you cannot see them shallow enough or clearly enough to chance a throw with a cast net. Try varying the distance and or the depth at which you place them. If you find a spot through which schools of minnows are traveling back and forth, you can score a bunch of them. Otherwise, you better hope that you brought plenty of worms, or that the fish are hitting lures that day.**

**Minnow traps are good for small ponds too. Many small ponds are murky, from the livestock wading in them or other agitation. Actually, the murkier the water, the better the traps work because the fish are not so spooky.**

**Perhaps the best use of minnow traps is in working small streams. Look for the quiet spots, in eddies or behind culverts, bridges or other obstructions in the flow. The still water right beside an out flowing pipe, on a small creek, will often be full of minnows. The same is true below head gates on irrigation canals and ditches. Minnows follow the current upstream and then congregate in the calmer waters.**

**If you do not have a minnow trap, you can make a workable one by folding over a large piece of window screen. Secure it with wire or some other fastening material around three sides, leaving one end open. It is also a good idea to add some sinkers or other form of weight in the bottom, to help it sink faster.**

**Now, you need to prop one end open with a stick or piece of metal tubing, and secure the ends in place, so that the opening stays open after you toss it in the water. Then, secure the two top outside corners with heavy twine or light rope...joining the two pieces two or three feet ahead of the opening.**

**Once your makeshift scoop trap is securely put together and connected to a throw line, add some hot dog buns or other bread. Find a good pool full of minnows and launch your trap just beyond where you want it to settle. Position it where you can see the most minnows. If you scared them with your throw, they will soon swarm back in for the tidbits in the trap.**

**Since this trap is open at one end, the minnows are free to come and go. You need to watch and when several are inside the opening, you must haul back on the rope and bring the net quickly up out of the water. Sometimes you score. Other times you blow it. But, it is fun. It combines hunting with trapping and fishing. And, you can find cast off screen material in a lot of places. Even if you have to buy it, it is not too expensive.**

**A lot of anglers have been able to scoop up minnows using nothing more than a landing net, with mesh small enough to catch small minnows. You can buy replacement bags for landing nets that have the fine mesh. You can also buy long handled scoop nets. These are used a lot by anglers who employ them to scoop into schools of shad or other fish, near bridges and dams. A large wire-meshed version is used in January each year by the hardy anglers that journey to Utah's Bear Lake, for the little ciscoes that spawn in the shallows.**

There is still another type of net that is effective in some situations for gathering minnows. That is the seine net. A seine is essentially just a strip of mesh between two poles, which is wielded by one or more anglers to drag through the water and trap or scoop all of the aquatic life within the area of the scoop. One person can work a small creek or narrow channel by himself. However, it sometimes works better if two seine operators work toward each other, trapping the minnows in the middle.

Seine nets are great for working the minnows in small streams. They are also ideal for chasing the schools of baby carp in the spring. Whenever you can find schools of bait sized fish in a shallow and/or narrow waterway, one person can generally work a one-man seine well enough to harvest a bunch. Just use the seine to herd the little tykes into a corner, or up against a bank, where you can slide the mesh under them and scoop them up.

The last way we will discuss for catching minnows is probably the most fun. That is to catch them on a fishing rod. Chubs, dace, suckers, small carp and other good candidates for bait are usually easy to catch, if you use a small hook and the right bait. Use a size 16 hook, on 2# leader and a tiny piece of worm to catch almost any of these potential baits.

One of the simplest but most effective baits is a bit of dough, made only of flour and water. Work enough flour into it to make it tough, so that you can pinch off tiny bits to tip the hook with. Keep it in a small plastic bag, to prevent drying, and just slip it into a pocket on your shirt or vest, where you can keep reaching for new bitty bits of minnow bait. Oh yeah, if you don't have custom made dough, you can squeeze a piece of fresh bread into a suitable dough ball too.

Chubs and other minnows will usually hit small flies too. Clip down the hackles on a small dry fly, or simply use a tiny caddis larva imitation. Catching them on flies kind of takes some of the shame out of fishing for minnows. You can use a fly rod, or spinning tackle. If you need to get the fly down, just pinch a small split shot a foot above the fly.

If you take kids fishing, you can usually persuade them to fish for minnows for you. If there are a lot of chubs in the water, the kids will have constant action and you will end up with a lot of bait for the freezer, as well as plenty of fresh bait for the day's fishing. If you are fishing all by yourself, and have a two-pole permit, keep one out in big fish country, soaking bait, while you play with the little ones on another rod.

## **PREPARATION AND PRESERVING**

If you are fishing where live bait is prohibited, the first step after catching some minnows is to kill them. Be sure to thump them on the head with a small stick, or your flipping finger. They should be dead before you put them in your cooler. If a fisheries officer checks you, and finds flopping minnows in your possession, you can get a ticket.

Keep fresh dead minnows in a cooler. Do not place them in direct contact with the ice. Instead, keep them in a hard plastic container or inside a plastic bag.

Do not leave minnows outside to air dry or begin to decompose. Also, do not let them soak in water. That will accelerate the spoiling process and soak out some of the natural scent and flavor. The longer minnows are dead, without being kept cold, the faster they turn soft and less appealing to fish.

If you are catching minnows to freeze, for future trips, you may also wish to put them into bags or plastic containers with some salt (non-iodized). You should do this to minnows you are going to freeze anyway, to remove some of the moisture from them and to help firm them up. By salting them as you catch them, you can package and freeze them soon after you get them home.

If you end up with a bunch of minnows you did not get to use for bait, while they were still fresh, you need to decide how you are going to preserve them. Pickling will work, and pickled minnows are tasty...to humans, not to fish. Canning will work, but the minnows turn out far too soft for bait use. That leaves smoking and freezing. Forget smoking. Makes them too dry and the smell of smoke is not likely to appeal to many fish. Besides, it is always difficult to figure out which end to light...when smoking fish. (Joke, joke)

If you plan to freeze your minnows, you should first prepare them properly. Obviously, you could simply dump them in the freezer, without any preparation or wrapping, and they would freeze solid. However, when you thawed them for bait, you would likely not be happy with how they turned out. Freezing minnows without salting first, and without eliminating trapped air around them, will result in mushy minnows with freezer burn.

Salting bait before freezing is an old saltwater trick. Many of the common baitfish along the coasts are oily fleshed, like anchovies, and tend to become very soft after a trip through the freezer. Long ago, the commercial fishermen learned that they could preserve their hard won fresh anchovies, which they had not used for bait, by covering them with salt for a while before freezing them. The salt drew out much of the moisture in the baitfish, and left them somewhat shriveled. However, it also made them much firmer when pinned on a hook, and the fish seemed to like the salted product just fine. In fact, many long line rockfish anglers on the west coast have some to prefer using salted anchovies to fresher and softer ones.

Small carp seem to hold up well in the freezer, but baby suckers and most minnows...like chubs, shiners, dace, etc.... usually come out soft after being frozen. The freezing breaks down the tissue in the minnows and they become so mushy that they are impossible to keep on a hook. They either come off on a cast, or are easily stripped from the hook by any fish that does not completely gulp the bait.

Salting your potentially mushy minnows is simple. You do not soak them in a brine solution, although that would make them taste saltier to the fish. Instead, you begin by laying out a thin bed of non-iodized salt on the bottom of a large flat container. Then, you carefully lay the minnows on the bed of salt, side by side, laid out straight and not curled. The less bending you have to do later, the better.

Next, pour a thin layer of salt over the minnows and place the container in the refrigerator overnight. Check them the following morning. They should have slightly wrinkled skin and be very firm. That's what salting does to them. And, it leaves them with a salty taste that most predatory fish seem to find very appealing.

You have several options for freezing your minnows. One is to lay them on a pan, freeze them without any covering and then count them out into "trip-sized" bags after they are frozen. You can also just stack them up in a sealable plastic container, and scoop out what you need before each trip.

The second option is to freeze them in the measured out bags...either with or without moisture added. If you leave air trapped inside the bag, the minnows are more subject to "freezer burn", and will lose both visual appeal and scent appeal. If you add moisture, you will end up with more natural minnows, but more potential for mushiness, if the partially cured minnows soak up some of the moisture they lost to the salt.

If you add water to the little bags of minnows, add only a small amount and then squeeze out all the air and excess water before sealing the bag for the freezer. If you do not add too much water, you minimize the loss of the salt curing process.

The last (and best) option for freezing minnows is to use a vacuum sealer. These things should be mandatory for all anglers who freeze their catch and/or their bait. By removing all air and excess moisture, the vacuum sealer helps insure the best possible minnows...after they have been salted and frozen. The plastic bags for a vacuum sealer are more costly than mere sandwich baggies, but if you do things right, you can often reuse them several times before trashing them. Again, freeze the minnows up in one-trip packages, and let them thaw in the refrigerator for a day or so before you plan to go fishing. Do not thaw them by “nuking” them in the microwave oven.

## **RIGGING AND FISHING**

There is no universal method of rigging and fishing minnows. Obviously, there are many variables. First and foremost would be what kind of minnows you are using, and how big they are. Next would be what kind and size of fish are you fishing for, and under what conditions. How deep is the water, and how cold? At what depth will you need to fish to catch fish? Will you be casting from shore, from a boat or float tube...or will you be drifting or trolling?

Probably the majority of the fishing done with dead minnows is while casting from shore. In that kind of fishing, you must first make the decision as to whether or not you want the minnow to rest on or near the bottom, or to hang somewhere between the surface and the bottom...usually under a float. A third option is to cast an unweighted minnow, on a light hook, and let it slowly settle without drag or unnatural sink speed. That can be deadly.

To fish a minnow on the bottom, you can simply add a split shot or other sinker a foot or more above the hook. A better rig is to use a “sliding sinker” setup. This consists of having a small sliding sinker above a swivel (to stop the sinker), and a leader tied on to the other end of the swivel. This allows the line to slide easily through the sinker, reducing the drag (which spooks some fish) and more easily telegraphing the bite to the anglers’ rods.

Minnows can also be fished on a dropper, above the sinker. The dropper can be anywhere from a few inches to several feet above the sinker. This provides for keeping the minnow off the bottom, up out of the weeds and in the cruising range of fish that are not staying close to the bottom.

In shallow lakes with rocks and debris on the bottom, you should hang the minnow below a bobber, and set it to ride high enough to avoid snags, while still being deep enough to attract the desired species. This method is popular for fishing shallow catfish, walleyes and even northern pike. Of course, there are times and places when that will be the best way to present a minnow to large shallow-cruising trout too.

If you are fishing from a boat, tube or ‘toon, you have many other options for fishing minnows. In addition to all of the methods used by shore anglers, you can add vertical jigging, bottom bouncing, drifting and trolling. Since you are already out in “fish country” you can also get away with using less weight, in most cases, because you do not have to add weight to cast long distances.

One of the most effective ways of fishing minnows from a floating craft...or through the ice...is vertical jigging them. Probably the most popular way of doing this is with a plain jig head, with the hook run up through the lips or head of the minnow and the tail trailing and wiggling behind.

You can also decorate a “dressed” jig or a jig and plastic rig with a minnow...whole, chunk or small pieces. Flavoring a jigging spoon with minnows is also a good tactic for vertical jigging. Sometimes a small piece of minnow on a jig or spoon works better than using a whole minnow. The smaller piece can focus strikes on the hook, and may eliminate a lot of “short strikers” and lost fish.

If you are going to decorate a jig, spoon or spinner for casting and retrieving...or trolling...you should use a small minnow and hook it once, up through the lips. This can be a deadly rig for many big fish.

The popular walleye fishing method known as “bottom bouncing” is an ideal way to fish minnows. The original technique was designed more for fishing crawlers, on an inline spinner, while moving slowly...at “paint drying” speed. The rig typically incorporates a special wire and sinker rig that keeps the outfit from snagging easily in the bottom rocks. Instead of a night crawler, you rig a minnow...with a single hook or a “trap” rig (with a treble hook in the tail of the minnow”.

Drifting minnows can also be deadly. Simply wait for a light breeze to come up and then let your craft drift across prime water. Trail a line with a rigged minnow and wait for action. You can keep the minnow weightless, or add weight as needed, if you would rather fish closer to the bottom.

Many minnow enthusiasts love to troll with them. Depending on the species you seek, and the depth at which they might be, you will rig your trolling setup several different ways. Some trollers use minnows behind flasher blades or a large dodger. Some simply add a small weight (and usually a swivel) on a “flat line” trailed out behind the boat. Still others drop them down on outriggers or side planers.

One of the big keys to success while trolling minnows is in the way you rig them. You can simply use a single hook, run up through the lips of the minnow. If the fish are aggressive, and are either striking from the front or gulping the whole minnow on the strike, you will get a high percentage of hook ups. On the other hand, fish that nip only the tail of the lip-hooked minnow will seldom get hooked and will often steal the bait.

Many veteran minnow trollers rig them with a “trap hook” rig. This consists of a double hook, and with the front hook usually sliding on the line. The front hook goes into the minnow’s head, and then the line is slid up through that hook until the rear hook is positioned just right for hooking in the tail area of the minnow.

If all the fish are “striking short”, whether you are trolling, drifting or casting, you can experiment with other options to put a hook in the tail of the minnows. One is to thread your line down through the minnow...from head to tail...with a long needle, and then tying on the hook before pulling the line up tight and positioning the hook in the tail.

If you look through a well-stocked tackle store, or surf the online sources, you will find numerous “minnow hooks”. There is one old-time design that has been around for many years. It incorporates a safety pin type arrangement, with the pin running up through the body of the minnow and then snapping into place to position the hook(s) outside the minnow, typically at the tail.

However you prefer to rig your minnows, for trolling, you should always include a swivel on the line and try to rig them as straight as possible. Unless a minnow is rock hard and absolutely straight, there will be some spinning and line twist.

As long as you have a swivel, to save your line, a little bit of spin on the minnow is not all bad. On the west coast, salmon trollers often “plug cut” their bait fish, and rig it with a bit of a bow, so that it purposely rotates slowly while being slow trolled or reeled up through the depths. There are days, while fishing fresh water with minnows, during which a bit of added action will improve the number of strikes.

**Perhaps one of the deadliest ways to fish minnows is casting them out, without weight, and letting them settle slowly and naturally to the bottom. Use the smallest hooks you can use and still get a good hook bite on a large fish. These hooks should be light wire hooks, and very sharp. You want the dead minnow to settle and flutter just as if it were freshly dead and “up for grabs”. Many big fish will charge many feet to intercept such an offering, but will not look twice at a trussed up minnow anchored to the bottom with a heavy sinker and a big hook.**

**In conclusion, it is worth repeating that most big fish prefer minnows when they can get them. That means that you are likely to catch bigger fish, while using minnows. So, if you want to increase the average size of your catch, work on your techniques for finding, catching, preparing, preserving and presenting minnows.**