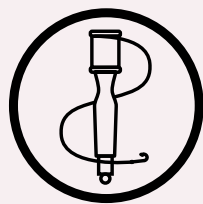


Handline Fishing Field Manual



Adam Nelson

Handline Fishing Field Manual

*Your guide to mastering
the world's oldest fishing method.*

by
Adam Nelson
Founder, Daggerfish

DAGGERFISH[®]

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Dedicated to handliners around the world.

The author would also like to thank Jeff Lovett and Nicholas Daly for their encouragement to write this book, Lindsay Dill, Mat Thorne, and Benjamin Saks for their photography, Barnabas Giannola for his advocacy for hand-line fishing, and the Daggerfish customers who have contributed personal photos and quotations.

Finally, thank you to my family, who introduced me to a life outdoors.



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Purchase additional copies or
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daggerfishgear.com/handline-book





Welcome to the world of Handline Fishing!

Handline fishing is a simple and beautiful alternative to rod-and-reel fishing. Handlining is the oldest line-fishing method in history, and has been practiced by humans for millennia.

This fishing method is a tradition in many cultures that is now experiencing a modern revival. Today, handliners are found all across the United States, and around the world!

Why go handline fishing?

Handline fishing uses **no rod and no mechanical reel**, making it a **simple, fun, and exciting way to fish!**

This ancient fishing technique is now practiced by backpackers, bushcrafters, and minimalist anglers. You can make your own handline from a simple whittled stick, or purchase high-quality turned wooden handlines from Daggerfish.

Because it uses no moving parts, handline fishing is a great way for beginners to start fishing. For experienced anglers, handlining provides new challenges along with the satisfaction of catching fish with limited equipment.

Things To Remember

Be Safe: Handline fishing will give you the opportunity to fish in many places that are difficult to reach with a regular rod and reel. Use caution when venturing into the wilderness, and follow safety guidelines as you would for any outdoor trip.

Follow Local Laws: While some people fish exclusively with a handline, many others use handlines just for certain trips. No matter how much you go handlining, always follow local fishing regulations, and always fish with a license.

Practice Makes Perfect: Learning to fish with a handline can be challenging, but your skills will improve quickly with practice. As you begin to master this hobby, you will earn a wonderful feeling of calm and confidence in yourself and your abilities.

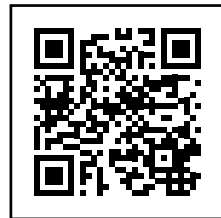
How To Use This Book

This book will give you all the information you need to fish with a handline, even if you've never fished before. Experienced anglers will find much of the general fishing information familiar, but will enjoy learning how to apply spin, bait, and fly fishing techniques to handline fishing.

Watch this!

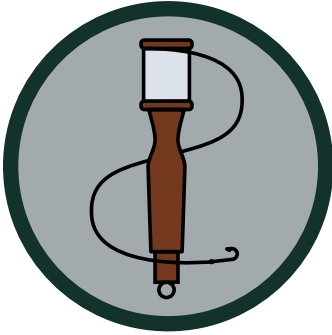
Throughout the book, callout sections like this will link you to online resources. If any links aren't working, you can let us know by using the link or QR code here:

daggerfishgear.com/contact



The videos and additional information linked throughout this book will help make some techniques easier to understand. It is highly recommended that you follow these links where provided. If you'd like to explore guides to handline fishing and more online, you can always go to daggerfishgear.com/learn.

Earning Your Handline Fishing Field Patch



At the end of this book, you'll find a checklist of essential skills and knowledge for handline fishing. Adults may use this for self-assessment, while kids can work with a parent, guardian, camp counselor or scoutmaster to complete the checklist.

Once you're able to complete each item on the checklist, you'll be a *Master Handliner*! You can get an embroidered iron-on **Handline Fishing Field Patch** and a sticker to showcase your achievement at daggerfishgear.com/field-patch.

"Handline fishing is the ultimate way to fish for the die hard minimalist. With practice, you will find yourself landing bigger fish than you ever thought possible with such a simple setup!"

- Barnabas Giannola



*6lb bass caught on a handline
Photo by Barnabas Giannola*



Equipment

One of the best things about handline fishing is that it requires very little equipment. You can carry enough for a basic handlining trip in a small backpack, meaning you can:

- go fishing easily on a day hike,
- stash it in a bicycle or motorcycle pannier to fish on a bike tour, or
- store it in your car's glovebox for spur-of-the-moment-fishing trips, and more!

You can improvise a handline from found objects like bottles or sticks, or purchase a high-quality handline from a small business. Several styles of handlines are available, including the wooden hobo-reel-style handlines made by Daggerfish.

As your skills with handlining expand, you can increase the gear you carry to fish more easily in more situations. The **Tackle** section of this book will cover a variety of tackle options you can use, and where it's best to use them.

Types of Handlines

Handlines (or handreels) fall into a few types, each of which can be useful in different situations:

Kite lines: These handlines resemble the handles for kites, typically a flat “O” or “H” shape with horns on one or both sides. Good for emergencies, and often found in survival kits.

Cuban yo-yos: Larger ring-shaped spools, typically held with one hand through the middle of the ring. Cuban yo-yos are most commonly used for ocean fishing and are useful when fishing with long or heavy lines.

Hobo reels: Great for ponds, lakes, rivers, bays, and even for ice fishing, a hobo reel is ideal for most inland handline fishing trips.

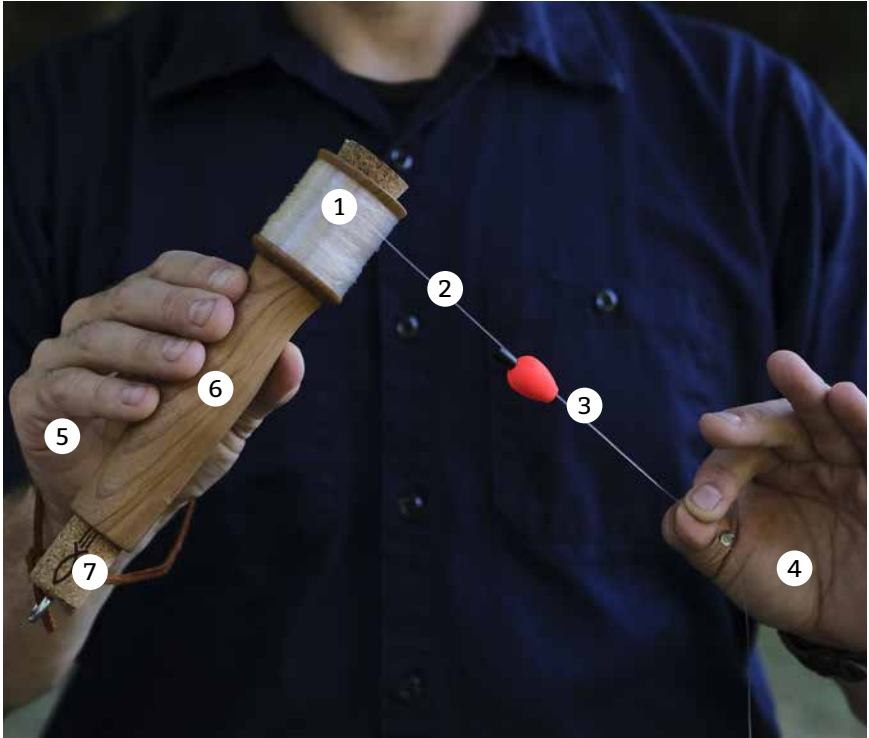
These handlines offer an excellent mix of weight, size, and versatility, as well as broad flexibility in casting methods. If your handline has built-in tackle storage, it's also an easy way to carry a complete fishing setup in one package.

This book will focus on hobo-reel-style handlines, but you can apply many of these principles, techniques, and terms to other types of handlines as well.



Parts of a Handline

We'll use these terms throughout this book.



- 1. Spool:** the area of your handline that your line wraps around.
- 2. Line:** the fishing line that wraps around the spool. High-quality monofilament is recommended; 8lb test is a good starting weight.
- 3. Terminal tackle:** the floats, weights, hooks, and bait, and other components used to create a variety of fishing rigs.
- 4. Line hand:** the hand that rests on the line and guides it onto your spool.
- 5. Reel hand:** the hand that holds the handle and provides the reeling action.
- 6. Handle:** the body of your handline that you hold in your reel hand.
- 7. Tackle storage:** internal storage areas for tackle (included at both the top and bottom of Daggerfish handlines).

Equipment for a Handline Fishing Trip

For a basic handline fishing trip, all you'll need will be:

- a handline,
- a fishing license,
- a basic set of terminal tackle, and
- a multitool or pair of [Mitten Scissors](#).

As you become more experienced, you may wish to add some or all of the additional gear on this list:

- Multiple options for terminal tackle,
- A small tackle box, [Fly Wallet](#), or [Belt Box](#),
- Eye protection or polarized sunglasses,
- A fish landing net or [Collapsible Fishing Net](#),
- A stringer or creel for keeping fish you have caught,
- Line clippers (nippers),
- specialty equipment for ice fishing, or a life vest and waders and wading boots, or wading shoes and swimwear for wading, and/or
- A chest harness, fishing vest, small backpack or [Field Bag](#).



A handline fishing trip will also be an outdoor trip, so you should **be prepared with the 10 Essentials**. Always have:

- water,
- food,
- a flashlight or headlamp,
- a first aid kit,
- sun protection,
- a knife or multitool, and
- appropriate clothing (including rain, sun, and insect protection, plus extra layers)

If you are going out of sight of your car or any structures, also carry a map and compass or GPS, fire starting tools, and an emergency shelter.



I was gifted a handline to use while backpacking, and decided to give it a try ice fishing”.

“I caught several trout that day, and more the following day. I now prefer using a Daggerfish handline to an ice rod.”

-Jack Smith





Knots & Line

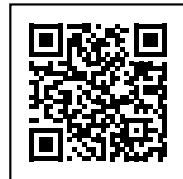
There are dozens (perhaps hundreds) of knots that have been developed by anglers for different purposes. Fortunately, you will only need to learn the **Improved Clinch Knot**, the **Double Surgeons Loop**, the **Loop-to-Loop** knot, and the **Arbor Knot** to get started handlining.

When learning to tie knots, it is best to practice on larger, stiffer rope before attempting to tie knots in fishing line. A well-tied knot is essential for good fishing, so take your time when learning. With a bit of practice, you'll soon be able to tie these knots quickly and easily.

Watch this!

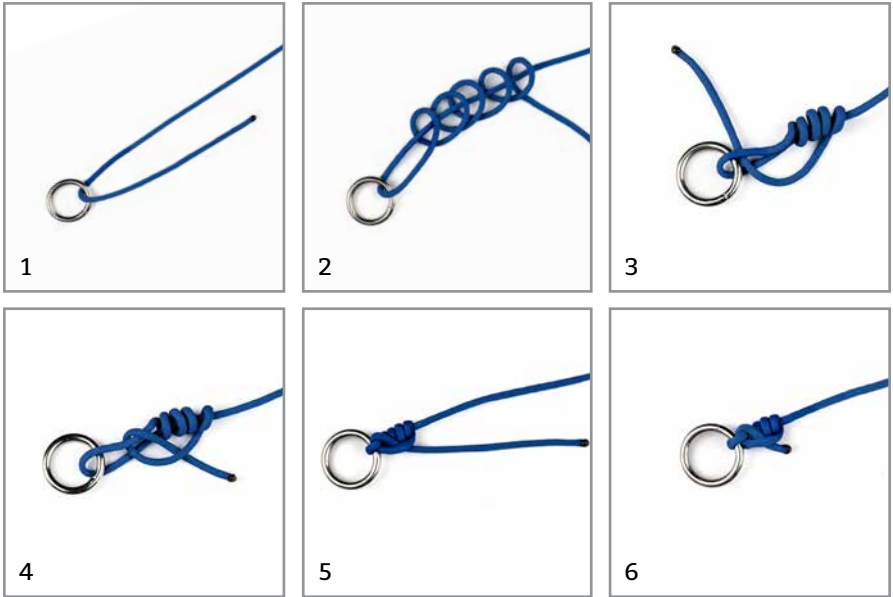
Watch step-by-step videos of all these knots at

daggerfishgear.com/knots



Improved Clinch Knot

This is the universal knot for tying hooks and other tackle to fishing line, particularly monofilament.

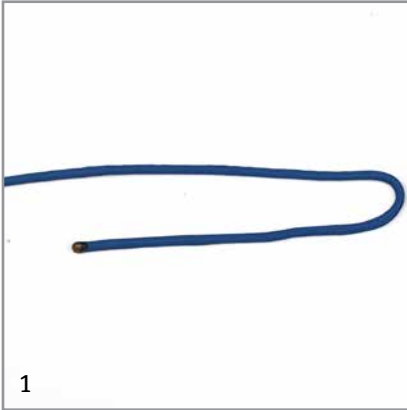


1. Start by threading the line through the hook eye. Pull a few inches of line through the eye to make the tag end.
2. Wrap the tag end around the standing line five times.
3. Thread the tag end back through the loop between the hook eye and the first wrap, creating a loop.
4. Thread the tag end back through the loop you just formed.
5. Wet the knot and pull the standing end, tag end, and hook to tighten.
6. Snug the knot down against the hook eye and trim off any excess line.

Alternatives: Other knots that can be used to tie a line to a hook include the **Palomar knot**, the **Orvis knot**, and, for hooks in the middle of a line, the **Drop-Shot knot**.

Double Surgeon's Loop

A double surgeon's loop is an easy way to form a loop in the end of a line, useful for attaching tackle and leader line.

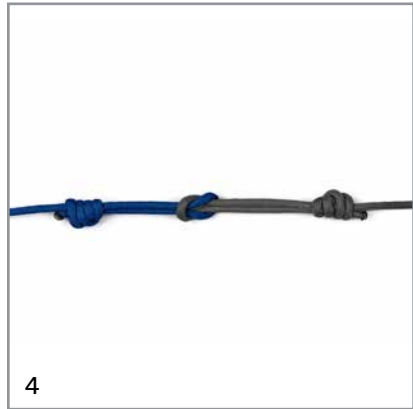
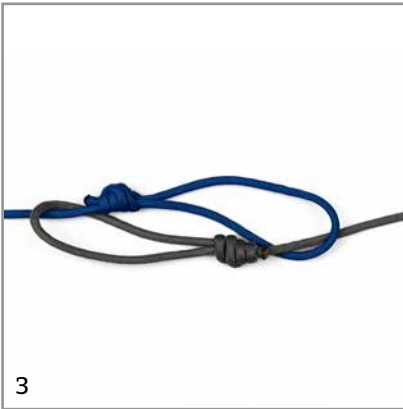


1. Double the end of the line over to make a loop.
2. Tie a single overhand knot in the loop.
3. Pass the loop around and through the overhand knot again.
4. Wet the line and pull to tighten. Clip off the any excess line.

Alternatives: Other knots that can be used to tie a loop at the end of your line include the **Perfection loop** and the **Rapala loop**.

Loop-to-Loop Knot

You can use two Double Surgeon's Loops to create a Loop-to-Loop knot. Loop-to-Loop knots allow leaders and other terminal tackle to be changed quickly and easily.

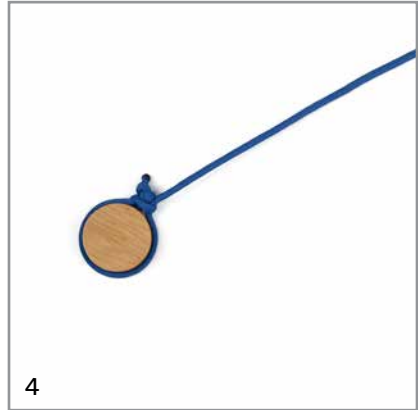
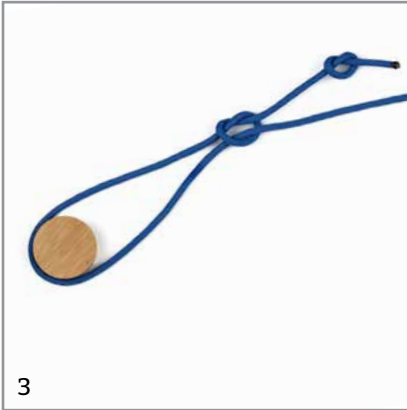
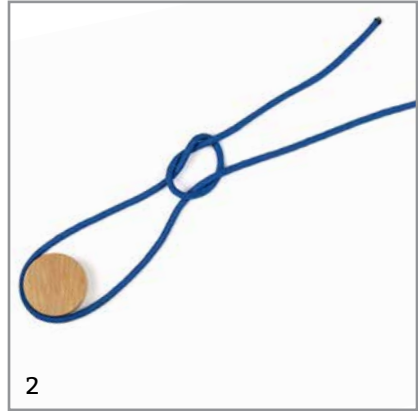
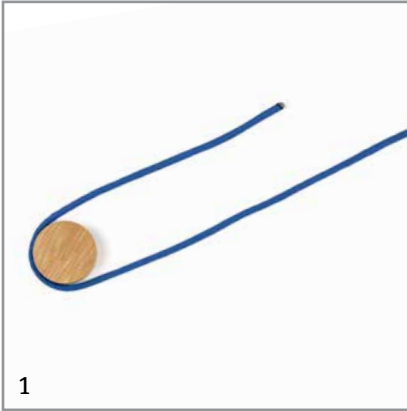


1. Cut a length of line from your spool and tie a Double Surgeon's Knot in one end. Optionally, attach terminal tackle to other end of this line.
2. Tie a second Double Surgeon's Knot in the end of the line running from the spool.
3. Pass the loop on the spool line through the eye of the loop of the free line, then pass the end of the free line through the eye of the spool line.
4. Pull gently to cinch both loops together.

Alternatives: Other knots that can be used to tie one line to another include the **Blood knot** and the **Double Uni knot**.

Arbor Knot

An Arbor knot attaches your fishing line to the spool, and is used when respooling your handline.



1. Pass the fishing line around the empty spool.
2. Tie an overhand knot around the main line.
3. Tie a second overhand knot at the end of the line, then wet the line and tighten both knots.
4. Pull on the main line to cinch the knots together and lock them to base of the spool. Trim off any excess from the tag end, then wind the main line around to respool your reel.

See pages 23-25 to learn more about respooling your handline.

What type of line is best?

High-quality monofilament line is the best overall choice for handline fishing. 8lb test is a good all-purpose line weight.

High-quality monofilament (“mono”) will have relatively little memory, meaning it will lay straighter along the water, especially with regular use.

Mono also has a slight stretch in the line, which acts like a built-in drag system that helps reduce line breakage. Since handlines have no mechanical drag, this stretch helps immensely when fighting fish.

Copolymer line can be used as an alternative to monofilament if desired, but **fluorocarbon and braided lines are not generally recommended**. Fluorocarbon lines are stiffer, increasing their memory and causing the line to break more easily. Braided lines can be hard on your hands and are less abrasion resistant than mono, making them a poor choice for handlines that are often fished on the bottom or drug through the shallows close to shore.

Stretching Your Line

To improve the performance of your monofilament line, stretch the first 8-16 ft of line before you begin fishing. This will help remove much of the memory from the line, making it fish better and less likely to coil around your body, clothing or gear.

This can be accomplished by stretching your line between your hands for a few seconds, hooking the terminal end to a tree and walking backwards, or with the help of a friend.

“Handlining has made going on a family fishing adventure an easy and enjoyable experience anywhere.”

-Dalton McCormick



*Family fishing adventure
Photo by Dalton McCormick*

Respooling Your Reel

Daggerfish handlines come standard with high-quality 8lb monofilament, the recommended line for basic handline fishing. The line supplied will last through many fishing trips, but eventually you may need to respool your handline with new line.

If you wish, you can respool your reel with lighter-weight or heavier-weight line. Line weights between 6lb -15lb test are suggested.

To respool your handline, pull the line straight off the top of the reel until you reach the arbor knot at the base of the spool. Cut the line free from the spool, then tie your new line on using an arbor knot and trim any excess from the tag end.

Using the same motions as you use for reeling, wind your new line onto your reel, working your way up and down the spool so the line lays flat and even.



It's easiest to turn your handline upside down and "flake" line off the spool directly into a wastebasket.



1. Tie your new line on using an arbor knot, and trim any excess from the tag end. Cinch the arbor knot down to the bottom of the spool.



2. Using the same motions as you use for reeling, wind your line onto your spool, working your way up and down so the line lays flat and even.



3. As you wind more line onto your reel, take care to continue moving up and down the spool so that your line doesn't mound up at the middle. After just a few minutes of winding, you should have plenty of line on your reel for many more fishing trips.

Watch this!

Watch a step-by-step video of how to respool your reel at

daggerfishgear.com/respooling





Tackle

Terminal tackle serves two purposes; it provides the weight necessary to cast accurately over distance, and provides an enticing target for fish to strike.

All fishing methods require some weight to cast, whether that's from split shot on a spinning rod or weighted line on a fly rod. For handlines, a small amount of weight towards the end of the line is all that is needed for effective casting. This weight can come from sinkers, lures, or even weighted bobbers.

This section covers several tackle setups (*rigs*) for different handline fishing situations. Many of these will be familiar to spin and bait fishermen, and many other techniques used with spinning rods can be adapted to work with a handline. Fly fishing with a handline represents a greater challenge, but can be achieved using added weights and fishing primarily with wet flies.

Once you have some experience with these setups, you can begin to experiment with other rigs, or even design your own!

Kinds of Tackle Setups

Bottom Fishing

Fishing off the bottom is a technique of using weighted tackle to reach the bottom of the water column, with some of your tackle resting on the ground.

Bottom fishing is great for targeting fish like crappie, catfish, and bass. These rigs are excellent for handline fishing, as they position the weight at the far end of the line for better casting.

Recommended setups for bottom fishing with handlines include free rigs, Texas rigs, Ned rigs, and drop shot rigs.

Suspended Fishing

Suspended fishing means targeting fish in the middle of the water column, neither on the bottom nor on the surface. Typically, this involves using some kind of float and a sinker or weighted lure. The distance between the float and the hook determines the depth at which you'll be fishing.

Recommended rigs for suspended fishing include the basic bait setup, jigs, jerkbaits, slip bobbers with weighted lures, and casting bubbles with subsurface flies.

Surface Fishing

While handlines are best for bottom fishing and suspended fishing, many of those techniques for can be modified for fishing at the water's surface.

For example, instead of a subsurface jerkbait, you can use a floating crankbait to imitate topwater prey like frogs. If fishing with floating bait, you can use a weighted bobber instead of a sinker to add weight to your cast, allowing your line and bait to stay at the surface of the water.

Fishing dry flies is the most challenging form of handline fishing, especially if targeting fish that are easily spooked (like trout). If you'd like to try fishing dry flies, you can try using a fixed casting bubble to add weight to your line, or try out the "double-slip" technique described later in this section.

Tackle Recommendations

Circle Hooks

Circle hooks curve back on themselves, making hook setting easier and decreasing the chances of gut-hooking a fish. Circle hooks are *highly recommended* for handline fishing, and can be readily used in setups like the basic bait fishing or drop shot rigs.

If you can find circle-hook-style jigheads, flies, and other lures, you are encouraged to use them in the other rigs discussed here as well.

Casting Bubbles

Casting bubbles are clear plastic bobbers that add weight to your cast. Some can be filled with water to vary their weight, and be rigged as either a fixed or slip bobber. Casting bubbles are a useful piece of tackle that can be used in a variety of rigs, and are a highly-recommended alternative to traditional or weighted bobbers.

You can purchase the A-Just-A-Bubble casting bubble shown in many of the following rigs at most big-box sporting goods stores, or online at daggerfishgear.com. The 3/16 oz A-Just-A-Bubble fits perfectly in the handle of all Daggerfish handlines.

Lead-Free Tackle

Although sinkers and tackle made from lead are the most commonly available, there is an increasing push to reduce the amount of lead that ends up in waterways from lost tackle. Many areas prohibit the use of leaded tackle, so seek out tackle made from tin, tungsten, and stainless steel whenever possible.

Watch this!

Watch videos covering the fishing rigs in this chapter at

daggerfishgear.com/fishing-rigs



Basic Bait Fishing

Tackle required: *fixed float, split shot sinker, hook, and live bait or rubber grub*

This is a simple rig for catching panfish, bass, or trout, and can be rigged with the tackle included with every Daggertfish handline.



Note: This rig has been shortened for clearer photography.

1. Position a fixed float 18 to 36 inches from the end of your line.
2. Pinch a split shot midway between the float and the hook, and tie a hook to the end of the line using an improved clinch knot.
3. Bait the hook with live bait or a rubber grub, and cast using a toss cast. Casting methods are described next in the **Casting & Reeling** section.

Free Rigs and Texas Rigs

Tackle required: *soft plastic bait, offset hook, bullet or egg sinker or teardrop weight (3/16oz - 1/2 oz)*

Free Rigs and Texas Rigs are variants of one another, and especially effective for bottom fishing as they tend not to snag in weeds.



1. *Thread a teardrop weight (Free Rig, left) or a bullet or egg sinker (Texas Rig, right) onto your line.*
2. *Tie on an offset hook and thread a soft plastic bait onto the hook*
3. *Bury the tip of the hook into the body of the soft plastic to prevent weeds from snagging and cast with a whip or flick cast.*

Drop Shot Rig

Tackle required: *drop shot hooks, teardrop weights (3/16oz - 1/2oz), and live bait or soft plastics*

Drop shot rigs position a weight at the end of your line and your hook and bait above it, suspending the bait off the bottom. They are great for fishing for trout or bass in still or slow moving water.



Note: This rig has been shortened for clearer photography.

- 1. Thread your hook onto your line and tie it off at your desired distance above the end of the line (10-36 inches).*
- 2. Tie a teardrop weight to the end of your line*
- 3. Thread a soft plastic bait on to your hook and cast with a whip or toss cast.*

Basic Jig

Tackle required: *weighted jig head (round or mushroom-style), soft plastic bait*

Jig fishing is very easy and straightforward, and a great way to get started with handlines. This method is especially effective for ice fishing with a handline.



1. Tie a jig head to the end of your line. Optionally, thread bait or a soft plastic lure onto the jig.
2. Cast with a whip or flick cast, or simply drop it off the end of your handline. Fish with a jigging motion, bouncing the lure slowly up and down.

By using a soft plastic lure and tugging the jig along the bottom, you can also use this setup to fish in a **Ned rig**, a bottom-fishing technique that has become popular over the last few years.

Jerkbait

Tackle required: *jerkbait (sinking or floating)*

Jerkbaits are a variety of crankbait that mimic the motions of injured or distressed prey. Jerkbait is the preferred crankbait for handline fishing, since the retrieve benefits from slower, jerkier motions.



1. Tie a jerk bait at the end of your line and cast with a whip or flick cast.
2. Reel in using a popping or jerking motion.

Subsurface flies

Tackle required: Casting bubble or weighted bobber, wet fly

For handline-style fly fishing, a subsurface fly like a streamer or nymph is recommended. Heavier streamers can use a slip bobber, while lighter nymphs may work better with a fixed weighted bobber.



Note: This rig has been shortened for clearer photography.

1. Rig a fixed weighted bobber, casting bubble, or a slip bobber with a stop 18-30 inches above the end of your line
2. Tie a wet fly like a nymph or streamer onto the end of your line and cast with a whip cast.

When casting a heavier bobber with a lighter weight fly, **give a slight tug to the line** just before it lands in the water to help straighten the line out and prevent tangles.

Slip Bobbers and Casting Bubbles

Tackle required: *Slip bobber or casting bubble, bobber stop and bead, weighted hook, live bait or soft plastics*

Slip bobbers are excellent tools for handline fishing, as they allow you to cast more easily while also being able to control the depth at which you fish. You can use a traditional slip bobber or a casting bubble like those offered on the Daggerfish website.

Slip bobbers use a bobber stop (a small piece of string and a bead) to set their depth. You can learn more about using slip bobbers in the Casting and Reeling section of this book.



Note: This rig has been shortened for clearer photography.

The Double Slip Technique

When fly fishing with a handline, it can be challenging to keep your fly and weighted casting bubble separated. This can affect the your ability to cast, as well as the presentation of your fly.

To help keep your fly and casting bubble separated, you can experiment with the Double Slip technique, which positions a casting bubble between two bobber stops. Position your lower stop at least 18 inches from your fly, and your upper stop at whatever final depth you'd like your subsurface fly to reach.

Experienced anglers may want to try this method for fishing dry flies, as it allows the line to move freely through the casting bubble, creating more natural motion of the fly in the water



Note: This rig has been shortened for clearer photography.



Casting & Reeling

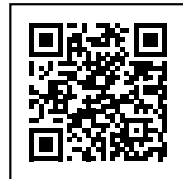
Since handlines don't have a rod, we use a variety of specialized techniques for casting. There are three basic methods of casting a handline, each of which works best for different tackle setups and fishing situations. As with other fishing methods, **eye protection is strongly recommended** when casting a handline.

These casting methods are easiest to understand by watching them in action. The video linked below explores several casting methods in detail.

Watch this!

Watch a video of all these casting techniques at

daggerfishgear.com/casting



Flick Casts

Flick casts are the best to use when you're fishing in areas of tight brush, with limited space to swing your line. Since handlines are great for getting deep into the backcountry, the flick is an effective cast in many situations where handlining is ideal.

To perform a flick cast, wind your line on the reel until the terminal tackle is almost touching the reel.

Hook a finger over the line or press a finger onto the spool to hold the line in place.

Lower your hand, then flick your wrist upwards in the direction of your cast, releasing your finger once your handline is pointing where you want your cast to go. Your line should unspool straight off the top of the reel.



1. Hook a finger on the line or press it on the spool to hold the line in place. The less terminal tackle, the easier it is to perform a flick cast.



2. Lower your hand and angle it slightly downwards to prep your cast.



3. In a smooth motion, flick your wrist upwards, releasing your finger when the spool is pointing where you want your cast to go.

Slip-and-Flick Setups

Using a slip bobber with a flick cast is an effective method for distance casting, especially from a boat like a canoe or kayak.

The added weight of the slip bobber will give you a greater casting distance, while allowing your lure to reach the appropriate depth for suspended fishing.

When reeling in a slip bobber, position the bobber stop at the bottom of your reel and wind the remaining line above it to reduce the chance of snags while casting. See more about under “Reeling” later in this section.

You can cast using the same flick technique described above, or use the alternate “backhand flick” technique shown here if casting from a boat.

The backhand flick allows you to cast across your body by rotating your arm from the elbow, making an arc or a rainbow shape with your arm, and is useful when casting from a seated position.



1. Rig your line with a slip bobber or casting bubble and allow it to slip to within 12 inches or less of your terminal tackle. If using a casting bubble, you can add water to increase the weight and extend your casting distance.



2. Prep your cast by positioning your arm across your body.



3. Rotate your arm outwards in an arc or rainbow shape, releasing your finger once your handline is pointed where you want your cast to go.

Toss Casts

Toss casts are best for live bait, eggs, and other soft baits where powerful casting motions may cause the bait to rip off the hook.

To perform a toss cast, hold your reel in your one hand and gather your terminal tackle in the other. Leave hooks outside of your hand to prevent tangles and potential injury.

Unspool 3-5 feet of line and point the spool of your handline where you want your cast to go. Bring your line hand across your body, then make a tossing motion similar to a frisbee toss or tennis backhand.

Release the tackle from your line hand once it's pointing in the direction you want your cast to go, and keep your spool pointed in that same direction to allow line to unspool straight off the top of the reel.



1. Gather your terminal tackle in your line hand, allowing the line to pile naturally. Don't try to coil your line up or wrap it around your hand to create a tight bundle - looser is better. Note the hook is kept outside of the hand to reduce the chance of tangles and injury.



2. Prep your cast by positioning your arm across your body. Note that the reel hand is pointing where the cast will go.



3. Make a backhand tossing motion and release the tackle from your line hand, keeping your reel pointed in the direction of your cast.

Whip Casts

Whip casts are the best casts for distance, and when performed properly you can achieve casting distances comparable to standard fishing rods.

Whip casts are particularly effective with weight at the end of the line, making them excellent for fishing rigs like drop shots, Texas rigs, crankbaits, and slip bobbers. You can also use a whip cast for casting subsurface flies, and for many other tackle setups as well.

To perform a whip cast, position your line hand 18-24 inches above your terminal tackle. You may wish to switch your line hand and reel hand for this cast. **Wear eye protection while performing a whip or lasso cast.**

Hold your line hand off to one side of your body, and keep your body clear of the line to prevent injury. **Check your surroundings for branches, people, and animals**, and once clear, begin gently rotating your line in a circular, underhand motion.

Point the spool of your handline where you want your cast to go, then after two or three rotations, release your line in that same direction.



1. Position your line hand so your tackle has plenty of clearance above the ground. Note that the line has been switched to the right hand.



2. A few gentle rotations are all that are required. Fast or aggressive rotation will make it more difficult to cast accurately.



3. Release your line hand as the tackle swings towards your casting destination, and point your handline to allow line to unspool.

Lasso Casts

Lasso casts are a variation of the whip cast and performed in much the same way, but with the line rotating above your head instead of off to one side of your body. Once comfortable with a whip cast, you can try bringing your line hand above your head for a lasso cast.

Timing the release takes a bit of practice, so cast in a wide open area free from obstructions (like a pond, lake shore, or field as shown here) when first starting out.

The lasso method poses the highest risk of injury from the terminal tackle, and is recommended only for experienced handliners. Lasso casts are effective for fishing from a solo kayak or paddleboard, but are not recommended for boats shared with others. Wear eye protection when casting.

With both the whip and lasso casts, you do not need to rotate your line quickly to get a good casting distance. A slower rotation will still cast far, and offers more control when releasing the cast.



1. Holding your line hand off to one side, swing your tackle forward and upwards to begin rotating it above your head.



2. Rotate the tackle once or twice to build up momentum. Remember that fast rotation will make it casting less accurate.



3. Timing the release of a lasso cast requires practice. Try casting with a crankbait or spoon with the hooks removed until you feel confident.

Casting Safely and Accurately

Effective casting is more about technique than strength. Let the weight of your terminal tackle do the work of pulling your line forward, and practice casting gently before increasing speed and attempting to cast for greater distance.

With practice, you'll be able to use any of these casting techniques effectively and accurately.

Always be aware of your surroundings, and use the casting technique appropriate for your environment to avoid snagging your line in nearby trees or brush, or accidentally hooking yourself or another person.

Don't get discouraged if you have a miscast and your line catches while attempting to cast. Simply unspool the snagged line and re-reel it to avoid the catch, and try casting again.

Practice Drills

Before your first fishing trip, practice casting your handline on a lawn or in an open field with short grass. Use a lure with the hooks removed to make it safe to cast and easy to reel in.

In order to develop your accuracy, position a small target like a hula hoop a few feet away from you, and practice using each casting technique to land your tackle in the hoop. Move the hoop further and further away until you can accurately cast a distance of 15-20 feet.

"There's nothing easier or more fun to carry back-packing than a handline!"

-Nate Sprowls



*Handlining outside of 84 PA
Photo by Nate Sprowls*

Reeling

After casting, your reel hand and line hand will typically rest in the neutral “ready” position shown here.

The line is held gently between the fingers of the line hand, helping to feel for a fish strike and guiding the line onto the spool during reeling.

Note that the fingers of the reel hand are placed at the base of the spool, which reduces the chance of the line winding onto the handle.



When reeling, *the line hand does not pull on the line*. Instead, the line hand remains in a fixed position, and the reel hand rotates at the wrist to wind line onto the spool. This prevents injury to the line hand, and creates leverage that can be used when fighting a fish.

See step-by-step instructions for reeling on the next page.



1. From the ready position, rotate your reel hand forward and down, keeping the line hand stable while allowing line to pass through it.



2. Continue rotating the reel hand. Keep the fingers of the reel hand at the base of the spool to prevent line from wrapping around the handle.



3. The line hand holds the line gently. Just pinching it between two fingers is enough to guide it onto the spool.



4. When reeling in a bobber stop or knot, position the stop at the bottom of the spool and wind remaining line above it to prevent catches.

Setting the Hook and Playing the Fish

While resting your line hand gently on your line, look and feel for a fish strike. More aggressive fish will strike harder and be easier to feel, but less aggressive fish will require more careful observation.

Hook sets begin at the ready position described in the Reeling section above. You can set a hook using the reel hand, the line hand, or both. The method you choose will depend on how much slack you need to take up in order to set the hook.

For a **minimal amount of slack, set with your reel hand.** Pull back and up sharply with your reel hand, allowing the line to slide through your line hand.

For a **moderate amount of slack, set the hook with your line hand.** Smoothly and quickly slide your line hand along your line, moving down and backwards to tug the terminal tackle towards you.

For the **most amount of slack, set with both hands** by sliding your line hand down and pulling your reel hand back simultaneously. You can also twist your body to move your line hand behind you, quickly taking up six to eight feet of slack.

Setting Circle Hooks

If fishing with a circle hook, no hook set is necessary. Simply begin reeling in your line when you feel the fish strike, and the hook should set itself in the lip of the fish.

Watch this!

Watch a video on how to set hooks and reel your handline at

daggerfishgear.com/reeling





Short hook sets on tight lines are best performed by pulling up and back on the reel hand.



When more slack needs to be taken in, sliding down and back along the line can quickly tighten lines and set the hook.



Performing both a reel-hand and line-hand hook set at the same time can take up a large amount of slack.



Rotating the body to bring the line hand backwards and the reel hand forwards can double the amount of slack taken up in a hook set.

Fighting and Landing a Fish

As you reel, use your arms as shock absorbers to reduce strain on the line, extending your arms and pulling them back steadily as you fight the fish.

Larger fish may try to throw your hook. Watch carefully and try to anticipate these jerking motions, and unspool one loop of line in advance of these head shakes to reduce tension and prevent the fish from throwing the hook.

If you need to allow the fish to run, point your reel in the direction that the fish is running to allow the line to unspool, then turn the reel perpendicular to the line to stop unspooling and begin reeling in again.

When you've reeled your fish close to you, it's easiest to capture your fish using a landing net. If you do not have a landing net, hold onto the line with your line hand, stow your handline in a sheath or pocket, and reach down along the line to secure the fish.

Catch and Release Fishing

For catch and release fishing, keep the fish in the water as much as possible. Wet your hands and hold the fish gently but firmly while you use a pair of pliers or forceps to remove the hook.

You can briefly remove the fish from the water for a photo, supporting the fish with both hands and keeping it horizontal. Return it to the water and point it upstream to allow water to flow over its gills until it is ready to swim away.

Many locations, species, and seasons are catch-and-release only. Check your local regulations and practice handling fish gently to help preserve the fish population in these waterways. You may wish to use barbless hooks or pinch the barbs down on your hooks to make unhooking your catches easier.

Catching and Cooking

For catch-and-cook fishing, dispatch the fish quickly and humanely. The *ike jime* method is widely recognized as the most humane method for killing a fish, and also helps preserve the taste of the meat. You can learn more about the *ike jime* method online at ikejimefederation.com/

If fishing in the backcountry, follow the “next-meal” rule: fish caught in the morning should be cooked for lunch, fish caught in the afternoon should be cooked for dinner. You can keep living or dead fish on a stringer in the water for a few hours before cleaning and cooking.

After cleaning, *do not* throw entrails back into the water. Dispose of entrails in solid-waste facilities or by burying them in a small hole at least 200 feet from water. This preserves the cleanliness of waterways and prevents diseases from spreading through fish populations.

“Handling is a fun and a challenging way to fish! It’s compact size makes it easy to keep a reel on hand at all times for those spur of the moment fishing opportunities!”

-Micah Strango



*Rainbow trout on Carolina rig
Photo by Micah Strango*

Storing Line and Tackle

When of the best features of a handline is its portability, and storing your line and tackle properly makes traveling with a handline easy.

To quickly store your terminal tackle when moving between fishing locations, you can stash tackle that can be easily removed (split shots, floats, etc.) inside the storage areas on the top and bottom of your reel.

When all that is left is a hook, wrap the line tightly around the reel, bury the hook in the top cork, and give the cork a gentle twist to lock the line in place.

For longer-term storage, remove the terminal tackle completely and wrap the line under itself to temporarily secure it on the spool. Wrap a large rubber band or a reel cover around the spool to hold the line in place, and protect from abrasions and tangles if storing in a bag or backpack.



On Daggerfish handlines, the top cork can be used to secure the hook and hold the line in place for temporary storage.



For greater security, use a reel cover or a large rubber band to keep the line in place and protected against abrasion.



Tips, Safety, & Stewardship

Now that you know a variety of methods for rigging, casting, and reeling your handline, you're ready for your first handline fishing trip! Here are some final tips and answers to commonly asked questions to help ensure you have the best experience:

Where are the best places for handline fishing?

Handline fishing is most effective in areas with still or slow-moving water, where you can fish off the bottom or below the surface.

Ponds and lakes are excellent places to try handline fishing, especially if you can find areas along the shore that are not too weedy. As your skills grow, you may want to try fishing in slow-moving rivers or from a boat.

When you feel very confident, you can try fishing in faster moving water by dry- or wet-wading into the water and fishing up and down the stream. When wading, always wear proper safety gear, including a life jacket.

What kinds of fish should beginners target?

For your first trips, target panfish like bluegill, which are widespread, plentiful, and attack aggressively for their small size. You can easily fish for other panfish, largemouth and smallmouth bass, catfish, and other species as well.

Once you've developed a feel for a fish strike on a handline, move on to targeting more subtle fish like trout.

What time of day or season is ideal?

Fishing is best when fish are feeding, but different species are more active at different times of the day.

Understanding fish behavior is one of the most enriching aspects of learning to fish, so plan to do a little research on the fish you want to target and how they behave in your area throughout the seasons.

In general, fish are more active around sunrise and sunset, and tend to be most active in the late afternoons and early evenings throughout winter, spring, and fall. In summer, fish in the early morning or the evening, avoiding the heat of the middle of the day.

Remember, these are just guidelines - fish whenever you have time!

Safety

Like all outdoor activities, fishing carries a certain amount of risk and requires that you prepare yourself to handle emergencies.

Fishing is not a dangerous sport, but being prepared for issues that arise from weather, insects, and other conditions can make for a safer and more pleasant experience.

Weather

Dress appropriately for the weather conditions that you will be fishing in, and ensure you have adequate protection from sun, rain and cold.

Outdoor weather conditions can change quickly, so be prepared with a poncho or light jacket as well as a hat and sunscreen. Be aware of incoming storms, and evacuate the area in the event of lightning.

Plants and Animals

Beware of plants like poison ivy and stinging nettle that may be common to your area, and learn to recognize and avoid these plants. Dressing in long pants or long sleeved shirts is useful both for minimizing issues from dangerous plants and insects.

If you live in an area prone to ticks, venomous spiders, and other dangerous insects, learn to identify them, how to remove them safely, and what to do if one bites you.

Wear insect repellent and have anti-itch or sting relief medicine on hand or available close by. If you are allergic to bee stings, learn to use an epinephrine pen and carry one with you.



If fishing in areas with dangerous wildlife, learn to recognize the signs of these animals, how to avoid them, and what to do if you encounter one.

Carry deterrents like bear mace in remote areas or areas with heavy bear activity, and avoid attracting animals by being mindful of your food and food waste.

Minor Injuries

Carry a small first aid kit capable of treating minor injuries including cuts, scrapes, bruises, insect bites, and mild sunburn. In tick-prone areas, carry a tick remover tool as well.

One of the most common injuries while fishing is being hooked by a fish hook. **Never attempt to remove a hook that is lodged in the face or near an eye, artery, or other sensitive area** - seek immediate medical attention instead.

Fish hooks lodged in other areas of the body can typically be removed by pressing down on the shank of the hook to dislodge the barb, and slowly working the hook backwards along the entry track.

Alternatively, you can rotate the hook to extend the barb back out through the skin, crimp the barb closed or cut the barbed end off, and then back the shank of the hook out through the entry wound.

Bandage the wound and seek medical attention, as the risk of infection is high with this type of injury.

Emergencies

Heat stroke, dehydration, and hypothermia are dangerous conditions that can occur while out in the backcountry. Learn to recognize the signs of these potentially life-threatening conditions in yourself and others, and how to perform basic first aid for these conditions.

Be prepared to take immediate action to remedy these situations, including evacuating the area and going immediately to emergency medical care.

"This handline has allowed me to always have my rod on me when mountain biking or adventuring. I love it!"

-Jessica Gibson



Ethics & Stewardship

Why is responsible fishing important?

Conservation is essential to the long-term sustainability and protection of wilderness, including the ponds, lakes, rivers and streams where we like to go fishing.

Each state has guidelines set up by their Fish and Game Commission or Fish and Wildlife Protection Services that determine when and how fish can be caught legally and sustainably.

Complying with Fishing Regulations

Handline fishing, like all other sport fishing methods, must follow responsible fishing regulations in order to ensure the sustainability of our natural resources.

Before going on your first handline fishing trip, check local fishing regulations to determine if handlining is prohibited in any areas you may be planning to fish, and what fish are available to catch at what time.

Purchase a fishing license for your area and keep it with you, and always follow local laws and regulations for fishing.

Note that you may encounter terms like *“hand fishing”* or *“snag line fishing”* when looking at these regulations. **These fishing methods are different from handline fishing**, and are not permitted in many areas:

Hand fishing (or *“noodling”*) is a method of reaching underwater into natural cavities formed in riverbanks capturing fish by hand. This method is typically used to catch catfish.

Snag line fishing (or *“snagging”*) is a fishing technique where hooks are used to impale a fish rather than enticing it to swallow the hook. This method is not legal in many states.

Contact your local fish and wildlife commission if you have additional questions about regulations in your area.

Stewardship

If you'd like to make a greater contribution to your local ecosystems, consider joining a local anglers club or a conservation organization like Trout Unlimited, and volunteering to help protect and restore your local fisheries.

Always treat Fish and Game officials with courtesy and respect, and thank them for the work they do in protecting our natural resources.

Practicing Leave-No-Trace

As with any outdoor activity, follow Leave-No-Trace principles when you are out handline fishing. Leave-No-Trace means that you leave the natural areas better than you found them by **minimizing the impact** of foot travel and camping, being **careful with fire** and ensuring campfires are put out completely, **removing your trash**, and **respecting wildlife, other people, and property**.

You can find more information about Leave No Trace at www.lnt.org

Final Thoughts

Congratulations! By following the guidelines in this book, you're now ready for a lifetime of enjoyment of handline fishing. If you'd like more information, you can always visit daggerfishgear.com/learn for online articles and video tutorials on handline fishing and other subjects.

Check these online resources for the most up-to-date recommendations and techniques. You'll also find links to join Handline Fishing Groups on Facebook or other sites, where other handliners share their techniques.

Before you go, remember that fishing is a lifelong pursuit that benefits from consistent practice. While the internet has dramatically increased the amount of information and opinions about the "best fishing techniques," the truth is that fishing has been practiced by human beings for millennia, and does not need to be complicated or intimidating.

Learning and practicing the techniques in this book is more than enough to get you started with the hobby of handline fishing. Even if you don't catch fish on every trip, enjoy the time of quiet reflection, and the opportunity to focus your mind on the natural world around you.

Good luck, and happy handlining!



Field Patch Checklist

To qualify for your *Handline Fishing Field Patch*, you should be able to do the following:

Fishing Line and Tackle

- Explain the differences in fishing line types, and discuss why monofilament is the preferred line for handline fishing.
- Demonstrate how to respool your handline.
- Explain 3-5 terminal tackle setups for handline fishing, and where each one is most effective.
- Discuss additional tackle, gear, and clothing you may use on a handline fishing trip.
- Demonstrate your ability to tie the following knots and explain how each knot is used in handline fishing:
 - Improved Clinch Knot
 - Arbor Knot
 - Double Surgeons Loop
 - Loop to Loop Knot
- Demonstrate how to stow tackle on your hand line and secure line for storage or travel between fishing locations.

Casting

- Demonstrate your ability to perform a Flick cast, a Toss cast, and a Whip cast. Explain why you would choose each method of casting over another.

- Demonstrate casting accuracy by using a Flick or Toss cast to land your terminal tackle in a 5-ft target placed 10 ft away.
- Demonstrate casting distance by using a Whip cast or a Slip-and-Flick to cast a distance of at least 20 feet.

Hook Setting and Reeling

- Demonstrate hook setting techniques using both your line hand and reel hand.
- Demonstrate proper reeling technique that uses the line hand as a guide and the reel hand to create leverage. Show how to use your arms as shock absorbers when fighting a fish. Demonstrate how to let your line unspool in order to allow a fish to run.
- Explain how to land a fish both with and without a net. Articulate proper fish handling technique for the health and safety of you and the fish.

Catching Fish

- Travel to a suitable handline fishing location, catch at least one fish, photograph it, and identify it before releasing it.
- Share a photo of yourself handline fishing or a photo of a fish you've caught on a hand line with friends and family or online via social media. Email any photos you wish to share to handlining@daggerfishgear.com or tag [@daggerfishgear](https://www.instagram.com/daggerfishgear) on social media.
- Explain the difference between catch-and-release and catch-and-cook fishing methods, and why you would choose one over another. Optionally, and if regulations and health concerns permit, humanely kill, clean and cook a fish you have caught.

When you have completed all the items on this checklist, you can visit daggerfishgear.com/field-patch to purchase an iron-on embroidered *Handline Fishing Field Patch* and sticker to showcase your achievement. Congratulations!

Where to Find Handline Fishing Equipment

You can find premium products for handline fishing at select retailers, and online at the Daggerfish website.

Daggerfish is a US craft manufacturer of handline fishing reels and accessories, all made by hand in our Pennsylvania workshop. Daggerfish products are made from natural and traditional materials including solid wood, full-grain leather, canvas, and brass, helping to enhance your feeling of connection to the natural world.

You can explore options for handline fishing gear and other wilderness essentials by visiting daggerfishgear.com/store



Watch this!

Explore handline fishing gear and more at the Daggerfish website:

daggerfishgear.com/store



About the Author

Adam Nelson is the founder of The Daggerfish Gear Company, an American craft manufacturer of tools for handline fishing and wilderness exploration. The son of a National Park Ranger, Adam grew up in National Parks around the US and developed a love for camping, backpacking, and canoeing at a young age.



As an adult, Adam returned to the wilderness with the discovery of handline fishing, and founded Daggerfish to help bring the hobby of handlining to more people.

When he's not in the Daggerfish workshop, Adam enjoys designing and building furniture, canoes, and other items, tabletop gaming with friends, cooking, and planning his next outdoor adventure.

Master the world's oldest fishing method.

Handline fishing (or *handlining*) is an alternative to rod-and-reel fishing that lets you **pack lightly, explore deeply**, and form a **closer connection to the natural world**.

The simple techniques of handline fishing enable you to **fish with no rod and no mechanical reel**. The oldest line-fishing method in history, handlining is now enjoying a modern revival among ultra-light backpackers, bushcrafters, and minimalist anglers.

This book is your guide to joining the handline fishing movement, and will teach you everything you need to know to become a *Master Handliner*, including:

- **how to cast without a rod**, including the Flick Cast, Toss Cast, and Whip Cast;
- **the best tackle setups** for handline fishing, including bottom fishing, bait fishing, and handline-style fly fishing;
- how to find **great spots for handline fishing**;
- **essential knots for handlining**, and more!

Whether you're new to fishing or an experienced angler, you'll find calm and confidence in the hobby of handlining. Discover the world of handline fishing, and **see how beautiful simple fishing can be**.

Adam Nelson is the founder of The Daggerfish Gear Company, a US maker of handcrafted wilderness gear. Since its founding in 2018, Daggerfish has helped spearhead the modern handline fishing movement through quality equipment, articles, and video tutorials on their website, daggerfishgear.com.

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