

Jigging and Softbaiting for Trout

and advice from Albert Einstein!



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Trout can find softbaits hard to resist

OVER TIME, FISHERMEN HAVE CREATED AND REFINED VARIOUS TECHNIQUES, SHARED AND ADJUSTED IDEAS, AND INVENTED NEW, POTENTIALLY MORE EFFICIENT WAYS TO DECEIVE TROUT.. ASSESSING TECHNIQUES AND MAKING CHANGES CAN BE PRODUCTIVE. AFTER ALL, DOING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AND EXPECTING A DIFFERENT RESULT IS SAID TO BE A SIGN OF MADNESS

Jigging and soft baiting for trout has become hugely popular on lakes throughout New Zealand, and for good reason: they can be highly successful methods.

But don't let the Youtube videos and TV shows totally fool you. Often, hours of uneventful footage are condensed into just a few minutes of exciting action, leading us to believe that these popular deepwater fishing techniques are consistently successful. The truth is that deep methods like jigging and soft baiting aren't new. They can be very successful, relatively speaking, and at other times frustratingly difficult. As with many specialised types of fishing, specific technique plays a major role in catch rate. Tiny changes to your delivery, your lures or how your gear is rigged will make a world of difference to your success rate.

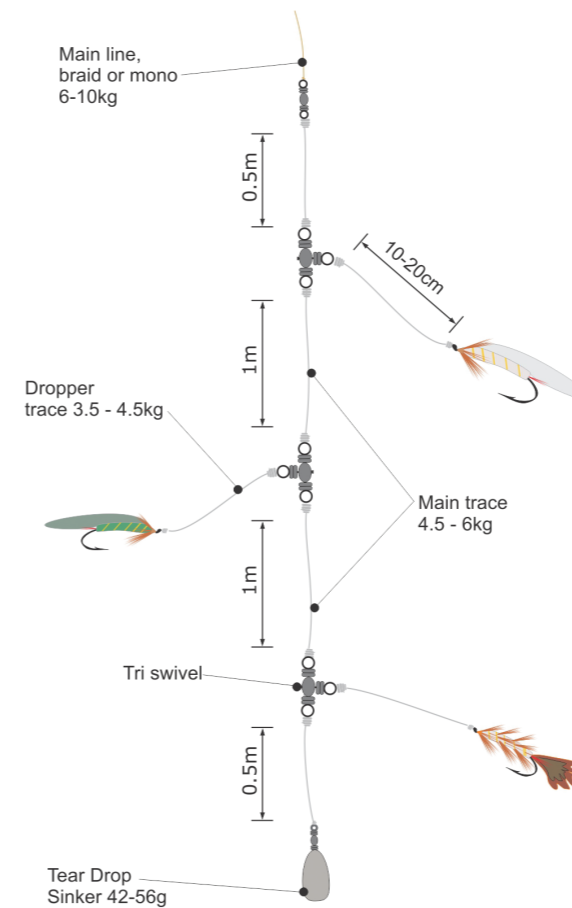
Before jigging in lakes became popular, trout were targeted at depth by deep trolling with lead or wire lines, and later

by using downriggers. Heavy trolled lines are very effective and still the choice of many, but the use of light tackle infiltrated the freshwater scene from the saltwater arena and jigging, initially, wasn't considered an option for trout. Heavy-trolled metal lines take the zing out of even a feisty trout with just a few last-gasp pulls happening as the fish nears the boat. With one hundred metres of lead line extended, it can be difficult even to detect if you even have a smaller fish on! Jigging and soft baiting use light, sensitive gear, which only adds to the thrill.

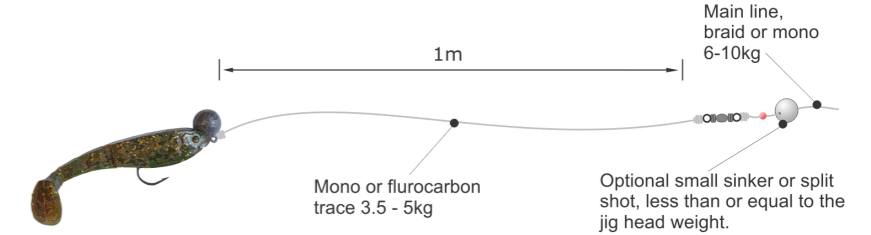
GET THE RIGHT GEAR

Historically, fishing rigs for new methods undergo a period of evolution before a consensus amongst the angling community is reached. Tackle enthusiasts love to play with, test and trial new rigs in the hope that they'll discover an advantage. Fortunately, anglers are a helpful bunch and love to speak about their success. Social media has made it even easier to access tips for tackle. It seems that the rigs used for trout jigging have remained the same

Standard Jigging Rig



Softbait Rig



for quite some time, indicating that the process of evolution may have come to a halt and we are currently close to achieving the best possible outcome.

Three flies or lures are allowed for all trout and salmon fishing in New Zealand, and although not always used in some methods, perhaps because of the difficulty with tangling, it's the way to go when jigging. A one-metre spacing, or thereabouts, between each fly makes jigging rigs difficult to handle in the boat, but there's a good reason why it works: successful deepwater jigging requires a degree of targeting, making sure your offerings are right in front of the fishes' nose. Even by utilising several depth targeting methods (as explained below), it's not easy to get a single lure at exactly the right depth to intercept fish seen on your sounder. The three-lure, three-metre rig allows for inaccuracies in your lure depth - if the fish isn't at the right depth for one of your flies, there's a good chance it will be for one of the other two.

Soft bait rigs, on the other hand, tend to be fished as single lures, although it can be useful to add a smelt fly on a dropper one metre above the lure as an added attractor. Jigging rigs are fished as ledger-style rigs, with a

teardrop sinker of 1.5 or 2oz (42-56g) on the bottom, whereas soft baits are fished conventionally with (in some cases) additional weight added about 1 metre above the lure. This is known as a 'Carolina rig' and is used to enhance sink rate.

There are several schools of thought when it comes to leader material for both methods, but most jigging rigs for the central North Island tend to be made of material about 4.5kg (10lb) breaking strain. Double fish hook-ups do occur on the Rotorua lakes, and leader separation becomes real when you have two feisty 3kg rainbows pulling in opposite directions! A lot of the jigging rigs that are sold commercially are tied with fluorocarbon material. This material is stiffer than others, so it keeps the flies away from the main leader. Most of these rigs also have small three-way swivels to connect them together. Making your own rigs enables experimentation, and some enthusiasts tie rigs using surgeon's knots and breaking strain down to 8lb. As with all fishing, sometimes the fish are super fussy, other times not so. The secret, perhaps is being willing to change things around when the fishing is tough.

Rods and reels for both methods are

highly varied. You can jig with a spin outfit if that's all you have, but the best by far is a bait caster style rod and reel outfit about 7' long (2.15m) in the 4-6kg range and made of sensitive carbon fibre. Use of a conventional spin outfit for soft baiting enables lures to be dropped vertically, or easily cast mid-water to fish. Jigging greatly benefits from the bait caster style reel and will enable you to easily control the drop as you watch fish on the sounder react to your offerings.

Main lines can be monofilament or braid, the former providing plenty of bust-off forgiving stretch and the latter improved sensitivity. A two or three-metre section of monofilament shock leader is handy if you are going the way of braid, again, as a means of head-shaking shock absorption.

LURES AND FLIES

For jigging, fly styles depend on the location, but smelt patterns to match the size of the most common local prey is the way to go on most New Zealand lakes. Grey Ghost, Jack's Sprat and darker patterns such as Parsons' Glory and Ginger Micks are popular in sizes 10 to 6. Smelt play such a big role in the Rotorua lakes that some anglers will fish mid-water with three identical



Jigging and softbaiting can be both fun and effective ways of targeting trout at depth



A solid Lake Rotoiti trout caught jigging

in tackle stores! When watching trout on a fish finder react to soft baits it becomes obvious that they find those vibrating tails absolutely irresistible. Paddle tails, grub tails and minnows all work well, as do the koura imitations. Size is critical, and up until recently, many of the imported soft baits have been overly large to 'match the hatch' in New Zealand waters. A good rule of thumb to follow is the ten per cent prey rule, where trout feed most efficiently and have a preference for prey that is at least 10% of their own length. That will mean lures in the 2-3" (50-75mm) range are perfect for most of our lakes. Colour choice is limitless, but silvery brown offerings that imitate natural smelt or bullies are a favourite. Bright garish pinks and oranges work surprisingly well in all styles of trout lure, and sometimes these are good options when matching the hatch has failed to produce a reaction.

FISH FINDERS AND TARGETING FISH

There is much to be gained from finding fish before you commence fishing; good electronics make a huge difference in this department. Jigging and soft baiting take place from boats that are, for the most part, stationary. This means you are waiting for fish to pass by, and locations where lots of fish are moving through will be the most productive. There is little point 'parking up' at a location unless you've seen some promising sign on the fish finder. It might be worth a few drops at a previously 'way-pointed' hot spot, but unless you can see fish, or at the very

smelt flies. Where fish are feeding along the bottom, and a variety of forage prey is available, a larger 'Bully-style' or koura pattern such as a dark Woolly Bugger, or killer styles like a Mrs Simpson, Hamills or Kilwell No1 are must-haves as the bottom fly. This is one of the advantages of three fly rigs also, as after landing several fish, you might notice one pattern producing more fish than the others and change one or both of your selections to match.

Soft bait selection can be a mental minefield if you spend time loitering



Softbaits can be quite realistic

least some big schools of smelt, don't waste too much time there.

Deploying an anchor or use of an electric motor with a GPS lock will keep you on the hotspot. That said, a slow drift in calm conditions perhaps assisted by a drogue, can work well, especially when the drift has you moving along a shelf or contour line. Drifting slowly off a shallow location over a deep drop-off can also be productive, sometimes letting line out as you go, other times suspending your lures mid-water. This can be particularly productive by lifting and lowering a soft bait into schools of smelt.

Once you are set up at a location, your fish finder will become your key focus. Even a reasonable quality, modern sounder/fish finder will allow you to see your lures or sinker at depth. The moment a fish moves into your sounder's cone of vision, move your lures rapidly up or down to intercept their path of travel. If a fish is passing under your boat at a depth of say 18 metres, there's little point having your lures sat on the bottom at 25 metres as it simply won't be seen. Trout are sight feeders, so what can't be seen can't be eaten. Place your jigging sinker just below the fish sign you see on your sounder so that they can't help but run into the three-fly buffet you kindly prepared for them earlier. Try placing your soft bait offerings just above the



Clothes pegs make a handy way of keeping jigging rigs under control

fish, making a couple of slow pulses of the rod tip, then winding the soft bait slowly toward the surface like dinner is escaping. This usually results in a follow and often a strike, all of which can be observed on the sounder.

The now popular split screen sounder units with sonar on one half and a bathymetric chart on the other make a huge difference when figuring out a place to drop your lures. A careful study of charts can reveal locations where fish moving along the contour lines are likely to be funnelled into areas.

If you can't see your sinker because of the depth, layers of algae, thick layers of smelt or simply because the unit you have doesn't have the necessary grunt, other methods can help you get your lures in front of hungry trout. Colour-coded braid, known as rainbow braid, changes colour every 5 metres, and this can help you get close to your target depth. To fine-tune that even further and help you get closer to your desired depth, mark the braid with a black marker pen - maybe every metre. Then, just make a note of the fish's depth and count down the metres as you drop your gear.

The same can be achieved with plain braid, the brighter colours of braid being the best to mark. You might try marking 5 metre sections with a long black line and single metres between each 5 metre section with a small black mark. Another useful method is to figure out how much line your reel retrieves with each turn of the handle. Armed with that information, you can drop your gear to the bottom and wind it up a given number of turns to intercept a fish. This works remarkably well, and you'll just have to factor in the distance between your sinker and the middle fly to optimise your success.

NAILING THAT STRIKE

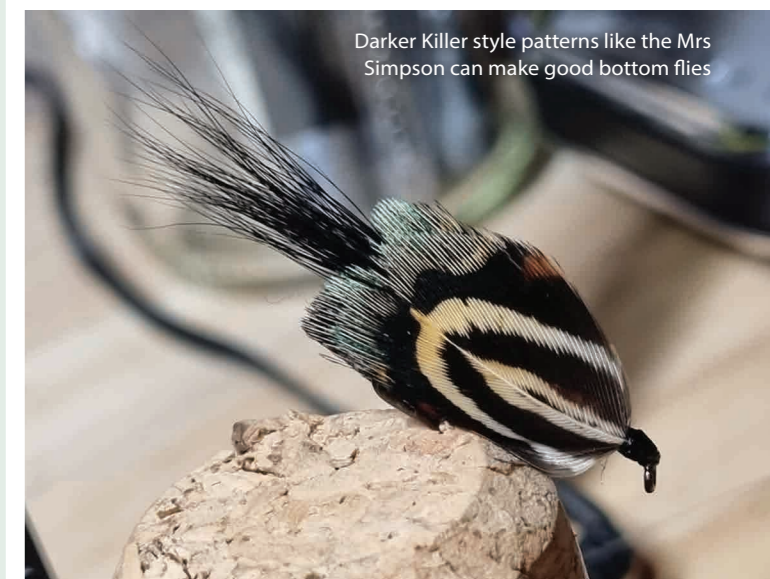
Trout can be unpredictable feeders. Sometimes they'll be as hungry as a teenager straight off the school bus, other times so fussy you'll swear their mouths have been surgically closed. However, there are some methods to nail a strike, and perhaps the key is to always think of them as predatory hunters. If you can figure out what action triggers a strike, and it will change from day to day, you'll be able to catch fish on the tough days and



Smelt flies rule!



Smelt from a trout's stomach in various sizes



Darker Killer style patterns like the Mrs Simpson can make good bottom flies



It's hard to go past a good selection of smelt flies



Jigging on the Rotorua Lakes

not just the on the easy ones. You could choose to leave the rod in the rod holder and simply rely on the swaying action of the boat, gently pulse the rod tip up and down a few centimetres in an enticing manner, give the rod tip long slow lifts and drops or work it erratically like a jack-in-the-box. The point is, just like fly selection, sometimes one method or lure will work better than another, so mix it up until you break the code.

One major strike trigger for trout is stimulated by the idea that their meal is escaping. Speeding up the retrieve is the easiest way to do this, but it has limits as your lures come rapidly back to you and begin getting close to the boat. You know what's going to happen when the fish sees the boat! The speed up, slow down, speed up, erratic behaviour retrieve will not only make fish think their dinner is escaping but that it may possibly be injured and this is an absolute strike trigger, as is a direction change. Prey fish don't swim in straight lines when they are being chased, and neither should your lures. Retrieving soft baits with a direction-changing zig-zag

action, albeit slight, will be much more life-like than just winding lures straight back to you. This is more difficult on a deep-water jigging drop except you can retrieve line and let it out – another reason why that bait caster reel is the best choice.

If trout don't respond to gradual pulsing lifts and drops of the rod tip, wind up several turns rapidly, then drop your lures below the fish's location. Repeat this until the fish strikes or moves off. Sometimes you'll see the fish follow your offering up and down several times, and this might be a sign to change flies. It can be surprising how many fish take on the drop, one theory being that a dropping lure gives off that irresistible 'I'm injured' vibe, which triggers an aggressive strike. It's rare to see small fish swimming vertically unless they are injured or being chased. If you get a take on the drop, you'll feel a slight tap as you thumb the spool down, or the line may go slack even though you are nowhere near the bottom; both signs your lures have been intercepted.

THE THIRTY MINUTE RULE OF SUCCESS

It can be easy to become totally fixated when looking longingly at your sounder and seeing loads of fish, even if they aren't taking your lures. A simple thirty-minute rule will pay dividends, and that is, if you don't achieve success with a particular method at a particular location within thirty minutes, then you need to change something. Success might be a dropped fish or two, and changing something might be as little as a lure change, but don't keep doing the same thing over and over for hours unless it is working. After a lure change, try another method – maybe go from jigging to soft baiting. If that doesn't work, try another location. Localised populations of trout will feed differently, so keep moving about the lake fishing at different spots. Come back to locations where you have seen fish but were unsuccessful earlier in the day but, most of all, keep changing things until you hit success.

...It was Einstein that said madness was doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. We reckon young Albert might have made an excellent angler!

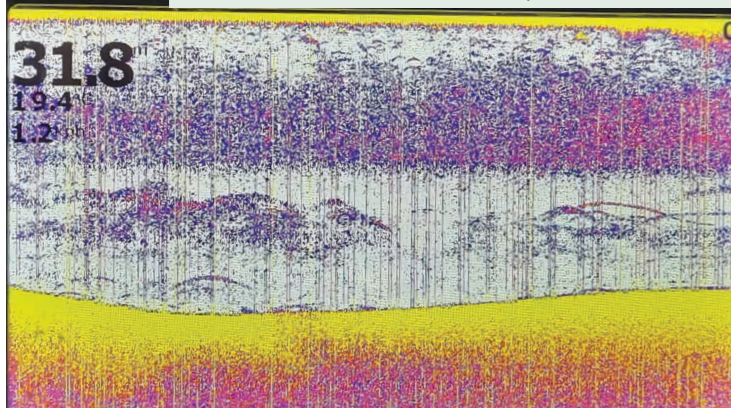
TOP TIPS

- Find fish on the sounder before fishing
- Continue using your fish finder, always noting the depth of fish
- Use well-designed rigs and tackle
- Target fish via your sounder by actively chasing them with lures
- Work your lures in a way that stimulates a strike response
- Keep changing things until you are successful

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LED LENSER

Trout in ambush mode below heavy schools of smelt



Chasing fish via the sounder. The dark line is the sinker and the light yellow line the fish

