Beginners guide to selecting freshwater lures

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Every now and then I like to throw something a little different into the freshwater section of the magazine.

For eleven months of the year we look at what’s biting, where and what on. This month, let’s go into detail on lure types, how to choose them, use them and hopefully catch fish with them. A lot of readers starting out with lures find all the jargon surrounding lures and fishing techniques confusing. Suspending jerkbaits, beetlespins, slow rolling, drop shotting, swim baits - the list of names describing the gear and methods we use goes on.

With so many lure options to choose from and a host of species dictating not only the lure selection but the way in which they are used, it’s time to delve further into it and shed some light on choosing the right lure for the job for those starting out.

Many anglers make the mistake of going fishing in the hope of catching anything. If you go fishing in the hope of catching something in particular you are far more likely to succeed. Choose the species you are chasing before you choose your lure. There will be times in mixed species dams where the golden perch you are hoping for turns out to be a cod, the bass turns out to be a silver perch or the barra turns out to be an old catfish. That’s fishing! However, if you do target a specific species, you are far more likely to catch it.

Soft plastics

One of the most versatile lures is the soft plastic. These soft critters come in a range of shapes, styles and sizes so let’s look at the ones which excel in fresh water.

The most successful soft plastics in freshwater all have one thing in common. They have an inbuilt action. When the lure moves through the water, the tail section comes to life. It is this vibration which attracts predators. The life in the tail comes from the design of the lure. Paddle-tail plastics have a body that tapers to a thin section before a boot shaped tail, which catches water and wiggles from side to side. These plastics come in thin grub shapes, fish-shaped shads and bigger fish-shaped swim baits. Another style of plastic often overlooked is the curl tailed grub. The thin curly tail that trails behind the grub-shaped body of this lure comes to life when moving through the water.

The action in these successful soft plastics doesn’t just happen when the lure is retrieved through the water. When they are sinking, the weight of the jighead descending gives the tail an action.

Rigging Plastics

Smaller soft plastics are best rigged with a hook and weight by the angler. One of the easiest, most effective and commonly used is called a jighead - a hook with a moulded lead weight on the head and a keeper to hold the plastic in place once threaded on the hook.

Some of the larger soft plastics are big enough to accommodate the hook and weight inside the lure’s body (swimbaits). When rigging your own lure, you have the ability to weight it suitably for the area you are fishing and the species you will be targeting. A light jighead of 1/8 or 1/4oz is ideal for shallow water scenarios and keeping the lure higher in the water column. When you want to explore deeper areas of 3-7m a medium sized head of 1/4 or 3/8oz is preferable. When working lures in over 7m of water, choose a heavier head weighing 3/8 or 1/2 ounce.

The hook size will vary on the size of the soft plastic and the species being targeted. For the south-east corner where the fish are smaller and don’t pull as hard as the big, head-shaking barra of the north, a smaller, lighter gauge hook will do the job. A hook around 1/0 will slide nicely inside a 3” or 75mm bait which is the standard size for most scenarios. If you have barramundi in your sights, forget the light gauge hooks and upgrade to a heavier model suited to the size of the lure being used. While a 4/0 hook might suit a 90mm plastic expect to use bigger sizes right up to 9/0 for 150mm plastics. Buying hooks and soft plastics together is a good idea and should ensure you have the right size match to do the job.

Bass Plastics

Choose a lure around 75mm long. Shads and paddle-tail grubs are perfect. Curl tail minnow grubs are an underrated choice and perform well. The different action they possess can be the key to fooling pressured fish.

Golden Perch and Others

Like bass, golden perch (yellowbelly) prefer smaller plastics around 75-90mm long. Choose stronger actioned plastics with bigger boot tails if you are keen on specifically targeting yellowbelly.

Sooty grunter, silver perch and saratoga are all suckers for a soft plastics. The same plastic used for bass and goldens will get the job done. When chasing saratoga, opt for a lighter jighead to keep the lure higher in the water column where the toga mainly feed. Sharp, quality hooks will be needed to penetrate their bony mouths.
**Barramundi**

Of all the freshwater species found in Queensland, they don’t come any meaner than the barramundi. These fish put on a great show when hooked and one of the most effective lures to fool them is the soft plastic.

Being such a big fish, the barra’s diet will dictate the lure choice. A section of softies from 90mm right up to 150mm should be included in the arsenal. Pre-rigged swimbaits are a good option with lures like the Berkley Power Mullet, Squidgy Slick Rig and Storm Shad perfect for tossing to these fish. The downside to these lures is that their built in weight can’t be changed easily. A selection of jigheads and shad tails or unrigged swimbaits is the answer.

**Soft Plastic Techniques**

Plastics are easy lures to use and one of the best ways to work them is by slow rolling. Allow the lure to sink to the depth where the fish are expected to be holding and begin a steady wind. Wind the plastic until it is through the fishy area then stop the retrieve, allowing it to sink again before repeating. The term slow rolling simply refers to the slow rolling nature of the winds taken on the handle of the reel to impart a slow and steady action upon the lure.

**Spinnerbaits**

In South-East Queensland impoundments, it always pays to have some spinnerbaits at hand. These flashy lures consist of a weighted hook dressed in a silicon skirt attached to at least one flashing blade via a wire frame. The spinnerbait looks little like anything found swimming in our waters. Its design doesn’t imitate specific bait but rather exhibits characteristics found in them. The flash of the blades and vibration they produce are similar to those given off by a school of baitfish. The trailing skirt then becomes a target as inquisitive fish can’t help themselves and instinctively strike as a reaction.

**Spinnerbait Species**

Most freshwater fish can be taken on a spinnerbait. Even the occasional barramundi and silver perch fall to these lures but they are more popular with the likes of bass, golden perch, saratoga, sooty grunter and Murray cod. The size of the lure chosen will influence catch rates. Small (downsized) models such as the Smak Mini Coop are designed specifically for bass wanting a smaller meal. The size of the food source can be a good way to match up the right sized spinnerbait. In winter, it often pays to choose bigger baits when fishing the lakes that are full of bony bream.

Sooties, goldens and saratoga will have a go at the smaller offerings but a medium sized spinnerbait is usually the best option. Murray cod on the other hand love it big. Spinnerbaits with big, flashing, vibration thumping blades with a soft plastic rigged under the skirt of the lure to add to the profile are the go. Even small cod like these big baits and their gaping mouths have no trouble swallowing them. The next cod to be taken on a small spinnerbait won’t be the last so be prepared to experiment but keep in mind what works best.

**Weights**

Like jigheads, spinnerbaits come in a range of weights. These weights affect the depth the lure will run when using a steady retrieve. Unfortunately, there is no way to give an exact gauge to the running depth of each weight lure. Influencing factors such as blade size and pause time change how quickly the lure will work up through the water column when being retrieved.

**Spinnerbait Technique**

The spinnerbait is versatile in that it can be allowed to sink to any depth before making the retrieve. When retrieving the lure, the angler can opt for a steady wind fast enough to have the blades spinning nicely. It pays to break up this steady wind with the occasional speed variation. A faster crank on the reel or a slight pause changes the appearance of the lure making the skirt flutter in a different manner causing any trailing fish to strike.

**Beetle spins**

The beetle spin is similar to a spinnerbait but has no hook or weighted head in place. A spinning blade on top of the rig is attached to an elbow shaped wire which has an attachment point for the main line and a second clip style attachment point for the lure. Beetle spins are most commonly fished with a jighead and soft plastics. A paddle-tail style plastic is rigged on the wire clip and the finished product is very similar to a spinnerbait.

The beauty of the beetle spin is it adds flash and vibration to any lure. Experiment with clipping on different lures and you may come up with a hot performer. Bibbed lures, blades and lipless crankbaits can all be used in conjunction with the blade bait.

Most beetle spin frames are built on light wire and their flimsy nature makes them better suited to smaller fish. Bass, golden perch, silver perch and sooty grunter all love the beetle spin when rigged with a soft plastic. A beefed up version is hard to find and may need to be homemade but is deadly on cod.

**Lipless Crankbaits**

Lipless cranks (vibration lures) have been around for many years. Their fish shaped body and tight vibration seems to send fish nuts. The introduction of the Jackall TN60 to Australia by Harry Watson took the freshwater fishing world by storm. This lure could well be the most used lure across the South-East Queensland lakes.
Lipless crankbaits will catch all of our freshwater species and are very popular with the yellowbelly and bass brigade. Even massive Murray cod take a liking to these dressed up bits of plastic. Barramundi are quite fond of the larger versions in these lures but seem picky about which ones they will eat. This is possibly due to most having a rattle and producing their own sonic frequency. Some frequencies attract fish better than others. Silent models are deadly on barra.

**Lipless Crankbait Techniques**

The lipless bait is another great lure choice due to its sinking nature. The lure can be dropped to the depth fish are holding and when it rises up through fish, it can be paused to drop again. There are plenty of ways to use the lipless crankbait most of which involve alterations in retrieve speed and pause time. A slow wind is very popular and by judging the speed you can keep the lure tracking at the desired depth for most of the retrieve.

**Soft Lipless Crankbait**

A hybrid of the lipless crankbait and a soft plastic is the soft lipless crankbait. These lures share the same body shape as the lipless crank but have a flexible body, making the lure not only appear to be real but also feel that way.

Again the Jackall steals the thunder in this department. The Jackall Mask Vib was first on the scene. Due to this lure’s success, others have followed and there is now a range of these lures available in various sizes and weights.

**Soft Lipless Techniques**

The soft vibe can be fished in a similar fashion to the standard lipless crankbait. There is slightly less vibration than in the hard models but this often suits species like yellowbelly and barramundi.

Where the lure performs well is enticing fish which are holding close to the bottom in deeper water. Once on the bottom, the lure can be hopped by sharply lifting the rod tip. As the lure falls back to the bottom the slack line is taken in on the reel. Play around with the size of the hops and how aggressive they are made. Feeling the vibration of the hopping lure through the rod is a good indication you are doing things right. Between each hop ensure the lure sinks far enough. A slack in the line as the lure touches down on the bottom is the signal it has finished sinking. When taking in the slack between hops try to stay in touch with the lure as nearly all bites will happen when the lure is dropping.

**Blade Baits**

Metal blades are a great option for chasing our freshwater natives. These faster sinking lures are well suited to deeper areas and fish which respond well to speed. Bass are a year round target and golden perch and barramundi can fire up and take blades when the conditions are warm enough. The fish-shaped piece of metal has a weighted head and a tight vibrating action. Most blades have several holes to attach the line to along their back. The front hole will see the lure track deeper and vibrate less. The back hole will make it thump out vibration causing more resistance and a shallower retrieve path as a result. Choosing a hole in the centre is usually a good gamble.

**Blade Techniques**

Heavier blades which reach the bottom quickly in the depth you are fishing are well suited to a slow rolling retrieve. Wind the lure from the bottom up through the fish and allow it to sink again before repeating. As the lure is wound along, vibration should be felt in the rod when using fused or braided fishing lines.

Lighter lures are harder to keep down deep when being retrieved. These smaller profile lures are ideal for a hopping retrieve. Use sharp hops that make the lure vibrate and dart off the bottom and fall all the way back down. Vary the size of these hops. Bottom hugging fish seem to like a very small hop while fish holding higher in the water will be keen on a higher rod lift which makes the lure dart well off the bottom.

**Surface Lures**

By far my favourite lure to fish is the surface lure. These topwater offerings float on top and are worked to mimic dying baitfish or insects on the water’s surface. The result is explosive surface strikes. Bass, saratoga, cod and barramundi are well known for their surface feeding antics. In periods of low light these species are prepared to rise to the top for a feed. The type of baitfish which inhabits a waterway can steady the willingness of bass to rise to the surface. Where they are surrounded by bony bream in deeper water, they have little need to waste energy chasing food.

**Surface Styles**

There are quite a few surface lure types out on the market, including pencil baits, stick baits, poppers, fizzers, walkers and wakebaits. If it is the right size, floats and makes a disturbance on top when worked, chances are it will catch a fish.

Poppers are one of the most common lures to get a run when topwater fishing. These lures have a cupped face that catches water when they are twitched along. A short jab of the rod pulls the line tight, making the cup catch and throw water out in front of the lure. Fresherwater species don’t like a big splash so the desired result is to have the lure creating a blooping noise as it chugs along the top. It is important to stop the lure often to allow the fish time to find it, size it up and eat it. Most hits will come on the pause or as soon as the lure moves again, making the pause an integral part of surface fishing. The better a spot looks or if fish have been seen feeding in an area, the slower the retrieve should be.
Fish don’t always like a lot of disturbance on the top and often a lure which zigzags side to side is a better option than a surface popper. This subtle action is achieved with a lure called a pencil bait or stick bait. These torpedo shaped poppers require a lot more rod work to get them motoring along the top in the side to side motion. The technique is called walking the dog and the action is imparted with some fancy rod work while the reel takes up the slack. Short downward twitches are made on an almost slack line. As the line pulls tight, the lure darts to one side, the next twitch sees it dart to the other. Each twitch of the rod occurs less than a second apart. Once mastered properly, the angler can work the lure like a puppet and have it dancing side to side without a lot of forward movement. Pauses are still crucial and a pause at least every metre or so in tight structure and every few metres out in the open will attract a lot more fish.

Facts

Tech Tip: Trim down

It can really put a dent in the budget to buy hooks of all sizes and weights. It is always easier to remove weight from a jighead than add it. For example, a 1/4oz head can be quickly trimmed down to 1/8oz with a set of side cutters or paring away the edges with a sturdy blade.

Facts

Tech Tip: Beetle magic

Saratoga are suckers for a beetle spin rigged with a 1/4oz jighead and 3” paddle tail grub soft plastic. Flick the lure around structure and begin winding as soon as the lure splashes down.

Another place the beetle spin excels is around thick weed edges. As soon as the lure becomes entangled with weed the vibration of the blade stops, alerting the angler to the lure being fouled. A sharp rip is often enough to free the lure up and keep it working close to the weedy area.

Facts

Tech Tip: A sting in the tail

When using a spinnerbait, it pays to add a stinger hook to connect to short striking fish. A stinger is a trailing hook behind the main hook. Some spinnerbaits come already rigged with it in place but it is quite easy to add your own. Using a specially designed hook such as a Siwash, pass the eye of the stinger over the point of the main hook. The hook then swings loosely on the bend of the main hook when the lure is being retrieved. To prevent the stinger falling off, add a soft glow bead stopper over the point of the main hook and position it past the barb. The lure’s motion through the water will keep the stinger in the right position when a fish strikes.

Facts
Tech Tip: Weights vs Size

When selecting a lipless crankbait to use, weight is a major issue. Because these lures rely on their sinking characteristic to maintain depth when being retrieved, heavier lures will track deeper than lighter models. Another thing that needs to be considered is the size of the lure. For example, a lure which displaces 12ml of water will need to weigh 12g including hooks and rings to become neutrally buoyant. The more it weighs over 12g the faster it will drop to the bottom. Therefore, a heavy fat-bodied lure may actually sink slower than a lighter thin-bodied lure of the same length.

Images

This is a popular selection of plastics to cover all bases. Top left is a packet of 3” Minnow Grubs. Centre top are two rigged paddle tail grubs (Slider Grub and Powerbait T-tail). The white shad rigged on a chunky jighead is a 7cm Powerbait Ripple Shad.

Spinnerbaits come in all sizes. The top three will catch most freshwater species while the bottom will is bigger and designed specifically for cod. Notice the trailing stinger hooks which hang just behind the skirt material. Short striking fish beware!
There are plenty of options when it comes to rigging beetle spins. These blades with wire frames can be clipped onto different lures to add flash and vibration. The most popular way to fish them is rigged with a paddle tail plastic like the one on the left.

Lipless crankbaits are one of the most reliable lures in the freshwater. Here are three proven models. From left to right we have a Megabass Vibration-X Powerbomb (heavy and suited to deeper holding fish or fast retrieves across the shallows), a TN60 Jack.

Soft lipless bait are perfect for enticing deeper holding fish using a hopping retrieve. First came the Jackall Mask Vibe (yellow headed lure on the left). Since then others have imitated the successful lure. Powerbait has released a similar style bait in.
Barramundi will take lipless crankbaits when they are active and willing to chase a lure. At these times a faster presentation will get better results. Here an 83mm Cultiva Mira Vibe hangs from the mouth of a fish.

Big fat bass are suckers for a hopped Mask Vib. The Jackall TN60 is the perfect big bass lure.
Surface lures are an exciting way to catch fish. On the left we have a range of torpedo shade stick baits suited to the walk the dog technique. When this subtle style of presentation isn’t enough to raise fish, try one of the cupped face poppers lined up.

Blade baits are really effective in deeper water as you can target specific depths quite easily with these offerings.