

Ten Techniques of Highly Successful Sightfishermen

A SPECIAL REPORT by Captain John Kumiski ©2010

If you've been fishing more than a few weeks you've heard the old saw, "10 percent of the fishermen catch 90 percent of the fish." What are these people doing that the "average Joe" is not? Whether you're a hackle heaver, a chunk chucker, or something in between, this piece will examine in detail the strategies successful anglers use.

1. Maintain your tackle. Strong lines, oiled reels, and sharp hooks catch more fish than old, weakened lines, dirty, broken reels, and dull, rusty hooks. Take the time to make sure your tackle is in good shape before it's time to go fishing. If you're properly prepared when Mr. Big comes along you have a good chance of landing him.

2. Tie good knots. Learn to tie those four or five knots that you need in order to eliminate unnecessary terminal tackle and secure the necessary terminal tackle. What are those knots? The clinch knot, the no name loop knot, the double surgeons knot, the Bimini twist, and the Albright special are five absolute necessities. Unless you use Tiger Leader when using wire you'll need to know the haywire twist, too. Most knot books will have directions on how to tie all of these knots.

3. Go fishing frequently. Fishing on a regular basis will improve your catch ratio for at least three reasons. By fishing often you will sharpen all of the skills associated with fishing, so you'll become a more competent angler. Also, fish move around. If you fish frequently you can better keep track of their whereabouts. Finding them is always a prerequisite to catching them. Lastly, if you fish frequently you're more likely to be there on one of those all too rare days when the fish really go off on a feed. Wouldn't it be nice to experience this rather than hearing about it the next day?

4. Hunt quickly. Too many fishermen sit in one place, waiting for a bite. While this will eventually work if you wait long enough, if you want to catch fish today you have to go find them. If you're in a boat use either a push pole or an electric motor to cover water fairly quickly until you start to see some fish. Waders likewise need to search as quickly as they can.

5. Fish slowly and quietly. Once you've located fish you need to imitate that superb hunter of fish, the great blue heron. Herons work very slowly and quietly. If they don't catch fish they starve.

Fish in shallow water hear everything that happens in a nearby boat, especially any movement of feet. They can feel it when the boat rocks. All of it spooks them. If you work slowly and silently the fish may never know you're there.

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As a related topic, when you find a school of fish (particularly tarpon or redfish), keep out of their comfort zone. If you work a school carefully you can often stay with them for hours. In order to do this you must be quiet and stay off them a minimum distance which changes from day to day, but which is almost always at least 40 feet and is frequently more than that. You can tell when they're getting nervous because their behavior will change. When you see this, back off and wait for them to settle down. It could be ten or even fifteen minutes. Only then do you start working them again.

It's only time to leave when you can't find them anymore or it becomes painfully obvious that no matter what you do they will not eat. "Never leave fish to find fish," always remains valid.

6. You gotta make the cast. You must put your offering where the fish will see it, and it's best if the fish doesn't have to change course in order to eat. If you can't hit a Frisbee consistently at 50 feet you need more practice, regardless of the tackle you're using.

How far do you lead the fish? No hard answer exists for this question. If your bait lands too close to the fish it spooks. If it lands too far in front the fish usually changes course and never sees it. So the answer depends on the speed of the fish, the depth of the water, the sink rate of your bait, and a host of other subtle factors. Have fun figuring it out.

7. Presentation, presentation, presentation. This past Spring I had a friend who we will call Fred out fly fishing for tarpon. Fred's a fine caster but doesn't take instruction very well. We were on a big school of fish that he kept casting across so he could pull his fly through the middle of them.

Needless to say Fred didn't get a bite. Lining the fish spooks them. An attacking fly seldom gets eaten.

What Fred would have done had he listened to instructions was to put his fly where the fish were going and allowed them to encounter it. Regardless of what's on the end of your line, regardless of what your target is, try to anticipate where the fish are going and position yourself such that you can place your offering there. It's always best if that offering moves away from the fish as the fish approaches it.

This is fairly easy if you have a large school of fish. They cover a lot of area. If you're after a single you frequently need to make a 50 foot cast to an area the size of a dinner plate, usually with a 15 knot cross wind. No one said it would be easy. I suggest you read #6 again.

One last thing while on this topic. A very common error occurs when the angler casts beyond the fish and draws the bait to the fish such that the paths of the bait and the fish intersect. In most places, at most times, this results in a spooked fish. Fish aren't used to seeing their food attack them. If you want a bite, allow the fish to encounter your bait. Take your time and get in position (out in front of the fish) for a good cast. One good shot is worth dozens of poor ones.

8. Just make it look alive. If you're using bait, either live or dead, you can ignore this one. The fish will see live bait or smell dead bait, so if you followed rules #4 and #5 you can expect frequent action.

Most people move their artificial baits too much. Assuming you made a good cast, look at it from the fish's point of view. He's swimming along. He sees something that might be food. Is he more likely to eat it if it dashes madly off into the gloom, or if it just hops slightly and then tries to hide in the grass?

Frankly, the answer to this question depends on what kind of fish it is. Crevalle want to sprint. I honestly think they love a good chase. Redfish, tarpon, snook, seatrout, they're all lazy. Make it easy for them and you're more likely to have success.

9. Be persistent. It happens frequently when the weather is questionable that my charter for the day will ask, "What are the chances that we'll catch some fish today?" I can't answer that question. No one could. But I always tell them, "If you don't go out your chance of catching a fish is zero."

I recently had a young man and his father out in my boat. His name was Kip and the day we were out was his 13th birthday. I looked all over for fish, even pulling the boat out and going somewhere else. Our luck was miserable until I decided to leave. Instead of heading straight back to the ramp I ran along the edge of the flat we had been fishing and lo! There was a school of big, Indian River Lagoon redfish. Kip got his birthday fish, and it pegged out my 30 pound Boga Grip.

The point is you have to fish as much as you can, as long as you can. Keep looking. Keep casting. Sooner or later you will find some fish.

10. Keep observing, keep experimenting, keep learning. As soon as you think you've got it wired you're finished. Great anglers try to learn something new on every trip, something we should all strive for. Never stop watching. Never be afraid to try something new. You'll be surprised what happens sometimes.

So, there we have it. Ten techniques guaranteed to make you a better sight fisherman. Follow these simple strategies religiously and climb into angling's elite!

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Sidebar

The Lures You Carry

As an important aside to this piece a short discussion of the artificial lures which I carry and use in my area (north Indian River Lagoon system, including the Banana River Lagoon and the Mosquito Lagoon) and the reasons why I choose these lures might be in order.

-Popping plugs. The gang hooks on plugs are a turn-off for me, but no one has yet invented a single hook, soft plastic popper that works. My two favorites are the Yozuri and the Storm Chug Bug. Walk-the-dog baits like the Yozuri Banana Boat and the MirroLure Top Dog family need an honorable mention here, too. These baits are used when conditions prevent successful sight fishing.

-Weedless spoons. For years my favorite has been the Johnson Minnow, ¼ ounce, in both gold and silver, simply used as is. Lately Capt. Mike's weedless spoon has been proving useful. These lures can be used for casting blind and for sight fishing, too.

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-Weedless jigs. Rip Tide makes a fantastic weedless jig head. I use their soft plastic weedless shrimp tail in conjunction with it. It's excellent for sight fishing on shallow flats, or working through deeper areas where visibility is poor.

-Jerk Baits. Many different companies make these baits, and I've caught fish on a lot of different ones. You can work them through the shallowest water and the thickest grass without them hanging up, and fish eat them very well. I like a five inch bait for castability reasons, used on a 4/0 or 5/0 hook. DOA now makes pinch weights that attach to the hook shank, allowing you to use smaller baits and yet cast them the necessary distance. Capt. Mike is marketing a hook with a lead weight molded around the shank for the same reason. Day in and day out these are the lures I use the most.

-DOA Lures. The three inch shrimp offers anglers a tremendous sight fishing bait. Properly presented to the sighted fish this lure is deadly.

The shallow running Bait Buster is an excellent choice when working schools of redfish, and is a good bait to use when blind casting, too.

There are lots and lots of lure choices out there. Find what works for you and use it. But don't forget to keep experimenting!

Colors of baits invoke more discussion among anglers than any other topic. They are more important to fishermen than to fish. Carry light colors, dark colors, and neutral colors, and you'll be ready for anything.

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