

Joy fishing for the miniature marlin

Garfish are the miniature marlin of the southern seas and great fun to catch. Making garfishing even sweeter is the fact that, in most cases, you are casting a line in the best weather and in the safest conditions for young and old anglers. Then, if your luck is in, you can enjoy one of the sweetest and most succulent fish in our waters. Garfish are found throughout gulf waters and sheltered bays on the west coast, Kangaroo Island and the south east coast. The extent of their offshore distribution is currently unknown. In the sheltered waters, garfish live among seagrass beds as they feed during daylight hours on leaves of garweed (*zostera* and

heterozestra). At night, they feed on zooplankton throughout the water column.

They are serial batch spawners, producing relatively few, but large eggs. In SA, the spawning season occurs from September to April with two distinct spawning peaks in November-December and February. Research has shown that garfish become sexually mature at a length of about 21 cm in approximately 18 months, and the maximum age of fish in South Australia is thought to be about six years of age.

Specialist recreational garfisher Richard Krawczyk says: "The environment in which you fish for gar is spectacular.

The best time to catch them is early morning when the weather is relatively calm, just when you want to be in or on the water."

Like bream, garfish are accessible to everybody whether from a boat, the shore or a jetty. And, if you follow a few simple guidelines, they are relatively easy to catch, even for first time fishers.

Richard's passion is casting in the shallows along the metropolitan foreshore soon after dawn on the days when the temperature is predicted to soar into the 30s.

"I'm at the beach about half an hour before the peak tide and I fish the outgoing tide wading out as the water recedes," he said.

"My favourite spot is on the sandbanks at Tennyson beach fishing from 6 am to around

10 am as the tide retreats. It's where I've caught some of my best 'flat backers' - garfish so big that their backs are flat.

"But the fishing can be just as good at spots anywhere from Outer Harbor to Seacliff."

Southern sea garfish are easy to distinguish. They are pale greenish blue on the back and upper sides, and have a broad, blue-edged silver band along their sides.

Garfish are distinguished from most other species by the large 'bill' or 'beak' on their lower jaw. Another species, the river garfish or (*Hyporhamphus regularis*) is found in a few locations in South Australia. However, little is known of the biology of the species.

Like any form of fishing, the dividend is in the preparation.

Prior to going fishing, "brew" some burley in a plastic icecream container. The burley can be a combination of stale bread, cereal or chicken pellets, mixed with water to form a stiff mix, then add tuna or aniseed oil.

Next, get your rig ready. Use a light rod at least 2.5 metres in length with a small casting reel and 3kg line. Look at the surface rig illustration on page 16 for the detailed set up of the feeder float and hooks. Consider tying a short length of white knitting wool around the top of the shanks on your hooks as decoy gents and simply continue to add two to three fresh gents as required.

Richard recommends removing the hook above the feeder float for safety purposes if children will be casting the rod.

Once you are at the beach, hitch two bait containers on your hips - one containing gents and the other for your berley. Don't forget the hessian bag over your shoulder to carry the fish you are about to catch remembering the minimum size limit is 23cm



ABOVE: Richard Krawczyk, a keen recreational fisher.

(measured from the tip of the upper jaw to the tip of the tail) with a bag limit of 60.

Just before the peak of the tide, Richard wades ankle deep into the water and squeezes some burley into the feeder float. He then puts two gents on each hook, which is all you will need for smell and movement along with the wool resembling maggots higher up the shanks.

"Once the float hits the water, the berley will disperse and begin to sink to the bottom," Richard said. "The oily slick will float away from the solid burley, where most of the fish will feed.

"I have found that the smaller, aggressive fish will move into the berley stream. The bigger fish tend to sit back behind the slick.

"By casting just beyond the slick, I find I get among the biggest fish, some of them up to 40 cm. Perhaps, it's because they are older and more cunning.

"Most fishers hold their rods upright, and for most types of fishing I agree with this method.





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When fishing for garfish from the shore, I recommend holding the rod to the right or left of your body and parallel to the water. This way, you have a good feel for the line and, apart from any movement of the float, you can feel when a fish takes the bait with the extra line drag helping to set the hook.

“Once the fish strikes, it is not necessary to jerk the line excessively. Just a gentle backwards movement with the rod will be sufficient to tighten the line and set the hook.

“Good sized gar will jump out of the water like marlin and they are great fun to catch.”

Another tip from Richard: “If you are going for keepers, as soon as you have unhooked the garfish, hold it firmly near the head in one hand and, with the other, grasp the garfish and slide your hand firmly down the length of the body removing all the scales in one easy action. Remember to keep your hessian catch bag moist at all times.”

Richard also practices catch and release, and he emphasises the need for careful handling of the fish to give it the best chance of survival.

“If you are planning to let the fish go, avoid any handling that will remove or damage its scales. “I find the best method is to place my thumb in the mouth of the fish and keep most of its body in the water allowing the water to

support the weight of the fish and preventing internal damage.

“The fish will remain quite still and long shanked hooks can be easily removed from the mouth of the fish.

“If you have difficulty removing a deeply set hook, it is best to leave it and cut the line. The hook eventually will disintegrate, and the fish will survive.”

While Richard prefers balmy mornings fishing from the beach, he is also partial to garfishing from boats.

The illustrations on this page also show how to rig a pencil float for boat fishing along with a bottom set up that may be used from shore or vessel.

Remember, there is a garfish boat limit of 180 if you have three or more fishing from the boat.

“On a boat, you will usually have a berley basket or pot attached to the transom so you don’t need a feeder float,” Richard said.

“Once again, cast your line into and beyond the oil slick as this is where you will find the biggest fish.”

Tides times are not crucial for gar fishing from a boat, but it is preferable to have some movement in the water with a very light breeze to take the sheen off the surface.

“When I’m garfishing from a boat, I look to anchor over weedbeds and it is always worth dangling a squid jag in the water because they share the same habitat.”

If you are keeping the garfish you catch, filleting can be quite a challenge. However, practice can make perfect for this delightful fish. The black lining from the stomach should be removed by scraping it with a sharp knife, or gently running the fillet in wet sand.

“Once you have a nice fillet, carefully slice away the rib cage. It is preferable to sacrifice a little of the flesh to remove all of the bones.”

Garfish fillets are delightful dipped in plain flour and fried quickly in a pan of hot olive oil.

Alternatively, cut the fillets into bite-sized chunks and place them in a bowl of lemon or lime juice for several hours.

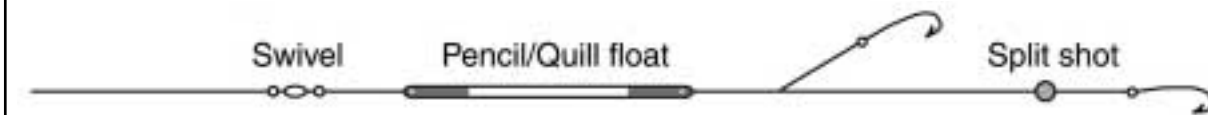
The acid in the juice “cooks” the flesh and it makes a delightful meal served and mixed with tomatoes, chillies, sliced onions, and olive oil.

Some people also make roll mops from garfish fillets using a 50:50 mixture of vinegar and water, adding black peppercorns, chile and bay leaves to taste.

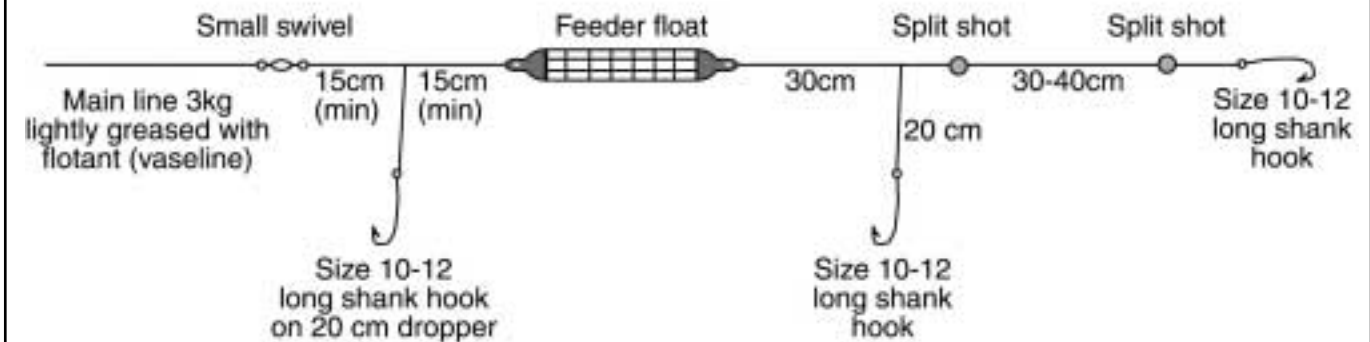
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Rigs

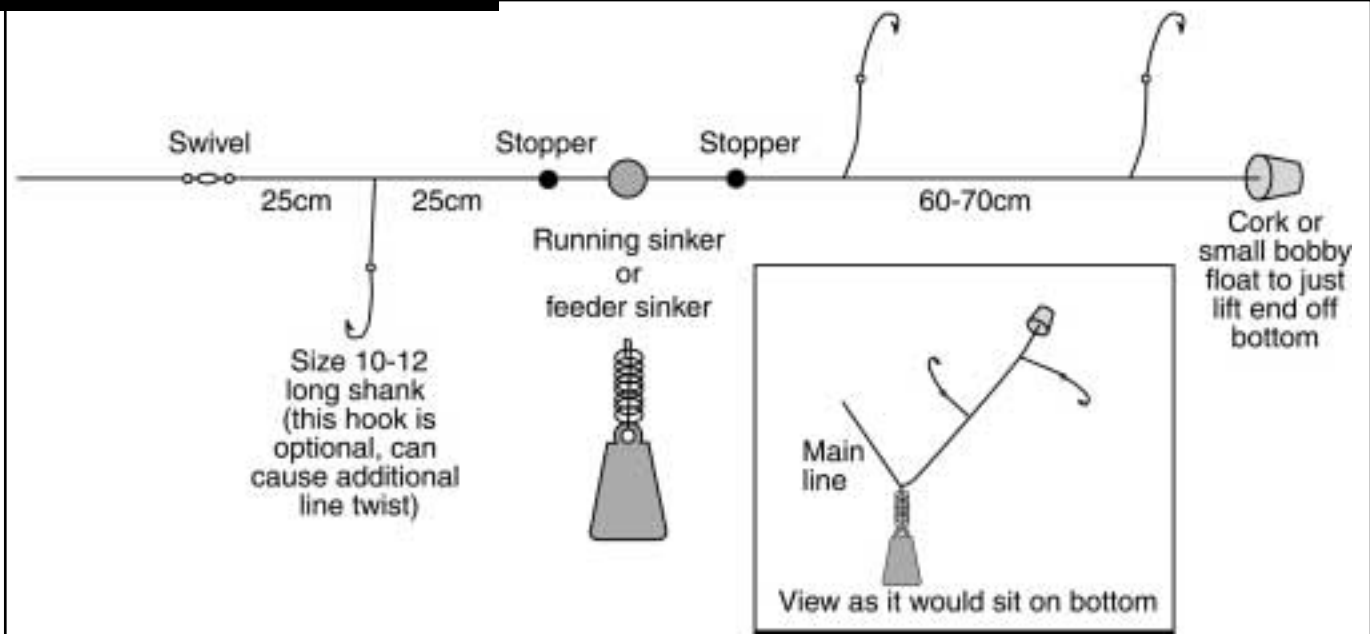
GARFISH RIG – BOAT



GARFISH RIG – BEACH AND ROCK



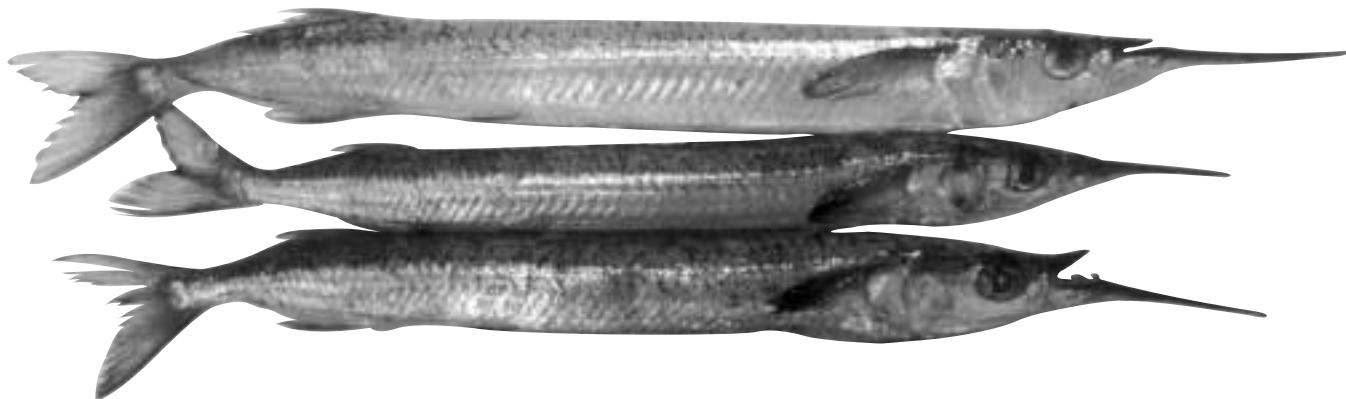
GARFISH RIG – BEACH, ROCK AND JETTY



Illustrations by Judi Francis.

Practice makes perfect

when filleting garfish



With some practice, you can become accomplished at filleting garfish. Here are some tips.

After washing, quickly scale the fish using the back of the knife. Then remove the head by cutting straight across under the pectoral fins. With the head removed, cut down the silver line of the belly and remove the intestines.

Lay the garfish on its back and push the knife through the rib cavity, separating the rib cage from the right side of the backbone. The finished fillet will look better if the tip of the knife does not break the skin.

Next, lay the fish out flat and work the knife under the spine towards the tail.

Now for the second incision. Roll the fish on its back and the backbone will be exposed. Hold the backbone with your fingers and push down feeling all the time to ensure the knife moves cleanly underneath the spine towards the tail.

Inside the fillet you will still have the rib cage. Make a clean incision underneath all of the little ribs to remove the cage. You will finish up with a beautiful double fillet of garfish.

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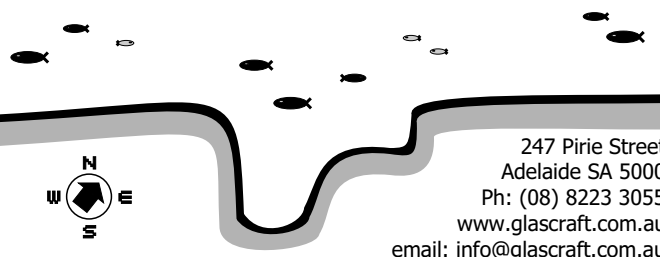


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