

King Mackerel: The Basics

By Captain Dave Tilley

All along the East Coast of the United States the King Mackerel is one of the most sought after game fish among small boat fisherman. Powerful and strong, tasty and delicious, the King Mackerel has made it's way in to many a Fisherman's heart. Juvenile fish move in schools along the east coast moving North in the spring and South in the winter. These are the fish that I call schoolies. They range from 5lbs to 20 lbs and make up a large number of the King Mackerel caught every year by both Commercial and Recreational fisherman. The biggest fish are thought to be loners and the lead predator in the area. The big ones are the smart ones. They are much harder to catch than the schoolies.

Recreational fisherman caught 75,853 King Mackerel along the North Carolina Coast in 1999. Total weight was 672,466lbs for an average weight of 9lbs each.

Commercial fisherman caught 1,082,419lbs of fish in that same year. Having worked on Commercial King boats in the spring and fall each year, I can tell you that the average fish was somewhere in that same 9lb range.

Growth Chart for Female Kings

Years down the left, length at the bottom.

As you can tell from the chart above, King Mackerel are not the fast growers like Mahi Mahi with the average caught fish being around 5 years old.

I wonder how many baits one fish has looked at in 5 years time. I bet it is a lot. That is where the fun of King Mackerel comes in. These are not the dumbest fish in the ocean and if you want to catch them on a regular basis then you better have your mess straight. That's why you are reading this right? So let's get down to some serious fishing info.

Trolling

King Mackerel are taken often on trolled baits. [Ballyhoo](#), [Menhaden](#) and large drone spoons lead the list, although schoolies can be caught on almost anything with a hook. The water temp must be at least 65 degrees with 68 to 76 degrees kind of being the magic mark. Look for area with a combination of bottom structure and temperature riff that will hold bait fish for the King's to feed on. 6" foot rods with a light end but stiffer as you go down the stick work well, I use Key Largo Sticks (20-30lb class) with Shimano Speed Masters. The 6-1 gear ratio and 25 lb mono make easy work of most Kings.

On a regular fishing trip I use [Rigged Ballyhoo](#) with a single hook treble rig, some with skirts some naked. Troll a standard W spread with the the leaders back at least 30 feet on the downriggers and move the outriggers back as far as practical. I like to use premade chum boxes that can be bought with the nets all ready on them. This makes the fuss and muss much easier. Troll from down current to up current and be

sure to shake the chum bag when you are over the target bottom. Set the drags lightly (about 5 lbs) with the clicker on so they will not freespool.

On a day when I want to turn up the volume, I add fresh ground chum to the mix. I stop by one of the shrimp boats on the way out and buy (they usually give me) a load of by-catch. Be sure to keep the fish in a cooler and cold until it is time to turn them into King Juice. Now where I live we have lots of eels and the shrimpers catch lot of them. They are perfect bait for Mr. King. Use the same type of rig as above but with 3 hooks instead of 2.

Slow Trolling

[How to Rig Live Bait](#)

On the day that I want to hit the biggest and the baddest of the Old timer King Mackerel, 20 plus years. There is only one way to do it and that is by fooling the fish into thinking it is dinner time. How? SLOW TROLLING and feeding him one of two of his favorite foods.

First Menhaden, Catch Live Menhaden and keep them in a proper live well. Keep the baits as fresh as possible. Also catch enough in a cooler on ice to grind into fresh King Juice. It is hard to have too much. Use the lightest rig possible with small gauge wire or no wire at all if you dare. Raise the spread and (Hopefully) hold on to your hat "cause we fixing to get busy. You got to go SLOW. Real Slow. So slow that you barely keep headway. About 1 to 1.5 knots max. The bait fish should be left to swim freely and try to be kind of easy on the chum, if you use too much it will attract the sharks and other undesirables.

Second, Live bottom fish. Have your party bottom fish with small hooks. Take the live bottom fish that they bring in and put them on the trolled lines. If you have a live well go ahead and stock up on bait. This works real well. The oldest and wisest of the fish are usually the hardest to catch, so you have to be careful about what you do. That means : No radio, be quite and no dropping stuff. You have to kind of sneak in to the hole.

Light Lines

King Mackerel can also be caught on what are called Light Lines. I use light lines for different kinds of fishing.

First while bottom fishing, get the boat on the hole and get everyone else bottom fishing. While they are bottom fishing take a rigged Ballyhoo or Live small bottom fish and let it out behind the boat. Try to get the bait as far away from the boat as possible. I will usually keep at least 2 and sometimes 3 light lines in the water at all times when bottom fishing. The guests love it and it is a good way to break up the monotony of bottom fishing.

Second way is called balloon fishing. Use the balloons when light lining as outlined above with dead bait. They are useful for keeping the baits near the surface or you can use them to balloon fish with live bait. First you got to get the boat in the right spot. Pick out your ledge or structure. Now figure out what way the current is moving and move upstream from that. Here's the hard part, you want the chum slick and parts and pieces to fall right down onto the structure. This will bring them to the boat. So we are anchored up and ready to fish. Put your live baits on double hook trebles as outlined before and tie a small balloon about 20 feet from the rig. This will give your fish some room to move around. Start at the outside and farthest bait and work your way in. I will usually fish 5 lines. Try to keep them spread apart to keep them from tangling. Keep the chum steady, not too much or you'll get a visit from the sharks. If they show up you might as well move.

Tight Lines and Slight Seas

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