

Chapter 14

Live Chum Advantage

When it comes to stirring up offshore action, nothing works like live chum.

Sailfish are one of many offshore species that respond well to live chum. The trick is to dole out just enough bait to keep the fish interested without overfeeding them.

It's no secret that chumming is one of the most effective techniques for attracting fish and putting them in a feeding mood. In fact, it can save the day when your quarry is scattered or reluctant to bite. Whether it's soaking a frozen chum block for bluefish or doling out a more elaborate concoction of fresh and frozen chum for yellowtail snapper, chum works wonders on many species.

Using live baits for chum takes the concept to an entirely different level. While fresh and frozen chum relies on scent and the dispersal of small pieces of fish to rally the bait and game fish, live chum spurs a more aggressive response. It exploits the movement, flash and distress vibrations emitted by frantic and sometimes injured live baits to draw in game fish and arouse their predatory instincts. Furthermore, live baits dispersed as chum while drifting or slow-



trolling tend to school-up around the hooked baits in the spread or underneath the boat, which also draws in fish.

The best live-chumming baits are those that happen to be abundant at the time. For example, the seasonal availability of pilchards and herring in South Florida makes them a prime choice for live chum. Finger mullet and menhaden are popular in the Mid-Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. Spearing (silversides) work well in the Northeast, while anchovies and sardines are preferred as live chum off Southern California and Baja.

Don't Feed the Fish

Like standard chum, live chum is first used to draw fish in and get them feeding. Once that has been accomplished, the trick is to chum just enough to keep the fish interested, not feed them. It's a balancing act that takes some time to master.

As far as how to apply the tactic offshore, consider how my friends and I sometimes fish for dolphin. If we have a live well full of pilchards and happen upon a weed line, floating board or other sizeable piece of flotsam, we'll either troll the area with rigged ballyhoo or cast out live baits. If we don't immediately

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Large live wells are mandatory for successful live-chumming.

encounter fish, but believe they're in the area, we sometimes troll while simultaneously chumming a section of the weed line or flotsam with live pilchards.

For example, we may troll parallel to a weed line and toss a couple live pilchards to its edge every 50 feet or so. After chumming a fairly small stretch of the weed line, we'll turn around and repeat the procedure while trolling back down it.

Depending on how thick the weed line is, and if we can cross it without snagging our baits, we'll sometimes chum the other side as well. When the dolphin begin feeding aggressively on the chum, they should be ready to take a trolled bait or a live pilchard cast among them. Furthermore, if the fish have

recently experienced heavy fishing pressure and have wised up to trolled baits, this tactic may fool them by showing them something they haven't seen before.

Tricks for Sails & Kings

Captain Dennis Forgione is a top Miami charter skipper who has perfected the art of live-chumming for king mackerel and sailfish. When drifting, Forgione runs

to a stretch of good bottom, shuts down and covers a broad depth range that often takes him from 75 to 300 feet of water. After setting out a spread of live baits, including a pair of goggle-eyes or blue runners suspended from a fishing kite, Forgione begins tossing out three or

four pilchards at regular intervals. Once these chum baits scurry out of site, he'll wait a few minutes and toss out another three or four.

"I only chum with a few baits at a time, and I rarely injure them," says Forgione. "That way, some of them find their buddies that I'm drifting in my spread. I never liked tossing out a dipnet full of baits at one time — like 20 or 50 in a shot — because all those baits will immediately school up and race off, quite possibly taking any game fish with them. I keep to my pace. The commotion caused by the chum baits swimming around my spread has an uncanny knack of attracting kings and sails. When a king or sail races into the spread, the chum baits scatter and excite the fish even more. The only baits that can't escape quickly are the hooked ones, and they almost always get eaten."

As in the dolphin example described earlier, Forgione typically

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makes repeated drifts within the same zone, especially if he's raised fish. He also agrees that the object of live-chumming is to draw fish into the area. Therefore, it makes sense to make repeated passes through the same zone and build on your initial chumming efforts, unless conditions dictate otherwise.

Chum 'N Troll

Dave Workman, Jr., is a noted authority on catching big king mackerel. He attributes part of his success at winning king mackerel tournaments to his chumming tactics. Although he generally relies on fresh, ground-up menhaden, he uses live chum when strikes are hard to come by. His strategy involves culling the weaker baits from his live well and tossing them into his spread of slow-trolled live pogies (menhaden).

"I'll toss out one or two pogies every now and then," says Workman. "I don't over-do it, because I don't want to feed any big kingfish. I want just enough live chum out so that some of them will swim alongside my hook baits and make my spread look that much more inviting. I want to attract a big kingfish to the baits, not let it lay way back there and fill up on the free handouts."

Workman also supplements his live-chumming efforts by slow-trolling a five-pound block of frozen glass minnows in a mesh chum bag. As the minnows thaw, they filter through the bag and create a "dribbling" of flashy tidbits. This tends to attract any Spanish mackerel or bonito that may be in the area, which dart in and out of his live-bait spread and eat the tidbits. All this extra activity sometimes draws in, and turns on, the

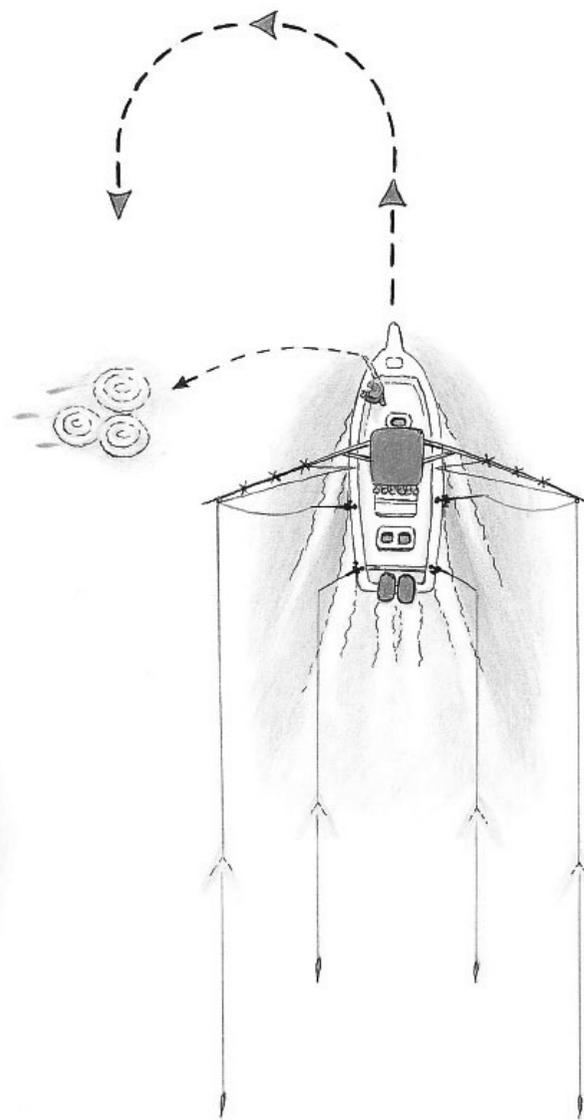
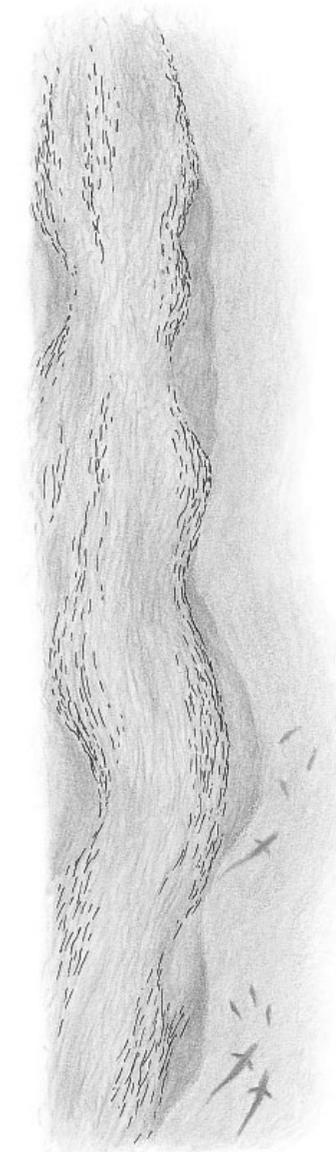


Illustration by Tom Waters

When trolling a weed line, the author likes to "spice" the area with live chum to stir up action. By the time he turns around and retraces his course, the fish may be ready to hit his trolled offerings.

big kings.

When he's not guiding clients to light-tackle catches from the Sailfish Marina in Palm Beach, Captain Greg Bogdan can be found chasing tuna in the canyons off Maryland and New Jersey. He often rallies the yellowfins by live-chumming with spearing (silversides), small silver mullet or peanut bunker.

Tuna Plan

Bogdan starts by culling the smaller live baits that will be used for chum and places them in a separate live well. Baits larger than four inches, which will be cast out on heavy spinning tackle or free-lined on 30- and 50-pound-test conventional tackle, are placed in a second

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Chum baits often seek the company of their hooked comrades, creating a mini bait ball that really gets the attention of offshore game fish. Baits that gather under the boat hull can have the same effect.

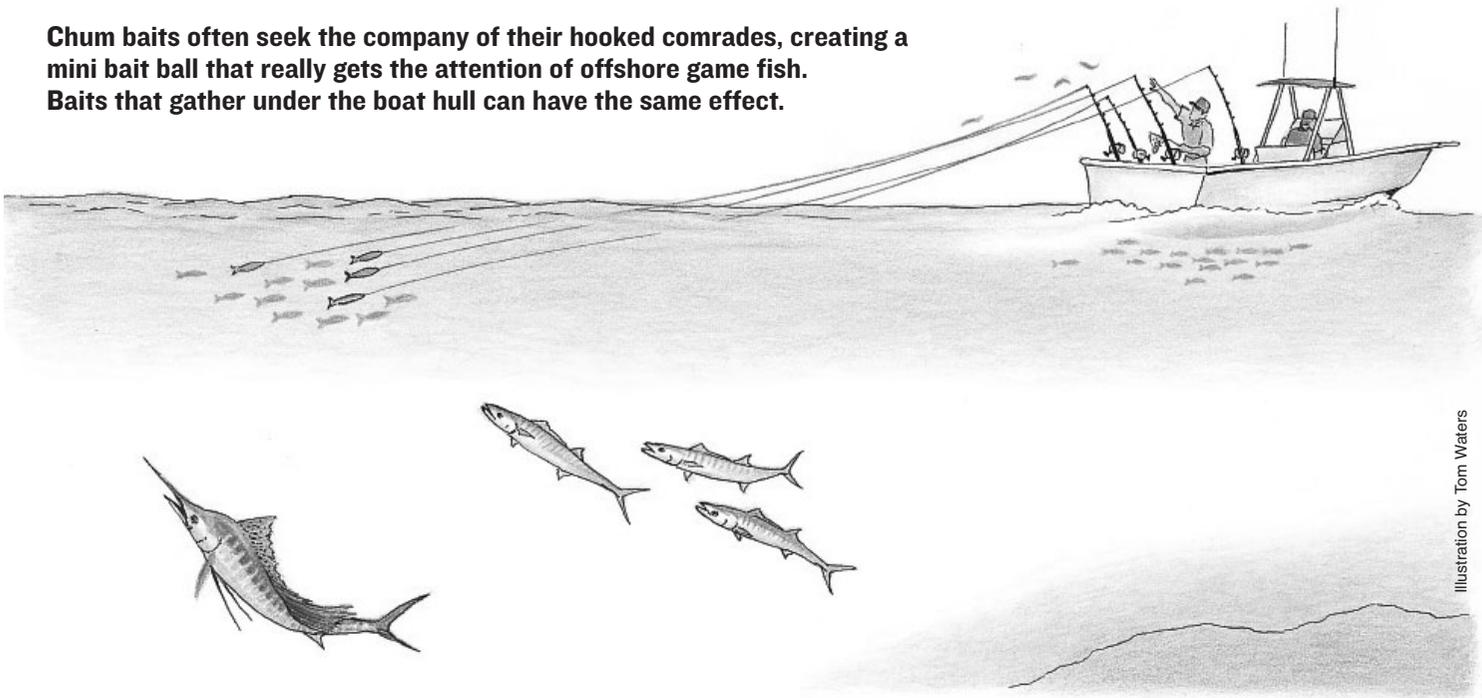


Illustration by Tom Waters

live well.

“I’ll first troll around in the daytime and look for tuna,” says Bogdan. “If I see tuna on my fishfinder, or get a couple bites on the troll, I’ll throw out a dipnet full of baits. If it’s windy, we’ll move upwind of the markings on our fishfinder or tie off to a lobster pot, then toss out the live chum.

“Half the baits will swim away and get eaten, while the others stay by the boat. In any case, the yellowfins go mad. They’ll come up top and start busting on these baits. We’ll then pitch out the hooked baits and have a blast. It’s incredible how well live-chumming works in the canyons for yellowfins, bigeyes and longfins. We’ve even caught dolphin and white marlin this way.”

Bogdan reports that he’ll stop chumming prior to sunset, then chunk through the evening. At daybreak he’ll start live-chumming again, which often sparks a major tuna blitz.

Is live-chumming really worth

the effort? If you’ve had any experience with this tactic, you know that it’s sometimes the only way to score. Outlined above are just a few examples of how deadly the technique can be. No doubt you can figure out how the concept may

apply to your fishing. It may take some time to round up enough livies for a serious chumming effort, but the results will more than make up for the effort. In this case, a little of the right stuff really does go a long way!

King mackerel are often lured to the boat and into feeding aggressively by live chumming.

