

---

## ***Guest Writer*** – Ian 'Big E' Phillips

### **Fishing with Soft Plastics**

#### **Starting out with soft plastics for Flathead**

Fishing with soft plastics for species like Flathead has become a very popular way to fish these days & I am going to outline a few tips. I don't feel there is a right or a wrong way to fish plastics & some days the fish will strike any plastic on just about any type of retrieve & other days are very fussy about retrieve speed & lure type / colour. There are many colours & types of soft plastics on the market these days but I will just cover a few of my most commonly used types here. Fishing soft plastics is a fun way & a very challenging way to fish & once you start having success it gets very addictive. It's currently my favorite way of fishing & hopefully after this you may decide to give it a go yourself. My main target on soft plastics is flathead so this is the species I will cover. This is just a starting point & there are many factors & methods which come in to being a good plastics fisherman & hopefully this article will help point you in the right direction.

#### **Tackle**

##### **Rods**

To fish successfully with soft plastics you need a rod that will give good distance with the small weights used. A threadline or baitcaster reel can be used for this type of fishing so the rod needs to suit that type of reel. Most of the jigs I cast are either 3/8th ounce or 1/2 ounce. The rod needs to have a light & sensitive tip without being too light, otherwise it will affect the working of the plastic, but with enough power in the butt to stop big flathead. The breaking strain of leaders most commonly used varies from 2 kilo through to 4 kilo, so it needs to be suitable for this class of line. I also use fluoro carbon in the same breaking strain when fish are timid or quiet. I mentioned the breaking strain of the leaders instead of the line as I use 2 pound Fins to 10 pound Fins & both of these break well above the rated breaking strain, so pick a rod to suit the leader more than the actual breaking strain of the main line. I prefer a carbon fibre or graphite rod myself as they cast well & provide excellent "feel" when used with Braided lines. There are many suitable rods on the market & they range in price from \$100 to \$600. I cannot name specific rods at this stage but all I can say is buy the best rod you can afford. It needs to be light to medium weight & have quality guides on it with preferably a cork grip as this transmits gentle takes better than hypalon or other grip materials. The length is personal preference again depending on the type of area you will be fishing. I use 2 types of outfits, the threadline is a 7 foot rod and the baitcaster is a 5 foot 6 inch rod, it is a bit more powerful than my 7 footer. When buying a rod weight is very important as fishing soft plastics generally involves a lot of casting & a heavy rod will soon tire your wrists out.

##### **Reels**

As for reels I prefer to use a Shimano Catala 200 baitcaster or a Phluger Trion President threadline for my soft plastics fishing. They are very suitable for this type of work & very reasonably priced. They have an excellent drag system & lay the line very evenly which is important when using braid. There are other brands available that will do the job, so it's up to your own liking and your favorite brand. A metal spool is a must as are coated bail rollers as braid will rapidly wear away the lip of a graphite spool & cut a groove in a soft bail roller. Again weight is important so look for a nice light reel.

##### **Main Line**

In my opinion a braid line like Fins or Platil Millennium braided line is by far & away the best type of line for fishing soft plastics. The very thin diameters allow for long distance casts with the almost

non existent stretch makes for instant "feel" of a touch on the lure. I use Fins in 2 pound for long distance casting on my threadline outfit & 6 - 10 pound Fins on my baitcaster. I prefer the "yellow" Fluro Green so I can watch the line on the waters surface as the jig sinks & detect takes. I think normal mono line runs a very poor second to the lines mentioned above for this type of fishing. A point I would like to make is rinse the line on the reel well after each trip as salt gets trapped in these lines & can lead to spool corrosion.

## Leaders

I always use a leader when I am fishing soft plastics. The reason is the mainlines mentioned above are very visible in the water & these can spook fish so a thin less visible leader is important particularly in clear shallow water, and braid lines are not as easy to tie knots in as monofilament line. I use Platypus Pre Test, Superflex Pre Test or a good quality Fluro Carbon for my leaders & I use 1, 2, 3 & 4 kilo breaking strains depending on where and when I am fishing. I find it has excellent knot strength & is very fine for its breaking strain. It wears well & I have no knot problems when I join it to my main line.

## Bits & Pieces

A couple things you need as well is a "Worm proof" tackle box to store your soft plastics in. They will eat away at normal plastic boxes. Do not mix different colours of plastics together or the colours will run into each other. A small pair of nail clippers or a pair of surgical scissors are very handy for trimming knots. A diamond hone should be carried for touching up jig hook points. I always use Duo clips for attaching my jigs to the leader as they make changing jigs easy, but points to remember are they are not rust proof & should be discarded after the fishing session or they may fail. They come in packets of 10. Last but not least is a bottle of Spike IT scent. I don't think that the scent on your plastics is VERY important, but the colour contrast does make the difference & I have found that Spike It is easy to use & last for ages. I use the "game fish" scent in either red or hot pink & only dip the tail of my soft plastic into it as per instructions on the bottle. Immersing the whole plastic affects the rubber & they can split or fall apart. Now for the nitty gritty

## Jigs

I use only 1 brand of jig heads & these are AusSpin. The reason I use only this brand is for the sharpness, strength & length of the hooks. They are extremely sharp & this is very important when fishing soft plastics even more so than in other forms of fishing. They don't come cheap but are well worth the money for the increased hook up rates. There are plenty of cheaper brands around & if you must use them make sure you get the point really sharp before using them. AusSpin 3/8oz #4/0 & #6/0 Shad jig head is a great size for most shad style plastics to fish edges and into mid water depths allowing slower retrieves & with the bigger hook size for slightly bigger profile plastics, long shank Mustard Aberdeen chemically sharp black nickel hooks get to the rear of the plastic for a better hook up rate with excellent quality finish, and they are Australian made. Below are some pictures of my most commonly used jig head.

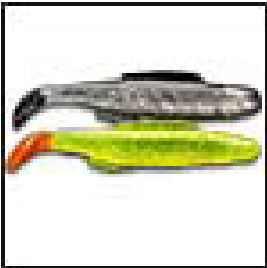
**Length:** #4/0 & #6/0    **Weight:** 3/8oz

**Average Depth:** medium, deep

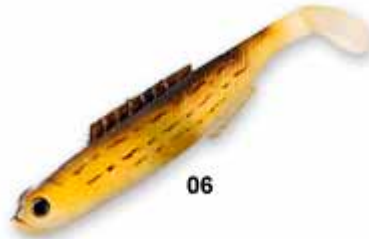


## Soft Plastic Baits

As I mentioned previously there are many different brands, colours & sizes of soft plastics available & they will all take fish if used correctly. Once you start using plastics your collection will grow like mine has but I'm just going to mention a few of my more commonly used types & colours that are consistently successful for me. The brands I use most are RipTide, Mann's, Berkeley, Cocohoe & Softies. Under most circumstances I prefer a soft plastic bait of 3 inches to 4 inches, when I'm chasing Flathead the bigger the better. I have found using too small a plastic for Flathead results in a lot of small or undersize fish. Below are pictures of some of my favorites. The selection below is only a small sample of the soft plastics available.



**Cocohoe Minnow**



**Berkley® Saltwater Power® Mullet**



**Mann's® HardNose™ Mullet Soft Plastic Bait**



**RipTide® Curtailer**



**RipTide® Mullet**

This should give you an idea of what has worked for me in the past & provide an idea of what to buy to get yourself started off. I have the above soft plastics in many different colours & they all have taken fish at some stage or another. A rule of thumb is to use dark colours on dark days & light colours on bright days & mostly this will work. Don't be afraid to experiment with different types & colours. Often I have changed from a paddle tail in say Amber to a wriggle tail in Amber & just the different action in the tail was enough to get fish going & produce several fish in the same water I had been fishing for no result. Always take a few types & colours along with you to give yourself the best chance of success.

## Rigs & tips for fishing soft plastic baits

### Soft Plastic Rigs

#### Main Line - Leader - Jig

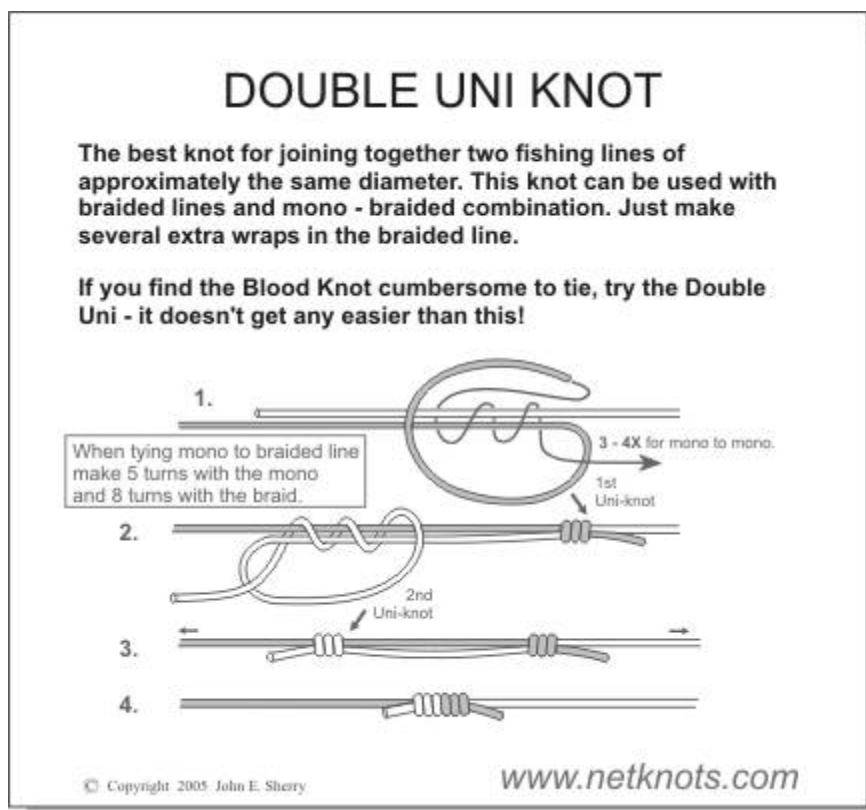
The rig I use for when I'm setting up my rod for soft plastics fishing is pretty simple but you need to take care with your knots when tying braids. The diagram below shows the leader knot I use & its simple to tie as well.

#### Double Uni-Knot

A better join can be made using the Double Uni-Knot.

This is a knot used for attaching the main line to the leader.

- Overlap the two lines for about 15cm.
- Using one end, form a circle that overlies both lines.
- Pass the end six times around the two lines.
- Pull the end tight to draw the knot up into shape.
- Repeat the process using the end of the other line.
- Pull both lines to slide the two knots together.



## **Rigging Soft Plastic**

It is VERY important to put your soft plastic on the hook properly. A few extra seconds taken here can make all the difference between getting strikes & not getting strikes. The plastic bait must lay straight & not be bunched up & the hook must be central in the bait or it will interfere with the action & not swim correctly. The soft plastic bait MUST have action both as it sinks & as it is retrieved to be really successful. Some plastics if not correctly rigged will still swim in a fashion on the retrieve but do nothing or just spiral as they sink. You need to have that tail working hard as they sink as flathead especially will strike as it is sinking provided it looks life like. Start by measuring your soft plastic alongside the jig head & take note of where the hook will need to exit the body in order for it to be straight & not bunched or stretched when the front of it is sitting against the head of the jig. Most plastics have a seam running along the centre in line with the tail so this shows where the hook needs to come through to be central & line up with the tail as well. Start the hook point in the centre of the plastic & thread it round the hook making sure to keep it central & bring the hook point out through the seam & you should have your plastic then laying nice & straight & not bunched up or stretched.

## **Retrieves**

What is the "right" way to retrieve a soft plastic? The answer is simple, there isn't one! I take fish on many types of retrieves but I think the biggest factor that makes the difference between success & failure is the speed. Soft plastics work best when used SLOWLY. Using them too fast I think is the main cause of people not being successful. I can't tell you what speed to wind the handle you have to learn it. I can only suggest getting a rigged plastic in the pool or in the river & watching it. You only need to move it enough to get the tail working to provide some action & that is all that's needed speed wise to get strikes, get used to that speed then add a few gentle lift & drop actions with the rod & your on your way. Keep experimenting until you get hits. Don't fall into the trap of sticking with one type of retrieve if your not getting strikes, vary it every few casts until you find something that works. A tip when your targeting flathead is give the rod a good hard rip to lift the jig well off the bottom then let it drop again & that really works with Flathead. Just remember keep varying that retrieve & try everything from a dead slow straight one through to a faster jigging type until you find what the fish respond too. In colder water try fishing the plastic very slowly & the same goes for murky water as well. Fish will often take a plastic sitting stationary on the bottom so give it a pause from time to time as well.

## **Fishing Methods**

### **Flathead**

If you are looking for a fish to start off with I suggest the Flathead. They love eating soft plastics. When you want to catch Flathead I suggest using a plastic at least 75mm (3 inch) in length. If you use smaller you will be plagued by small & undersize flatties. Trust me you will get enough littlies on 75mm plastics & remember you pretty well can't go too big for flathead. I don't use any special leader when after them just my "standard". Provided you keep a Flathead's head under the waters surface he won't saw you off, I've taken Flatties to 101cm on 2 kilo leaders & had no problems at all.

Fish any of the normal areas you would for flathead, along the edges of channels, drop-offs & around weed beds on sandbanks. I generally like to fish the falling tide. Remember flathead generally face into the current so its important to retrieve your lure in the same direction the current is running rather than against it. Try working the jig over the top of weeds as well as along the edges. Use the appropriate size jig head that will get to the bottom under the conditions. I use a pretty active retrieve most of the time when I'm targeting flathead & mix that up with the odd dead slow straight retrieve. I jig the soft plastic back by starting off with the rod horizontal & sharply lifting it to about 60 degrees then lowering the rod tip, taking in slack while I wind the reel. Every few cast I will just retrieve the jig slowly without applying any type of action at all. Mix it up a bit until you find what's working on the day. I don't think flathead are as particular & fussy about the type of retrieve, but you still need to be putting your soft plastic down there where the flathead lives. The bite is

generally a hard bump or 2 then you feel the fish's weight on the end. Strike as soon as you feel the fish's weight & you shouldn't miss too many. This is a starting point for catching flathead on soft plastics & good sport is not restricted to boat fishing either. I recommend it for a bit of fun.

