

Tips for Fishing the Carolina Rig

By M.L. Anderson



Carolina rigs are known for catching big bass.

The Carolina rig is a favorite with tournament pros because you can cover a lot of water while keeping the presentation subtle. If you want to, you can slow down and finesse it around a rock or a stump, or you can quickly drag it down a point. You can even pop a Carolina rig down a cliff or finesse it through heavy cover. Shallow to deep, fast to slow, tiny bait to giant plastics, the Carolina rig has you covered in an endless variety of situations.

First of all, the Carolina rig is simply a weight, a swivel, and a leader. The length of the leader varies – I've known guys who fish with a 4-inch leader one day and a 4-foot leader the next. The general rule of thumb is: the tougher the bite, the longer the leader. The weight also varies greatly, and egg sinkers are popular. Some guys put a bead between the swivel and the weight because the knot can get damaged by the weight smacking into it over and over. The rule I use with weights is easy: the deeper I'm fishing, or the heavier the cover, the bigger the weight. You have to be able to get to the bottom, and you also need to be able to feel the rig once it's down there.

Tip #1 – Gear for big weights

Bass Fishing Hall of Famer Mike Folkestad recommends a high speed reel and a fairly stout rod for Carolina rig fishing, especially with heavy weights. You need power to get hooksets on deep, heavy rigs and you need speed to get the fish to the boat without giving him any slack. A 6'6" medium heavy rod is ideal for 3/8- to 1-ounce weights, and you can use 15-pound-test line. A lot of fishermen use slightly lighter line for the leader.

Tip #2 – Gear for light weights

You may think that if you fish a Carolina rig with light weights, you are basically just split-shotting. This isn't true because in a Carolina rig the weight slides freely, so when the fish picks up the bait, he often doesn't even know the weight is there. Folkestad uses a medium action spinning rod when he's fishing in shallow water, clear water, or under really tough conditions. He'll use a 3/16-ounce mojo weight as a standard, and moves up and down from there.

Tip #3 – Bait size

If you're fishing crystal clear water or super tough conditions, go with a smaller bait like a small Yamamoto grub, a reaper, or a 4-inch lizard or Senko. Size your hooks accordingly. When you've got a limit or the fishing is good, break out the big baits – six inches or more to try for a kicker.



The Carolina Keeper holds your weight in place, plus it's adjustable.

Tip #4 – Terminal Tackle

Most of the time a barrel swivel is used for Carolina rigs, but a Carolina Keeper is a small cylinder with a slit in the center that you can use instead of a swivel. You simply squeeze the Keeper with your needle nose pliers – keep the slit perpendicular to the jaws of the pliers - and squeeze until the slit opens enough for the line to go through. Slide it on the line without letting go of the pliers until it is in place. Slide the weight on the line first, then the Keeper. This makes your Carolina rig adjustable. Just make sure you squeeze it open before moving it up or down the line.

Tip #5 – Hooks

Go with the lightest wire hook you can get away with for the size of the bait you are using. The whole point of a Carolina rig is that the bait sort of flutters and floats around behind the weight. When you pull the rig, the bait jerks forward, then it begins to drift down when you stop moving it. A thick wire hook makes the bait sink too fast, so use a good hook, but a light one.



Gary Senft at Bartlett Lake with a Carolina rig.

Tip #6 – Leader length

This is the big question. How long should your leader be? I've seen guys fish a leader as long as 5 feet and as short as 2 inches. The short answer is: the tougher the bite, the longer the leader. Also, the leader needs to take the cover into account. If you are fishing an area with a lot of thick weeds and you want your lure to run over the top, make sure your leader is long enough to allow for that. A slightly shorter leader is easier to use if you're fishing a lot of trees – use a two-foot leader and bring the weight right up to the tree, inch it up, then shake it a couple of times and give it some slack as it falls down the near side of the tree. This is one of the few instances where you'll feel a fish just hammer a Carolina rig.

Tip #7 – The bite

Most of the time on a Carolina rig, you really won't feel a bite. The fish will just be there – you'll feel weight when you try to move the rod, or the fish may tug back. Set the hook instantly – don't give him a chance to drop the bait.

Tip #8 – Technique

The best way to fish a Carolina rig is to simply drag it on the bottom. You don't need to hop it around or lift it at all. With a big stout rod and a heavy weight, you can throw the rig a very long way. Keep your spool open until the rig hits bottom, then just take up the slack. Once the line is taut, move the Carolina rig by pulling the rod to the side, keeping the weight on the bottom. When you've pulled as far as you can, return the rod to the original position, reeling up the slack as you go. You should end up with taut line again. Just keep doing that over and over until you need to re-cast. At some point, when you go to pull the rod to the side, it will feel heavy – like you've hooked a rubber band. When that happens, set the hook!

Tip #9 – Hookset

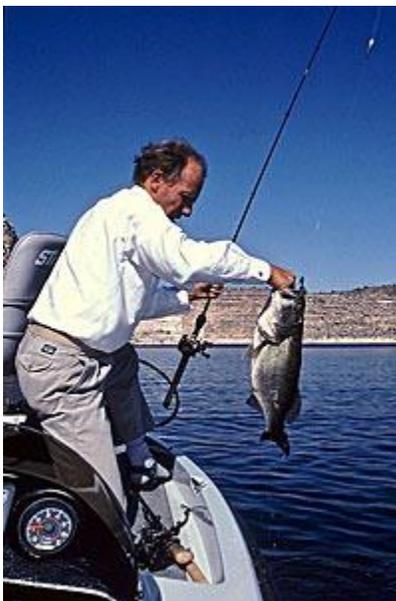
With a lot of line out and that heavy weight, setting the hook requires a lot of power. One thing I learned in martial arts applies here: speed is power. The instant you feel that heaviness, set the hook hard by turning your body and jerking the rod to the side at the same time. Keep reeling hard so you don't give the fish any slack. Now is when having good sharp hooks and good line pays off.

Tip #10 Line

Mono is not the best choice for a Carolina rig unless you choose something without a lot of stretch – like Berkley Big Game. 15-pound-test Big Game is great Carolina rig line. A lot of guys also use fluorocarbon or braid. You should experiment with different line and stick with the one that suits your style. I use Big Game because I hate braid and never use it for anything, and I don't think I need the expense of fluorocarbon when the 15-pound Big Game works so well. If the bite is super tough or you're fishing shallow or clear water, a fluorocarbon leader might be the ticket.

Tip #11 Where to fish

The Carolina rig is an excellent bait for covering water. It's not usually as fast as a crankbait or spinnerbait, but it can definitely cover water quickly, even when you're fishing deep. Go to a point and fan cast it just like you would a crankbait. Fish them down points, along ledges, down the center of cuts, over and around humps, and even down cliffs – I know a guy who uses a 4-inch leader and a craw and bounces that thing down cliffs. He catches a lot of fish that way, and it's a dynamite way to figure out how deep they are.



This big one took a green pumpkin lizard at Lake Pleasant.

Tip #12 Baits

The king of the Carolina rig baits in Arizona's reservoirs is a green lizard. Guys have been catching giant limits on that bait for decades, literally. When the fish are finicky, we go to reapers or grubs. There are also a lot of great floating baits out there, like the ones at necotackle.com. A floating bait puts a whole new twist on the Carolina rig because it never sinks back to the bottom. Instead, it darts forward, then stops, then darts down and forward again. These baits can be killer, especially on muddy bottoms or places where the bottom is covered in grass or weeds.

Tip #13 Weights

The egg sinker is cheap and effective for Carolina rigs and it comes in a variety of sizes. People also use cylindrical mojo weights and regular old bullet sinkers as well. The key is to use the heaviest weight you can get away with so you're not wasting a ton of time waiting for the darn thing to hit bottom. An Arizona man named Rob Vanderkooi used to just slay 'em on Carolina rigs all the time. I'm talking 42 pounds for six fish limit! A rule of thumb he told me was this: for fishing 8-12 feet deep, use a ½-ounce weight. Over that, use ¾. He kept his leaders at 4 to 5 feet long and he fished slowly. He'd fish as deep as 40 feet first thing in the morning when everyone else was throwing topwater.

The Carolina rig is an old school technique, but it is one of the most versatile rigs around. Next time the fish in your neck of the woods get lockjaw, tie one on and see what happens.