

How to use a gill net

In the past few years there has been a shift here towards the use of gill nets for obtaining bait for catfishing instead of cast nets. There are several ways a gill net differs from a cast net. One is the ease of use. A gill net is easily set and retrieved and does not require learning a throw like a cast net does. A gill net also catches a certain target size range of fish only, allowing smaller fish to pass through and larger ones to hopefully turn out of the net without becoming entrapped. In addition gill nets are not as often lost in a snag as cast nets are. A separate license, in addition to your fishing license, is required to use a gill net. [HERE](#) is a list of places where the license can be purchased. The fee is currently \$9. Licenses can also be purchased directly from the VMRC by calling (757) 247-2265.

RIGGING

When rigging a net, a marker float with the owners licensing information is placed at each end of the floating rope. They can be store bought floats or home made, such as a section cut from a large foam swimming pool noodle or large empty jugs. Just be sure they are of sufficient size and sturdiness to keep the net, including anchor weights afloat should the net be pulled or drift into deeper water. In addition to the markers, any extra identifying or marking information is set by the [VMRC & VDGIF](#), such as flags and float color. At each end of the bottom leaded rope an anchoring weight is placed. These can be removable if desired to allow the net to be set in deeper water and drift with the current. Anchor weights can vary from a few ounces on up to several pounds. Mine are 5 lbs each and removable.

SETTING A GILL NET

Use caution when setting your gill net. It is best done with two people, one to run the boat and the other to set and retrieve the net. While letting the net out be careful of your hands or feet becoming tangled in the mesh. The net will snag just about any irregularity it drags across like buttons, zippers, rings, wristwatches, and lots of other things commonly worn. You could very easily be pulled overboard and tangle up in the net making swimming impossible. Take it slow and use some common sense. When bringing the net back in be careful not to run over top of the net with the boat and wrap it around the prop.

A gill net is set by dropping one end in the water, usually on a flat in 5-10 ft of water, then backing the boat away while letting net out to hang like a curtain in the water. When the end of the net is reached the weight and float on that end are dropped overboard as well and the boat is backed away. **DO NOT SET A NET IN A CHANNEL OR WHERE IT MAY BE HIT BY ANOTHER BOAT.** Fish collide with the net and become trapped by the netting encircling their heads and hanging up behind the gills. The net is picked back up reverse of how it was set and the trapped baitfish are removed as the net is brought back aboard. I have a 3ft x 1 inch PVC pipe with a hook on one end I use to reach down and grab the end of the float rope near one of the marker floats so I don't have to risk leaning way out to recover it. Nets for gizzard shad are normally only set for a very short time. 5-15 minutes max and monitored carefully for signs of fish. I have seen a couple dozen shad in a net in less than 5 minutes. It usually takes a longer soak in the winter than in the summer to get enough shad for bait, but not always. Try and be responsible with the resource. Better to bring the net in too soon and have to set it a second time to get enough bait than to have way too much that will go to waste. I try to give any excess to other fisherman either on the water or at the ramp on the way home.

A short soak time also allows enough time to release untargeted species such as catfish and striper before they die. Care must be taken to not harm untargeted species when removing them

from the net. This sometimes means a couple strands of the netting must be broken to free a fish without damaging its gills. A fish with injured gills is not likely to survive a release. The netting can easily be patched with some monofilament later. Just hang the net stretched out in the yard, and find the holes. Snip off any loose strands of netting in the holes while noting where the loose strands were attached at each end. Replace the cut strands with some 12 lb mono. Any knot will do as long as it is secure. I just use a couple of overhand knots on each side of the repair. Large holes or tears are more difficult to repair. It's usually easier to just trim away the loose strands of netting around the damage and bring the sides of a large hole or tear together and use mono to tie them to each other. It will cause the net to hang a little funny, but won't effect its bait catching ability as badly as a large hole will. [HERE](#) is my article on gill net repair.

The size fish a gill net catches is determined by the size of the mesh. The size mesh in the nets most people use for shad will not catch anything smaller than about 8 inches. A cast net is the better option for gathering smaller shad, or when collecting bait from shore since a boat is usually required to set a gill net. A lot of times we will set the gill net, then start throwing the cast net for the smaller shad while waiting to pull the gill net.

REMOVING YOUR CATCH



Removing shad can be a little tricky because of the saw like keel on the underside of a gizzard shad. The net is often snagged well back on this keel as well as being hooked behind one or both gills. The first thing to do is figure out which side of the net the fish is on and position the shad so that it is laying on top of the net, not under it. Usually the net can be simply stretched off of the gills and the fish backed out or rotated back to free the net from the keel if it is snagged there too. Another method is to push the shad forwards, forcing it through the net to free it. This will sometimes damage the netting and works best with smaller sized gizzards. The option of last resort is to break a few strands of netting, which will create a small hole to patch later. If it is a fish you intend to release back into the river, such as a striper or bass be careful not to harm the fish as you unhook its gills. Keep your fingers out of them. It may be best to just go ahead and break or snip a few strands of net as to not harm the fish.

<http://sites.google.com/site/catfishingonthejames/gillnets>
