

Those Deadly Dredges!

by George Poveromo

An effective trolling spread relies on the angler's ability to properly rig only the freshest baits or most realistic lures, then position them to cover a broad swath of ocean. After that, the lines and trolling speed must be tweaked to make sure the baits perform their best. Everything must appear realistic or you'll end up taking a long and uneventful boat ride.



To further enhance the illusion, teasers are often deployed. The radical splashing, diving and darting characteristics of certain teasers create the appearance of a feeding frenzy in progress, in addition to increasing the number of baits in the water, all of which helps to attract game fish and often coaxes them into striking.

Outside of Mold Craft's Fish Fender teasers – modified boat fenders that dive ten feet or more beneath the surface – the majority of teasers on the market perform on or slightly beneath the surface. But one of the latest and hottest subsurface fish-attractors is the dredge teaser. Whether it's trolled off the Northeast, Florida, the Bahamas, the Gulf of Mexico or Southern California, the dredge has proven to be a potent fish-raiser. And the word is spreading rapidly!

What Is It?

A dredge teaser creates the illusion of a large, tightly bunched school of bait swimming frantically between two and six feet beneath the surface. Unlike most teasers and daisy chains that splash along on the surface and appear as a silhouette to game fish below, the dredge teaser presents the three-dimensional illusion of a large, underwater bait ball attempting to take shelter below the boat hull. In addition, the swimming vibrations emitted by the hookless baits also draws the attention of game fish. Similar to traditional teasers, a fish will rise to the dredge, setting up an opportunity for the angler to drop back a hooked bait.



(above) J&M Tackle rigs Tournament Cable dredges with Mannhaden teasers and Clark Number 5 spoons for a flashy presentation. (left) Mann's Bait Company also produces the Ultimate 'Hoo, a paddle-tail teaser that performs well on dredges.

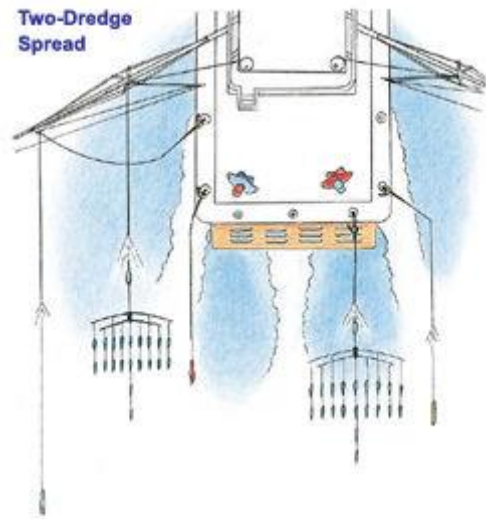
Resembling an oversized mobile, a dredge is composed of stainless or titanium arms with "droppers" that accept single or tandem-rigged hookless teasers. The longer center dropper positions one or more teasers behind the others on the dredge, lending the appearance of weaker members of the bait school. A dredge can range from a fairly simple, 18-inch-diameter, four-arm version equipped with anywhere from eight to 20 teasers to a massive 36-inch-diameter, six-arm version with as many as 30 teasers. Double dredges – two dredges rigged in tandem on one line – are also quite popular.

Depending on the size of the dredge and the fishing situation, the tow line can be as simple as 60 feet of 200-pound monofilament with an in-line trolling sinker (weight varies based on desired depth) and a snap swivel that attaches to the dredge. A section of rope at the forward end of the tow line allows it to be secured to a cleat. For large dredges that create a

lot of drag, special curved-butt “dredge rods” equipped with large reels spooled with 200- to 300-pound line are often used.

How to Fish ‘Em

As a general rule, dredges are deployed when game fish are concentrated in a particular area. Because of the excessive drag they generate when pulled through the water, coupled with the fact that they must remain underwater to create the “bait-ball” illusion and prevent tangles, high-speed, search-trolling missions are best left to lures and skirted baits. Dredges perform best when trolled at speeds below six knots, with their running depth controlled by the boat speed and the size of the trolling weight. It’s a slow-troller’s teaser, one that’s ideal for fishing among a spread of natural baits – especially ballyhoo, mullet and live baits such as goggle-eyes, blue runners and menhaden.



Large boats with multiple crewmen should be able to fish two dredges with little problem.

Dredges are usually fished somewhat close to the transom and in the clean water outside of the prop wash. Many anglers run the tow lines through the lower outrigger eyes before attaching the dredges. Dredges are typically run from 20 to 40 feet behind the transom, although boats with towers often drop them farther back. The object is to fish the dredge as far back and as deep as possible, while still maintaining a clear and unobstructed view of the rig. Large boats with adequate manpower often deploy a dredge from each corner of the cockpit, while anglers aboard small boats and center consoles generally troll just one. When the boat banks on a turn, the dredge teaser on the inside dips lower, while the one on the opposite side rises – an action that drives game fish wild.

Unlike ordinary teasers that are removed from the water when a fish rises to them, the drag of a dredge (the larger ones generate more than 30 pounds of drag) makes this impossible. Instead, the dredge remains in place and it becomes the angler’s responsibility to either pitch a bait back to the fish or adjust one that’s already in the spread so that the fish will see it. Sometimes the angler must repeatedly reel the bait ahead of the dredge and free-spool it past the fish to get its attention. This is a common tactic for white marlin and sailfish that refuse to leave the dredge.

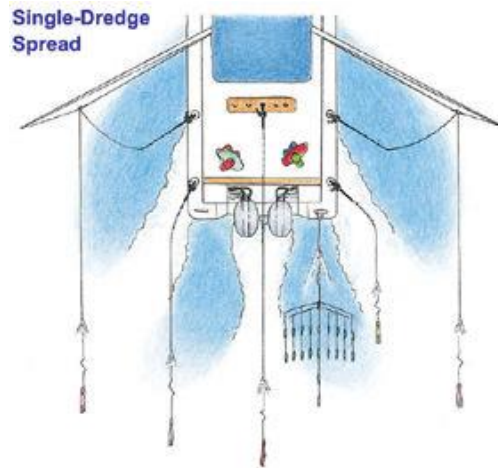
Dredge Drawbacks

The disadvantages of dredges include their vulnerability to snagging weeds, the labor involved in rigging and replacing the numerous baits (especially on dredges armed with natural baits), and the extra expense of a dredge rod and reel. Also, there is the difficulty of storing them, although some newer, folding versions have eliminated this problem. Regardless of the drawbacks, more and more anglers are becoming convinced of their effectiveness.

Bryan Bennett at J&M Tackle in Orange Beach, Alabama, has seen a big upsurge in the use of dredge teasers along his section of the coast. "The dredges are really catching on," says Bryan. "We're selling more of them and getting more orders to build custom dredge rods. On a boat out of Perdido Pass, for example, a mate had a blue marlin come up on a dredge teaser, and he had difficulty getting the fish away from it! They finally caught the blue, a 300-pounder, on a mackerel they dropped back. The dredges are really something on white marlin, too, and the tuna guys are also doing well with them around the canyons and oil rigs."

Dredge teasers became popular with crews trolling for sailfish in Mexico, where the mates painstakingly dress the rigs with hookless natural baits such as chin-weighted mullet or ballyhoo. Natural-bait dredges are so time-consuming to rig and maintain that many tournament teams hire mates whose sole function is to tend the dredges. While stories of such labor-intensive tackle might deter many anglers from trying dredges, Bryan Bennett says the advent of quality artificial ballyhoo and menhaden baits has made dredges much more fisherman-friendly. J&M Tackle carries a wide selection of Tournament Cable dredges, including some rigged with Calcutta Bully Hoos, Mold Craft Tuff Hoos and Mann's Ultimate 'Hoos or Mannhaden teasers. "The new artificial baits have so much action that a lot of natural-bait guys are going with them," says Bryan. "If you saw a video of these dredges in action and didn't know you were looking at artificials, you wouldn't know they weren't real. They look just like a real school of fish.

"Two of our most popular dredge teasers are the Mannhaden double dredge and the Bully Hoo dredge. The Mannhaden double dredge features 13 eight-inch Mannhaden teasers with one 11-inch teaser bringing up the rear of the second dredge. Because of the paddle tails on these baits and their aggressive swimming action, we run just one off each dropper so as not to hinder their performance or cause a tangle. The Bully Hoo dredge can be tandem-rigged to carry more baits.



Here's a good setup for small to mid-sized boats with limited crews. Note the bait trolled right next to the dredge, which imitates a weak member of the school and can be dropped back to a game fish that has risen to the dredge.

“An interesting variation is partially rigging either dredge with Number 5 hookless Clark Spoons. We keep the Mannhaden or Bully Hoo teasers on the outside arms of the dredge and replace those on the inside droppers with the hookless spoons. It creates an incredible flash in the water and really draws species such as sailfish and marlin into the spread. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it worked on striped marlin and spearfish, too. We know it works on wahoo, and we’ve since been rigging the spoons on cable droppers to keep them from being eaten off the rig.”



The Ultimate Umbrella from Calcutta Baits tows a whopping 28 Bally Hoos. The six arms fold for easy storage.

One of the top makers of dredge teasers is Calcutta Baits. The company’s latest model is the Folding Ultimate Umbrella Dredge that’s available in 23- and 34-inch diameters and in four- and six-arm versions. The number of Bully Hoo teasers on each dredge ranges from 14 to 18 on the smaller versions, and from 22 to 30 on the larger versions. The arms are made of annealed stainless steel and fold easily into a 36-inch storage bag.

“This dredge teaser has been raising an incredible number of billfish and other game fish,” says Calcutta’s Howard Christians. “One time, while fishing off the west coast of Florida, we had 20 bites, mostly from blackfin tuna. Of those bites, 18 came off the dredge.

“When I fish dredges, I like my hook baits to be the same as the teaser baits on the dredge. For example, I’ll troll a like bait with a hook off to the side of the dredge to imitate a weak fish that’s trying to catch up to the school. I’ll even go as far as to alter the colour of the hook bait. If the dredge is rigged with blue Bully Hoos, for example, the hook bait will be green to make it stand out. Another trick I’ll sometimes use when trolling for billfish is to remove one or two of the center teasers. By doing so, I’ll get a tighter ball with just two teasers per dropper and no ‘weak’ bait lagging behind.”

Endless Applications

Thanks to modern artificial baits, dredge teasers should now be just as appealing to the masses of offshore fishermen as they are to the game fish themselves. In fact, many more opportunities to raise game fish could arise for those willing to give them a serious try. We know dredges have proven themselves on marlin, sailfish and tuna, and they’re bound to stir up dolphin as well. With a little tweaking, I can see them attracting wahoo and even king mackerel – right to where a well-placed hook bait or lure can be presented to them.

Dredges definitely have a lot of potential, so it’s small wonder they are fast becoming the latest “must-have” item on big-game boats around the world. J&M’s Bryan Bennett puts it in perspective: “Like every other piece of fishing equipment, the dredge teaser has a time and a place where it really shines. When the fish are in, it’s hard to find a better teaser anywhere. They definitely raise fish.”