

GET A GRIP!

There are right and wrong ways to handle your fish, says B.A.S.S. member **Steve Pitts**, who also has some nagging doubts about some of the latest crop of lip-grip devices

It is not for nothing that the bass is often described as a 'bristling' predator. Although the bass does not have sharp teeth, it is armed with some pretty formidable weaponry that can inflict painful injuries on those who mishandle it, as anyone who has handled a live one will testify, and they will probably have the scars to prove it.

First, the bass has two sharp points on the tip of each gill cover and around the edges. Additionally, on the cheek and behind the eye, there are vicious serrated projections that open out when the fish flares its gills.

Schoolies instinctively do this as a defence mechanism and larger fish never lose this inbuilt reaction, so grabbing a bass around the head is a sure-fire way to get the palm of your hand sliced open.

A safer way of restraining bass is to grip the lower jaw between your thumb and forefinger while supporting the fish with the other hand below its belly.

The dangers don't stop at the head end. Along its back the fish has eight or nine needle-sharp spines in its dorsal fin and a short but prickly spine to the fore of the rear dorsal. The bass is pretty adept at erecting these fins to protect itself. Any wound inflicted on the angler's hand will be sore for days, if not weeks.

Underneath, the two pelvic fins have a long spine along the leading edge, and the anal fin, set behind the vent, has three spines to stab the unwary.

Then there are the added dangers that arise when you have just landed your bass and have to extract the hook or hooks. Single hooks are not too much of a problem and the thumb and forefinger grip is usually sufficiently safe and secure to remove a large single bait hook or bass fly, but with many popular plugs sporting two or three trebles, that's another six to nine points of potential injury to be aware of.

The trusty thumb and forefinger grip is a recipe for disaster where the combination of ultra-sharp trebles and a

lively bass meet and I know of many anglers who have ended up in A&E after being attached to a wriggling fish via the 'spare' hooks on their lure.

Gripping devices

It is not surprising then, given the risks in handling and unhooking a bass, that many anglers are equipping themselves with lip-grip devices to minimise the chances of gashed hands and impaled fingers.

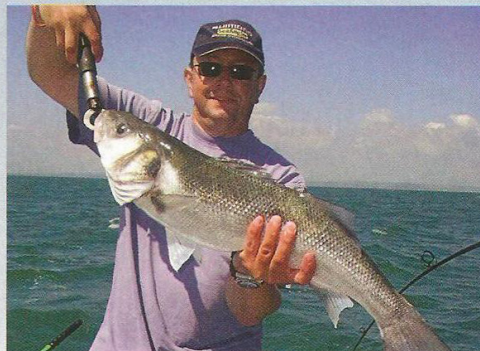
While these keep the sharp bits of fish and lure away from the angler they can cause harm to the bass if used incorrectly.

There are a growing number of lip-grippers on the market, ranging from budget versions resembling of a pair of plastic mole grips for about £15 to the Boga Grip at £100-plus.

Some models, it has to be said, have questionable design features, like the grip with serrated jaws designed to bite into the flesh of a fish's mouth. I guess this isn't too much of an issue if you're planning on inviting the fish home to tea, but if you want to release the bass shouldn't it be going back with as good a chance of survival as possible? A torn mouth or crushed jaw isn't going to do it any favours in the survival stakes. Grippers with rounded jaws or plastic caps over the ends of the gripper jaws are far less damaging.

Safe weighing

Another likely injury-inducing practice is weighing



Top: Clive Hodges keeps his hands out of danger



Above: Ouch! A hook in the thumb

the fish by using the built-in weigh scales fitted to some models.

Even if the jaws of the gripper are 'fish-friendly' the fish is likely to suffer jaw or spinal damage if it is hung by its full weight. Indeed, tests conducted by scientists in Australia on barramundi showed that lifting unsupported fish with lip-gripper devices altered the alignment of the vertebrae, which did not return to normal.

If you want to weigh your fish and return it in the best condition, then using

a wetted weigh sling is probably the safest way. For a quick trophy photo, supporting the fish with your hand under the belly is best.

The lip-gripper is then used to hold the fish in the water until it has recovered enough to swim off, and that's a sight that more and more bass anglers are coming to appreciate. **SA**

Paul Jennings uses the thumb and forefinger grip on this 9lb fish

