



THE JIG IS DOWN

Written & Photographed by Jim Dean

Lures don't have to be expensive to catch a lot of fish. Sometimes a simple Squirt, a type of tube jig, can be very productive.

*The only fish-getter I've ever seen that works better than a **Squirt** is likely to have a fuse sticking out of one end.*

No matter how serious we are about our fishing, or how wrapped up we get with high-tech tackle, cutting-edge techniques and expensive forays to chase exotic species, there inevitably comes a day when it dawns on us that we're not always getting a very good return on our investment. We're doing plenty of fancy fishing, but we're not doing much catching.

My nearly foolproof remedy for this situation is to put the horse back in front of the cart. I'm hungry for action, and I'm more than ready to sacrifice the arcane arts and crafts of the sport for some fish—make that lots of fish. The tackle and methods I choose are simple, and experience has proven that they will also be successful. One rod, one lure and one relaxing afternoon on the water should be all it takes to recalibrate my priorities. That one lure, by the way, is a small soft-plastic jig popularly called a “Squirt.”

I was introduced to these marvelous little lures one summer years ago when I was fishing with my old buddy Jack Avent on a small lake not far from my home in Raleigh. As usual, I had at least three or four casting rods and two spinning rods, but I had caught only two small bass while Jack was steadily cranking in fish using a single light spinning rod.

In addition to half a dozen decent large-mouth bass—including one that pushed 4 pounds—he was also catching bluegills, shellcrackers, crappies and the random yellow perch. Some of the bluegills and shellcrackers he'd caught would nearly overlap a dinner plate. I am normally a generous soul, happy to share in the good fortunes of others, but I had enjoyed about all of this I could stand.

“All right, I give up,” I barked. “Show me that thing you're using.”

“Why there's not much to it,” Jack allowed. “Just a little lead-head jig with a hollow



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soft-plastic head slipped over it that has sort of a wriggly skirt on the rear end. I added a soft curly tail. Fish seem to like it.”

Indeed they did, and what also impressed me was that Jack had chosen to use light tackle instead of the heavy bait-casting gear he typically prefers.

“I just wanted to catch fish today without having to work very hard,” he explained.

I borrowed a Squirt and tied it on my ultralight spinning outfit. I have no idea how many fish we wound up catching, but for the rest of the afternoon, we were often hooked up at the same time.

Obviously, this is not the kind of fishing that challenges an angler's lifetime of accumulated skills, but it certainly does rank high on the fun index. Since that day, I have acquired lots of Squirts in many colors, along with the tiny lead jig heads designed to use with them. These diminutive lures work well even if you don't add a curly tail, but they're more deadly if you do.

I have been a fan of light and ultralight spinning ever since this gear first began to appear many years ago. Until I learned about Squirts, I typically relied on Beetle Spins, which are essentially small-bladed spinnerbaits with soft-plastic bodies. I also used in-line bladed lures made by Mepps and Panther Martin, along with various conventional lures in small sizes such as Rebels and Rapalas. Some popular top-water lures are also available in ultra-light sizes. All are great lures that should be part of any light tackle enthusiast's arsenal. But, for my money, a Squirt is hard to beat.

Squirts are particularly good for panfish such as bluegills and shellcrackers, but they will catch any game fish found in ponds, and they are also deadly for panfish, crappies, bass and most other species on bigger water. I have used them successfully for white perch, white bass, and even hickory and American shad. In streams and rivers, they are killers for everything from

redbreast sunfish and Roanoke bass to smallmouths and pickerel, and because the hook point rides up, they are less likely to snag. I haven't tried them for rainbow or brown trout, but I believe they'd work great.

A handful of anglers are now even using them in salt water while fishing inshore holes and sloughs for gray and spotted seatrout, especially with those jig heads that have red hooks. It wouldn't surprise me to soon see lead-head Squirt jigs with stainless or plated hooks that won't rust.

If Squirts have any disadvantage, it may be that they aren't always the best choice for water much deeper than a dozen feet or so because they are small and relatively light. Crappie fishermen, however, have developed some tactics with Squirts that work well on big lakes. They fish them with a normal cast and slow retrieve when crappies are shallow or along the shoreline (a typical spawning pattern in early spring). However, when crappies are deep, fishermen often rig them beneath a float that allows the Squirt to slide freely until it reaches the desired depth where it is held there by a stopper (usually a knotted rubber band). The stopper knot can be moved up or down the line to vary the depth you want. This keeps the Squirt in the strike zone where your depth finder has indicated there may be schools of crappies. This deadly

tactic was developed years ago using small jigs that have marabou feather tails for species that are suspended or holding around structure, and it also works well with Squirts.

The soft-plastic Squirt bodies have a hollow head with wriggly appendages at the rear (sort of like a squid). They come in dozens of solid and multi-toned colors, and can be bought in packages of single or mixed colors. Most are 1 1/2 inches long, but some colors are available in a larger 2-inch length. The Squirt tubes, jigs and curly-tailed grubs are sold separately, but can usually be found together in tackle stores. The most popular-sized jig head is 1/16th of an ounce, but 1/32nd and 1/8th ounce heads are also available. The small curly-tailed grubs also come in lots of colors.

Because Squirts don't come assembled, you have to do it yourself, but the process is quick and easy once you get the hang of it. It may help to wet the jig head with saliva first, then slip the open end of the hollow soft-plastic Squirt tube over the lead jig head and work it down until it covers the jig head. You may have to wiggle the Squirt head a bit to get it fully seated, and I find it helps to hold the Squirt at an angle as I'm sliding it onto the jig head to keep it from snagging on the upturned eye of the hook. Once seated, the eye of the hook will easily penetrate the side of the

Squirt when you push against it. Then, you pull the wriggly appendages aside, and attach the curly-tailed grub. I often bite off a bit of the fat front portion of the grub to get a better, more streamlined fit.

There are so many colors and combinations available that you may wonder which to choose. It's hard to beat a solid white or silvery-gray sparkle body and curly tail for crappies, but some fishermen like a red or black head. I find it hard to beat chartreuse for most species, so I'm most likely to combine a curly-tail of that color with a Squirt body that has chartreuse appendages and either a green, black or red head.





Even so, I have successfully used many other color combinations, including speckled pumpkinseed, and I like dark colors such as black or blue in murky water.

A slow, steady retrieve that keeps the curly tail quivering is often best—not too fast or the lure may twirl. I also often give the lure an intermittent hopping motion, pausing occasionally to let it sink. In deeper water, I will let it sink awhile before I begin my retrieve, and if I consistently find fish at a certain depth, I'll use a countdown to get the Squirt where I want it.

My favorite rod for Squirts is a light 6-foot graphite spinning rod designed for 4- to 6-pound test monofilament (I prefer 4-pound test because it's a perfect match for the 1/16th-ounce jigs I typically use). I also have an old soft-action 5 1/2-foot fiberglass ultralight rod that's fun to use. If you're catching bigger fish, you can switch to 6-pound test, but it

won't cast as well, and heavier lines aren't really suitable.

My preference is for open-faced spinning reels that are a bit larger than those that are truly tiny, because their spools are so small that you can't get a faster retrieve when you might need it, and the inevitable loops and tangles you're going to get due to line twist are harder to pick out.

There aren't many artificial lures that will reliably catch fish virtually year round, and even fewer that produce hot fishing during those torrid summer months when a heaping cone of ice cream will be dripping off your elbows before you can get it licked.

But that's an especially good time for a refreshing little Squirt. ♦

Jim Dean is the former editor of Wildlife in North Carolina and writes the "Our Natural Heritage" column for each issue.

The Squirt and other soft-plastic jigs are versatile lures that come in many colors and sizes. They can be used to catch species in small ponds as well as bigger waters. Some anglers have even used them in salt water.