

Lure Of The Month

Tattoo Sea Spook

By Joe Lyons



Tattoo Tackle
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Mike "Tattoo" Dauphin likes nothing better than to revive a once-popular saltwater lure or adapt or upgrade an existing lure to a new application. The innovative Portsmouth, Rhode Island, lure builder and well-known Aquidneck Island fisherman produces several classic, high-quality designs through his Tattoo Tackle Company, as well as collaboratively with John Haberek of Hab's Custom Plugs via their joint venture, the Hab-A-Tat Lure Company.

Mike's formative angling experiences were as a freshwater fisherman, when he used topwater plugs mainly because they were fun and easy to fish. After watching the Bassmaster Classic on television for hours on end, Mike realized the Spook was a special lure. In fresh water, Mike found that Pradco's Zara Spook out-produced any topwater plug he owned and he fished it religiously, catching largemouth and smallmouth bass, northern pike, pickerel, sunfish and trout – even a catfish. But as Mike sought more and bigger fish, he decided to see if the Spook had saltwater applications.

When I spoke with Mike for this story, he freely admitted to his inexperience in the salt at that time in his fishing career, characterizing himself as a complete neophyte. Still, though inappropriately armed with a 6-foot rod and an Abu 5600 reel spooled with 12-pound-test,

Mike made his way down to the docks for some field testing. It was the middle of the day and bright and sunny – not exactly ideal conditions – when Mike made a cast along a row of pilings and started imparting the classic side-to-side topwater or "walk the dog" action with his Zara Spook. Within 15 seconds Mike hooked a fish. Another 15 seconds went by and the fish was gone, along with the plug. "WOW!" Mike said to himself, "They do work in salt water!" Luckily, he had brought another one along as a backup.

Mike retied and made another cast. This time he was ready, or so he thought. Mike said that even now, many years later, he "can see the Spook walking back and forth in a nice Z wake, nice and slow, just like on TV." And then a striper (at the time it was the biggest fish he had seen, probably around 25 pounds) inhaled the plug and took off running. Mike fought the fish the best he could but was no match for it with such light gear. The line went slack and Mike lost the fish, but this time he still had his plug.

"Great," thought Mike, "I'll get him next cast." Unfortunately, there would be no next cast that day as the hooks had been ripped off the freshwater Spook and Mike did not have another one. He made

several subsequent trips that year and managed a few fish with the light outfit, but the plugs just didn't hold up.

Soon, Mike acquired a proper surf-casting rod. The quest was on to find a heavy-duty saltwater Spook. A few companies made some out of wood (Poe's and Trader Bay among them), but with screw-eye designs and inexpensive hooks, they did not last long either. Mike used them as they were all that were available, and he caught fish but was never really satisfied.


Once Mike started making plugs, he knew he had to try something similar to the Spook. He talked to a few people and they were excited about the idea: a through-wired version with heavy-duty hooks that you could cast a good distance and walk the dog – a striper angler's dream.

After many designs and plenty of testing, the Tattoo Sea Spook was born. However, Mike soon found that convincing himself his design worked was easy, but convincing the rest of the world was another thing. But with positive feedback from anglers John Habs, Ed Hughes and "Iron Mike" Everin, Tattoo was convinced the product was ready to take to market. Rhody shore guide Steve McKenna also gave the Sea Spook a strong endorsement, having used it to good effect along the Narragansett shore in 2004, both day and night. Tattoo has even outfished Iron Mike a few times with it while the Iron Man stood only five feet away. Tattoo relished the chance to outfist Iron Mike, as those days come few and far between.

Mike recommends fishing the Sea Spook with a stiff fast-action rod rated for at least four ounces with a sweet spot at about three ounces. Those familiar with pencil poppers will find that

the Spook works with a similar action: short twitches of the rod tip are all that is needed to get the plug to dance. A crosslock snap of 100-pound-test or the addition of a heavy split ring will give the lure more side-to-side action than tying direct.

Many anglers have reported that the Spook will catch when nothing else will. When cast to actively feeding yet finicky fish that for some reason will not take another artificial, the Spook will often get strikes. Mike has found that the slowest possible retrieve is often best; the slower you can make the plug walk the dog, the more fish you will catch. If you find you are enticing strikes but missing fish, pausing the lure after the first hit produces hookups more often than not. Steve McKenna noted that at night the darker patterns like black/purple and black/silver were effective with a simple, slow, straight retrieve with intermittent jerks of the rod tip. As with any lure, don't forget to vary the speed of your retrieve if you find the action is slowing. The darker patterns of this lure generally work better at night, whereas the lighter are better at dusk and dawn. Favorite patterns of the builder include blue and white, and yellow and white.

Like the best lures, the Spook lets the fisherman get creative with his presentations. Anglers who fish it have found it catches in just about every setting. It works at false dawn in June (on stripers keyed in on herring), under calm conditions at night when you can hear fish popping, on bright sunny days at high noon, and in the middle of the night when you can barely see your hand in front of your face. At three ounces, the Sea Spook can be the surfcaster's best friend on windy days when you can't throw an average plug 20 feet. 

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