



Fishing History

Keith Bell

Heddon River Runt Spook



River Runt Spook Sinker in perch color with box.

Open any vintage tackle box and you are sure to find a Heddon River Runt—probably the most successful early plastic lure (spook) lure ever invented. It was advertised on their box, "For ALL Game Fish Everywhere," and I can attest to having caught pretty much everything on one of these in my fishing career. The River Runt is truly a classic. In fact, it is so much of a classic that I hesitated to write about it, wondering if I could summarize such an important and historic fishing lure in such a short span. Heddon itself has many books written about its history, and for us fishing lure collectors, there is a complete book written about just the Heddon River Runt. That's how plentiful and wonderful a history this lure has.

River Runt history

Heddon is probably the most famous name in American Fishing Tackle. It was founded in 1894 out of Dowagiac, Michigan by James Heddon. The company would lead tackle innovation and manufacturing for most of the next century. The company was family owned until 1955. After a series of ownership changes and mergers, it was sold to PRADCO and moved out of Dowagiac in 1984. Heddon lures are still made today by PRADCO. Heddon tackle is highly sought to this day by fisherman and collectors alike.

One of Heddon's greatest contributions was their "spook" baits, which was their introduction into plastics in 1932. Early versions proved to be somewhat unstable mixes of plastic, but quickly improved. This is why you might find some early spoons, including River Runts, that have shrunken or disintegrated completely over time in tackle boxes.

Heddon introduced the River Runt Spook in 1933. The design was modeled as a smaller version of a Heddon Vamp. It differs, however, from its namesake, the original Heddon River Runt, which has a more rounded nose and is made of wood rather than plastic. In addition, River Runt Spooks had painted eyes rather than tack or glass eyes.

The first River Runt Spooks were the "standard sinking" models (#9110). It was a casting lure and measured 2 1/2 inches in body length. Given its weight of only 1/2-ounce, the lure sank slowly after entering the water, thereby giving the angler control

over how deep the lure traveled. Early instructions suggested it be allowed to sink to a count of 15 before retrieving. As a sinking lure, however, it could be fished in weedy areas if not allowed to sink as far as suggested.

Just two years later, in 1935, two new models were added to the River Runt Spook line: a floating model (#9400) and the jointed floating model (#9430). The floating model measured 3 1/8 inches, a bit longer than the standard sinking model, while the jointed floating model was 4 inches long. The jointed floater consisted of two pieces, held together by a pinned metal plate. Both floating models dived when retrieved to a depth of 2 to 3 feet, depending upon retrieve speed.

Heddon saw great success with the River Runt and continued to add models to the line. Adding the jointed-sinking model (#9330) and a fly-rod lure, the River Runtie-Spook (#950) in 1937, the Midget River Runt Spook (#9010) in 1939, two "Go Deeper" Spooks (D9110) and the midget size (D9010) in 1940.

In 1941, one of the most interesting variations was introduced, The "No-Snag" River Runt Spook (#N9110). It used the body of the standard sinking model, but rather than treble hooks, used an elaborate hardware system to make the lure "weedless."



A 1956 ad for the Heddon line of River Runts.

It has the distinction of being the shortest production run of any River Runt. It was only catalogued in 1941, 1942/43 and 1946. If you look at the one in the images clipped from their 1942/43 catalog cover, I am sure you can understand why. Casting that lure through the water is anything but weedless! This is the only River Runt I wouldn't recommend fishing.

After the war, more models started to appear again. In 1949, the Midget Digit River Runt Spook (#9020) was introduced, designed for spinning gear at 1 5/8 inches. The jointed Go Deeper River Runt Spook (#D9430) and Tiny Runt (#350) joined the group in 1952, weighing a mere 1/5 ounces and measuring 2 1/8 inches in length. Finally, in 1953, the last two models were added to the series, the Tiny Floating (#340) and the Tiny Go-Deeper (#D350). This brought the total varieties of River Runt Spook lures produced by the original Heddon Company to 16 including lip style changes made in 1949.

Heddon River Runt lures continued to be produced under PRADCO. They last appeared in a catalog for purchase in 1989. Including the wooden River Runt name, it was the first time a River Runt had not been in a Heddon catalog since 1928! Quite the run.

Colors and packaging

The River Runt Spook was first introduced in 1933 in only six colors. They



A 1956 ad for the Heddon Midget River Runt.

story continued on next page

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A 1942/43 Heddon catalog illustration of the No-Snag River Runt.

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The Lost Art of Back Reeling

"Absolute control!" Al Lindner proclaimed in a recent conversation we had on back reeling. "Modern spinning reels no doubt have the smoothest drags ever created, but no reel gives the absolute control of 'back reeling.'"

Lindner and I are both "old school" in our assessment of back reeling. That's why it's always interesting to watch tournament bass anglers today, who rely entirely on reel drag systems, jockey and contort while battling bass with spinning tackle. One of their current methods is to set the drag tighter for hook setting, then backing off the drag while playing the fish. The problem is that you never really know what drag setting is best as the fish pulls and runs in different directions at different speeds. This leads anglers to constantly adjust their reels on the fly, fumbling with their reels instead of focusing on playing the fish.

I recently saw one angler on TV hook an 8-pound bass, and in his excitement, turn his drag in the wrong direction, tightening the

drag instead of loosening it! He eventually landed the fish, but the mistake could easily have broken his line.

Another method of drag adjustment you often see is when anglers begin pulling line out with their hand whenever bass make sudden, strong runs. Some anglers even revert to running back and forth around the boat, in effect becoming "human drags" in the process. While all these methods do work to some degree, there are better ways to fight bass with spinning tackle. And why are we asked to spend more money on reels with better drag systems if all drag systems are inherently flawed?

The easy solution to all these problems is to eliminate mechanical drag systems altogether. Fortunately, there is a little lever on the bottom of most spinning reels that lets you eliminate the drag and engage the reel into direct drive. When you tighten the drag and engage the direct drive lever, you now have a reel that gives you ultimate control. You now have the advantage of a strong drag for solid hooksets, and the ability to instantly react to whatever the fish is doing by either taking line in by reeling forward, or by giving line out when needed by reeling backwards.

If the fish is heading toward potential problems like brush or weeds, your reel is set to horse it away from cover; and when giving line is needed, you simply back reel while maintaining the proper rod pressure. Whatever needs to be done can be instantly done with the back reeling method. Once you get good at back reeling, you'll realize it's the only method that gives you ultimate control, and it can be done with the cheapest of reels.

While back reeling is super effective for smaller fish like bass, does it work for big fish, too? Yes and no—it all depends how good you are! Yes, for pike, muskies and catfish; maybe no for bigger salmon, stripers and carp. Back reeling is easy for slow movers like catfish and sturgeon, and these fish are

good to practice on. But even the biggest pike and muskies are easily landed by back reeling because pike and muskies fight with alternating head shakes and mad dashes, and the dashes are easily countered by back reeling. Just remember to keep your rod bent with an even pressure and let your hand back reel to match the speed of the dash. In rare cases, when the fish runs faster than the speed you can back reel, simply let the handle go and catch up to the handle once the fish slows.

Although I often back reel even when fighting big trout, salmon, stripers and carp that make the longest of runs, most anglers might find it easier to use a normal mechanical drag in these situations—especially when you're catching lots of these hard-fighting brutes.

Everyone was back reeling back in '60s and '70s when I started fishing, and the anglers who mastered it knew how good back reeling was. Because of this, I began experimenting with casting reels to see if they could be made to do the same.

The Garcia Ambassador 5000 was the best casting reel back then, and while cleaning one of my Ambassadors, I discovered that if you took out the small arbor that was on the main gear along the drive shaft, it disengaged the star drag completely and made the reel a direct drive reel! Once I did that, I had the ultimate fish-fighting, casting machine. I could tighten the drag all the way down for solid hooksets and to pull fish away from cover, and then instantly let fish run with any pressure necessary by simply using thumb pressure on the spool. My direct drive casting reel was so good that it even gave me more spontaneous control than spinning reels. Unfortunately, I have not yet found a way to turn modern casting reels into direct drive reels.

People are often amazed how much pressure I put on fish while fighting them with 4- or 5-pound-test lines. I've caught dozens of 20-pound-plus stripers on 4-pound line, and once landed a 26-pound carp screaming under a dock complex on 6-pound line. Even with the lightest lines, fish of any size don't have a chance in open water. Once you master back reeling, you rarely lose any.

The secret to maximum pressure is to set up every rod, reel and line combo properly. Take whatever tackle combination you use—let's say a lighter spinning rod with 4-pound line. Tie on a lure, hook the lure into a tree, a fence railing or whatever, and lean into your

rod like you would a hard, solid hookset. Start with a lighter drag and the line will give on the strike. Keep adjusting the drag tighter and tighter until the line finally breaks on a hard set. You will be surprised how much pressure the rod absorbs before the line actually breaks.

Once the line breaks, back off the drag a touch and you have the proper setting. Now you can apply maximum pressure without having to worry about the line breaking, and you'll have the confidence to exert maximum pressure whenever needed. I do this set up with every rod/line combo I have.

When fighting fish on lighter lines, remember to always keep the rod bent when applying maximum pressure. The bend of the rod absorbs the pressure and keeps the line from breaking. That's why you never pump in a fish. If you take pressure off the rod for even a moment, it might instantly snap lighter lines.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, let's say you're fishing for bass or walleyes with a jig. You set the hook, then realize it might be a good pike or muskie. Since it wasn't a bite-off on the set, there's a good chance you'll land the fish no matter how big. Simply back off on the rod pressure and let it easily take line whenever it wants. You'll land most toothy fish this way—even ones that have the jig way back in their mouth. When I discover there are lots of pike or muskies in an area, I'll add a short leader of 15-pound mono or fluorocarbon to the line, play them soft, and will probably land every one that bites.

Trends in the fishing industry come and go, and the industry eventually moved away from back reeling with spinning tackle, as a new generation of anglers simply don't understand how to do it or how effective it is. And sponsored anglers, of course, are promoting the most expensive reels with the best drag systems. Some companies are even terminating direct drive levers from their spinning reels. Personally, I would never buy a spinning reel that didn't have a direct drive option, and if the industry geniuses ever come out with a direct drive casting reel, I would buy a dozen the next day. **MWO**

Paul Prorok spent his life as a fisherman, traveler, photographer and artist. His passion for travel and fishing has taken him to 63 countries and 46 states. He co-wrote the book In Pursuit of Giant Bass with lunker bass legend Bill Murphy, which can be purchased by emailing paulprorokphotography@gmail.com.

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No-Snag River Runt in Yellow Shore color with box.

were Rainbow, White and Red, Yellow Perch, Dace Scale, Shiner Scale and Pearl. By the time Heddon left Dowagiac, Michigan in 1984, well over 100 catalogued colors had appeared on River Runts through the years. Once River Runt production ended at PRADCO, that number had easily doubled. Add in special-order colors and slight variations, and the possibilities are almost limitless.

Over the years, the River Runt was packaged in over 25 different boxes and packaging variations. Unlike most lures, it had its own specific box, marked River Runt, for many years from the late 1930s to the late 1950s. An example is shown in one of the photos.

Collector's value

The great thing about River Runts is that they can fit almost everyone's budget. Fishermen can still get River Runts in more common colors in good used condition in the \$5 to \$10 range. Collectors can expect to pay anywhere from \$10 and up for an excellent condition common color, to double to triple that with a matching box with paperwork. More difficult colors can be quite a bit more expensive, depending on rarity. Some extremely rare River Runts in excellent condition with boxes can go for hundreds of dollars. **MWO**

Keith Bell and his family live in Neenah, Wisconsin but spend a lot of time fishing northern Wisconsin. Keith has been an avid angler and outdoorsman his entire life. His passion for fishing is matched only by his passion for fishing history and preservation. He is the founder and owner of MyBaitShop.com, the world's largest online vintage tackle and history website. You can reach Keith at his website or at keith.bell@mybaitshop.com

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