WISCONSIN

START FISHING GUIDE

From your first license to your first fish fry

The complete beginner's guide to fishing Wisconsin lakes.



WISCONSIN

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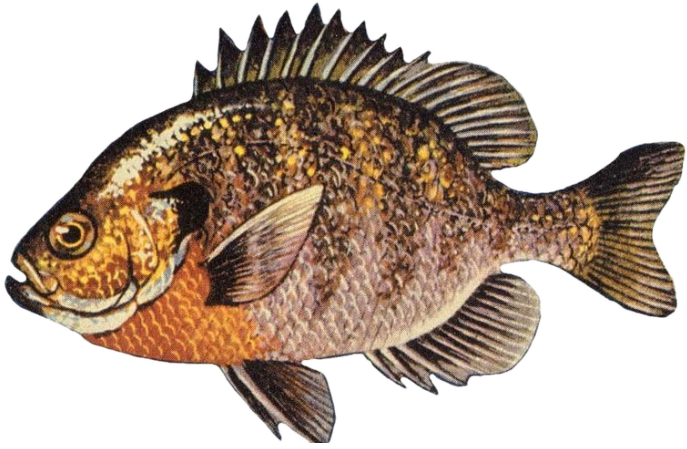
Guide

From your first license to your first fish fry



Start Fishing in Wisconsin
First edition, October 2026

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Read this first. Fishing rules change every year and differ by lake. Everything about seasons, sizes and bag limits in this book is for the 2026–27 season, checked 2026-10-10. Always check the current Wisconsin DNR rules and your lake's own rules before you fish. Depth maps are not for navigation. Ice is never guaranteed safe. You are responsible for your own safety and for following the law.

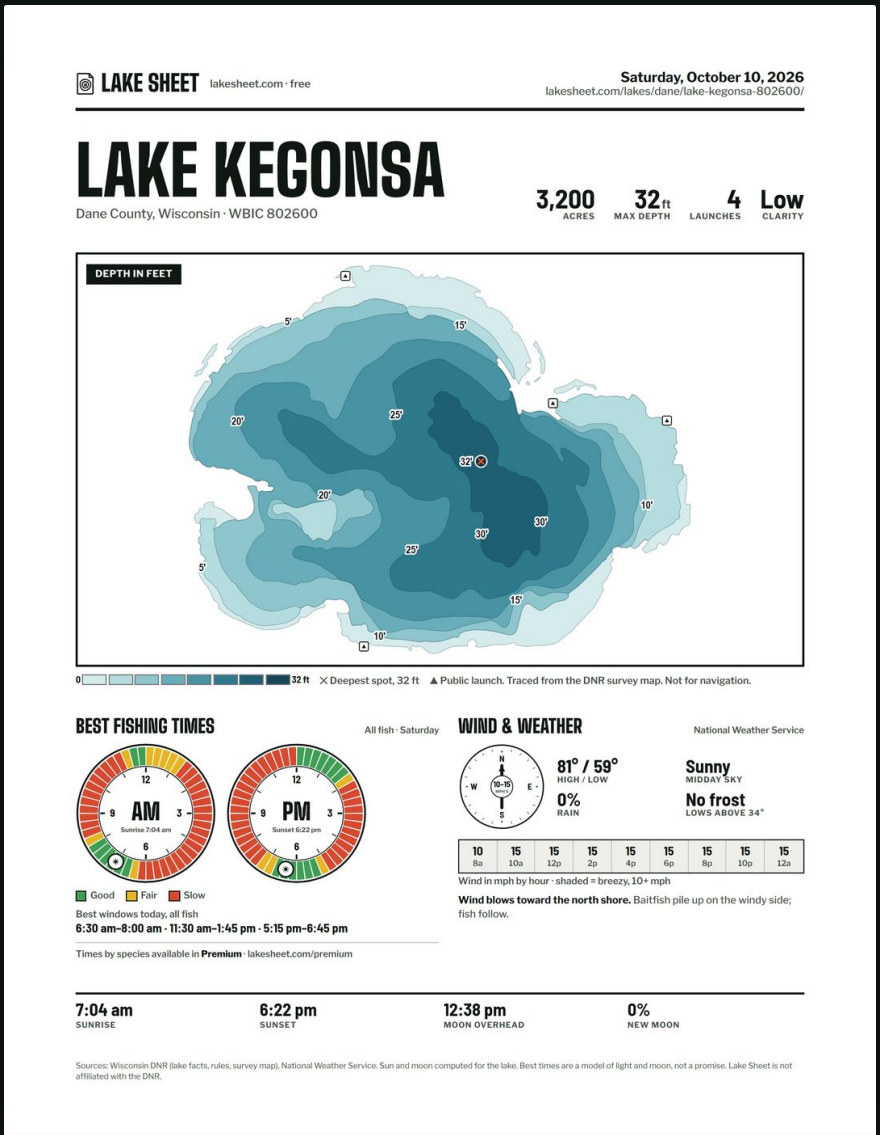
Lake Sheet is not affiliated with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Lake facts come from DNR survey and stocking records as published by Lake Sheet; see the sources at the back of the book.

lakesheet.com

FREE WITH THIS BOOK

YOUR FREE LAKE SHEET

Free for more than 4,600 Wisconsin lakes: two printable pages, made for the boat. This is the real sheet for Lake Kegonsa.



LAKE SHEET lakesheet.com · free

Saturday, October 10, 2026
lakesheet.com/lakes/dane/lake-kegonsa-802600/

LAKE KEGONSA

Dane County, Wisconsin · WBIC 802600

3,200	32 ft	4	Low
ACRES	MAX DEPTH	LAUNCHES	CLARITY

DEPTH IN FEET

5' 15' 20' 25' 32' 20' 10' 30' 30' 25' 5' 15' 10'

0 32 ft · ✕ Deepest spot, 32 ft · ▲ Public launch. Traced from the DNR survey map. Not for navigation.

BEST FISHING TIMES

All fish · Saturday

AM — Sunrise 7:04 am

PM — Sunset 6:22 pm

Good · Fair · Slow

Best windows today, all fish
6:30 am–8:00 am · 11:30 am–1:45 pm · 5:15 pm–6:45 pm

Times by species available in **Premium** · lakesheet.com/premium

WIND & WEATHER

National Weather Service

81° / 59°
HIGH / LOW

0%
RAIN

Sunny
MIDDAY SKY

No frost
LOWS ABOVE 34°

10	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
8a	10a	12p	2p	4p	6p	8p	10p	12a

Wind in mph by hour · shaded = breezy, 10+ mph

Wind blows toward the north shore. Baitfish pile up on the windy side; fish follow.

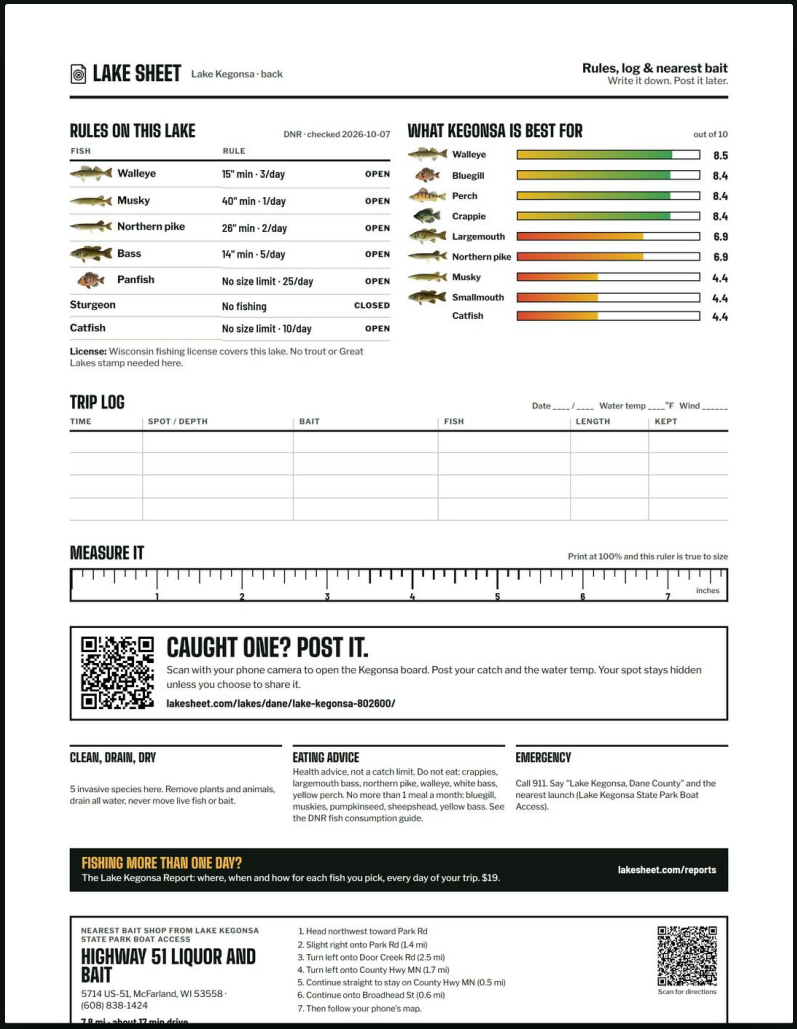
7:04 am	6:22 pm	12:38 pm	0%
SUNRISE	SUNSET	MOON OVERHEAD	NEW MOON

Sources: Wisconsin DNR (lake facts, rules, survey map), National Weather Service. Sun and moon computed for the lake. Best times are a model of light and moon, not a promise. Lake Sheet is not affiliated with the DNR.

1. **Depth map** traced from the DNR survey, deepest spot marked (traced lakes)
2. **Lake facts:** acres, max depth, launches, clarity
3. **Best times** from the sun and moon on AM and PM dials
4. **Wind and weather** by the hour, and which shore the wind hits
5. **Sun and moon** times for the lake
6. **Sources and date** on every fact

THE BACK OF THE SHEET

RULES, LOG & NEAREST BAIT



LAKE SHEET Lake Kegonsa · back

Rules, log & nearest bait
Write it down. Post it later.

RULES ON THIS LAKE

DNR · checked 2026-10-07

FISH	RULE	
Walleye	15" min · 3/day	OPEN
Musky	40" min · 1/day	OPEN
Northern pike	26" min · 2/day	OPEN
Bass	14" min · 5/day	OPEN
Panfish	No size limit · 25/day	OPEN
Sturgeon	No fishing	CLOSED
Catfish	No size limit · 10/day	OPEN

License: Wisconsin fishing license covers this lake. No trout or Great Lakes stamp needed here.

WHAT KEGONSA IS BEST FOR

out of 10

Walleye	8.5
Bluegill	8.4
Perch	8.4
Crappie	8.4
Largemouth	6.9
Northern pike	6.9
Musky	4.4
Smallmouth	4.4
Catfish	4.4

TRIP LOG

Date ____ / ____ Water temp ____°F Wind _____

TIME	SPOT / DEPTH	BAIT	FISH	LENGTH	KEPT

MEASURE IT

Print at 100% and this ruler is true to size

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 inches

CAUGHT ONE? POST IT.

Scan with your phone camera to open the Kegonsa board. Post your catch and the water temp. Your spot stays hidden unless you choose to share it.

lakesheet.com/lakes/dane/lake-kegonsa-802600/

CLEAN, DRAIN, DRY

5 invasive species here. Remove plants and animals, drain all water, never move live fish or bait.

EATING ADVICE

Health advice, not a catch limit. Do not eat: crappies, largemouth bass, northern pike, walleye, white bass, yellow perch. No more than 1 meal a month: bluegill, muskies, pumpkinseed, sheepshead, yellow bass. See the DNR fish consumption guide.

EMERGENCY

Call 911. Say "Lake Kegonsa, Dane County" and the nearest launch (Lake Kegonsa State Park Boat Access).

FISHING MORE THAN ONE DAY?
The Lake Kegonsa Report: where, when and how for each fish you pick, every day of your trip. $19.
lakesheet.com/reports

NEAREST BAIT SHOP FROM LAKE KEGONSA STATE PARK BOAT ACCESS

HIGHWAY 51 LIQUOR AND BAIT

5714 US-51, McFarland, WI 53558 · (608) 838-1424

7.8 mi · about 17 min drive

1. Head northwest toward Park Rd
2. Slight right onto Park Rd (1.4 mi)
3. Turn left onto Door Creek Rd (2.5 mi)
4. Turn left onto County Hwy MN (1.7 mi)
5. Continue straight to stay on County Hwy MN (0.5 mi)
6. Continue onto Broadhead St (0.6 mi)
7. Then follow your phone's map.

Scan for directions

1. **This lake's rules** for every fish, from the DNR
2. **What the lake is best for,** rated by fish
3. **Trip log** and a true-size **ruler**
4. **Invasive species** and eating advice
5. **Nearest bait shop** we know of, with turn-by-turn directions
6. Scan to post your catch

lakesheet.com

Find your lake, print it, take it in the boat

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book takes you from "I've never done this" to a fish in the frying pan, in the order you'll need things. Read Chapters 1, 2 and 4 before your first trip. Keep the rest for when the questions come up, because they will.

IF YOUR FIRST TRIP IS THIS WEEKEND

1. Check whether you need a license (1.2). Under 16, you don't.
2. Buy the $45 kit in 2.7, plus a dozen worms.
3. Tie on a hook with the improved clinch knot (4.4).
4. Set up the bobber rig (4.1).
5. Pick a lake with a pier from 5.6 and fish the weed edge at sunrise or the last two hours before sunset.

IF YOU HAVE A FEW WEEKS

1. Chapter 3: the eight fish you'll meet first.
2. Chapter 4: practice three knots and casting in the yard.
3. Chapter 5: learn to read a free Lake Sheet.
4. Chapter 6: the rules and staying safe you need.
5. Chapter 8: the questions every beginner asks.

The QR codes. Each of the 15 lakes in Chapter 5 has a code. Point your phone's camera at it and you land on that lake's free Lake Sheet: the fish the DNR found there, its depth map, launches, best-times dials and hourly wind, the lake's own rules and the nearest bait shop (when one is in our list). Other waters named in passing, like Lake Winnebago or the record-fish lakes, don't have a code in this book; search for them at lakesheet.com.

The rules. Seasons, sizes and bag limits change every April 1, and many lakes have their own. Rules in this book are for the 2026–27 season. Before you keep a fish, check the current rules. The fastest way is the rules box on your lake's Lake Sheet.

The words. When a fishing word first appears it's in **bold** and explained right there. "Panfish" means bluegill, pumpkinseed and other sunfish, crappie and yellow perch: the small, flat fish that fit in a frying pan.



CHAPTER 1

WHAT YOU NEED FIRST

To start fishing in Wisconsin you need three things: a license if you're 16 or older, a simple rod with a hook and a bobber, and a place where fish live close to shore. This chapter covers the license, the cost and the plan; Chapter 2 covers the gear and bait.

1.1 Start with panfish from shore · **1.2** Who needs a license · **1.3** 2026–27 prices and how to buy · **1.4** What it costs to start · **1.5** The best months to begin · **1.6** Your first-trip checklist

1.1

START WITH PANFISH FROM SHORE

The easiest way to start is **still fishing for panfish from shore**: a worm on a small hook, hanging under a bobber, next to weeds or a dock. "Still fishing" means you cast out and wait for a bite, instead of reeling a lure in over and over. "Panfish" means bluegill, pumpkinseed and other sunfish, crappie and yellow perch.

- **Panfish are everywhere.** Of the 4,631 lakes with a Lake Sheet in October 2026, the DNR's survey lists panfish in 4,260, and as **abundant** in 540.
- **They live close to shore.** In late spring and summer, bluegill hold in weeds and around docks in 2 to 10 feet of water, a short cast away.
- **The rules are simple.** On most inland lakes panfish are open all year, with no size limit and a 25-fish daily bag (Chapter 6).
- **They bite**, even on a hot afternoon when bigger fish won't move, and they're the safest fish to eat (7.6).

Once you can catch panfish, every other kind of fishing is the same skills with a bigger hook. Bass, walleye and pike all eat panfish, so you'll hook some of those along the way.

START LIKE THIS

- From a public pier, dock or shore.
- With a worm, a #8 hook and a bobber.
- In May, June or September.
- In the first two hours after sunrise or the last two before sunset.

DON'T START WITH

- Musky, sturgeon or trout: special gear, special rules, lots of patience.
- A boat, unless someone experienced comes along.
- A bag of 40 lures. Live bait catches more fish for beginners.
- Noon on a bright, hot, calm day.

1.2
WHO NEEDS A LICENSE

Everyone 16 or older needs a Wisconsin fishing license, residents and visitors alike. That includes small lakes, rivers and ponds with no public access: they are all "waters of the state." You must be able to show your license to a conservation warden if asked.

- **Under 16:** no license, resident or visitor.
- **Residents born before 1927:** no license; carry proof of age.
- **A private, man-made pond** on one owner's land, not connected to other water, fished with the owner's permission: no license (all other rules apply).
- **Free Fishing Weekends:** nobody needs a license or trout stamp on the first Saturday and Sunday in a row in June and the full weekend before the third Monday in January. The next ones are **January 16–17, 2027** and, by that rule, **June 5–6, 2027** (the DNR confirms each date in its yearly guide). Seasons, sizes and bag limits still apply. It's the cheapest way to try fishing.

PARENTS

Kids under 16 don't need a license. The adult with them does if the adult fishes too. If you're not sure whether what you're doing counts as fishing, buy the license: it's $5 the first time.

1.3
2026–27 PRICES AND HOW TO BUY

FOR THE 2026-27 SEASON · CHECKED 2026-10-10

LICENSE	WHO IT'S FOR	PRICE
Under 16	Residents and nonresidents under 16	No license needed
Resident annual	Wisconsin residents 18 to 64	$20.00

Resident first-time buyer	Residents who have never bought a fishing license, or last bought one 10 or more years ago	$5.00
Resident reduced-rate	Required of residents 16 and 17, and 65 or older	$7.00
Resident one-day	One day; the price counts toward an annual license if you buy one later the same license year	$8.00
Resident spousal	A married couple, both residents	$31.00
Nonresident annual	Visitors 16 or older	$55.00
Nonresident first-time buyer	Nonresidents who have never bought one, or not in 10 or more years	$28.75
Nonresident one-day / 4-day / 15-day	Short visits	$15.00 / $29.00 / $33.00
Nonresident family	Spouses plus children 16 and 17; 15-day or annual	$45.00 / $70.00
Trout stamp (inland) or Great Lakes trout and salmon stamp	Only if you fish for trout or salmon	$10.00 each

All 2026 annual licenses are good through March 31, 2027. Buy at gowild.wi.gov or a license agent (many bait shops and sporting goods stores). Residents born before 1927 need no license. Disabled, disabled-veteran and armed-forces licenses are listed in the DNR guide.

Rules change every April 1, and many lakes have their own limits. Always check the current rules: **https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/fishing/regulations**, and your lake's rules box on its free Lake Sheet.

The first-time buyer license is the best deal in Wisconsin fishing. If you've never bought a fishing license, or your last one was 10 or more years ago, a resident license costs $5 instead of $20. Visitors pay $28.75 instead of $55. You only get it once. **Trout stamps** are needed only if you fish for trout or salmon; for panfish, bass, walleye and pike in inland lakes, the plain license is all you need.

How to buy. Online at **gowild.wi.gov**, the DNR's license site, or from one of more than 1,000 license agents, including many bait shops and sporting

goods stores. A social security number is needed to set up your account and buy your first license.

When it runs out. Every 2026 annual license is good through **March 31, 2027**, whenever you buy it. If you're starting in February, the one-day license ($8 resident) may be the better buy; its price counts toward an annual license if you buy one later in the same license year.

Carry it. Go Wild keeps your license on file, so you can't lose your only copy. On Lake Michigan, Lake Superior, Green Bay and the boundary waters (the Mississippi, the St. Croix and the Michigan border rivers), the DNR says to carry a paper copy.

1.4

WHAT IT COSTS TO START

A real first-year budget at typical 2026 Wisconsin prices:

ITEM	BARE MINIMUM	COMFORTABLE
License (resident, first time / annual)	$5	$20
Rod and reel combo	$25–35	$50–70
Hooks, bobbers, split shot, line	$12	$25
Pliers, clippers, small tackle box	$8	$20
Bucket or stool, ruler	$0 (use what you have)	$15
Bait for 10 trips	$40	$50
Life jacket (boat, kayak or ice only)	$0	$35–60
First year total	**about $90**	**about $200–260**

After the first year you'll mostly spend money on bait, line and hooks: maybe $50–100 a season. Fishing gets expensive only when you add a boat, electronics and dozens of lures. Spend your money on bait and gas to the lake, not on gadgets.

BORROW A ROD FOR FREE

The DNR's **tackle loaner program** lends rods, reels, bobbers, hooks and sinkers free at DNR offices and state parks, for up to a week. Bring your own bait.

1.5

THE BEST MONTHS TO BEGIN

MONTH	EASY FROM SHORE	WHERE	NOTES
Jan–Feb	Bluegill, perch, crappie	Weed edges in 5–15 ft	Ice fishing: only with an experienced adult and checked ice (6.11)
Mar–Apr	Crappie, perch, bluegill	Warm shallow bays, channels, docks	Ice goes out late March to early April in the south, mid-April to early May in the north. Small baits, fish slowly
May	Crappie, bluegill, bass	Shallow bays, docks, weed beds	General opener for walleye, pike and bass harvest: first Saturday in May (next: May 1, 2027)
June	**Bluegill on nests**, bass, pumpkinseed	1–6 ft along shore	The easiest month. Free Fishing Weekend: first Saturday and Sunday in June
Jul–Aug	Bluegill, bass, rock bass, perch	Weed edges, docks, shade	Go early or late; midday is slow
Sep–Oct	Bluegill, crappie, perch, bass, pike	Weed edges in 5–12 ft	Fish feed hard before winter; fewer people
Nov–Dec	Perch, crappie, bluegill	Deeper weed edges, then first ice	Dress warm. Never trust new ice (6.11)

1.6

YOUR FIRST-TRIP CHECKLIST

Paperwork: license (16 and older), on your phone or paper; a printed Lake Sheet for your lake.

Gear: rod and reel rigged with a bobber and #8 hook (4.1); spare hooks, split shot and a bobber; needle-nose pliers and line clippers; a ruler; a bucket or stool.

Bait: a dozen nightcrawlers or a cup of red worms; maybe a cup of waxworms.

For you: water and a snack; sunscreen, hat and sunglasses; a rag for your hands; bug spray in summer; life jackets for small kids near deep water and for everyone in a boat.

If you'll keep fish: a cooler with ice, and a plan to clean them the same day (7.7).

CHECK THE SHEET THE NIGHT BEFORE

Open your lake's free Lake Sheet. Note where you'll fish, the best-times dials and the hourly wind, the panfish rule, and the nearest bait shop if the sheet lists one. Ten minutes of planning saves an hour of wandering.



CHAPTER 2

GEAR AND BAIT

The best fishing setup for a beginner is a 5½- to 6-foot light spinning rod and reel, spooled with 6-pound line, plus a handful of small hooks, split shot and bobbers. That kit costs about $45 and catches bluegill, perch, crappie, bass and the odd walleye. This chapter shows exactly what to buy, at two budgets, what to leave on the shelf, and the live baits and three simple lures that catch most beginner fish. The best all-round bait in Wisconsin is the plain worm.

2.1 Rod and reel · **2.2** Spincast or spinning? · **2.3** Line · **2.4** Hooks · **2.5** Sinkers and bobbers · **2.6** Tools · **2.7** The $45 kit and the $110 kit · **2.8** What to skip, and gear care · **2.9** Worms · **2.10** Waxworms and grubs · **2.11** Minnows and leeches · **2.12** Bait rules · **2.13** Three simple lures · **2.14** What bait for which fish

2.1
ROD AND REEL



FIG 2.1 One small clear box holds most of a beginner's tackle: hooks, split shot, a few jigs, bobbers and a couple of ready-made rigs. Add a rod and reel and a spool of line and you're set.



FIG 2.2 A small spinning reel on a light rod. The reel hangs under the rod; you flip its wire bail open with one finger to cast.

Rods are labeled with **length** (5'6" = five and a half feet), **power** (how much force bends it: ultralight, light, medium-light, medium, heavy) and **action** (where it bends: fast near the tip, moderate into the middle). Most also print a **line rating** ("4–8 lb") and a **lure rating** ("1/32–1/4 oz").

For a first rod, buy: 5'6" to 6'6" long, **light** or **ultralight** power for panfish (medium-light if you also want bass), moderate or fast action, a line rating that includes 6 lb, and a lure rating that starts at 1/32 or 1/16 oz.

Buy a **combo**: a rod sold with a matched reel already on it, often with line already spooled. It's cheaper than buying the parts.

2.2
SPINCAST OR SPINNING?

	SPINCAST ("PUSH-BUTTON")	SPINNING ("OPEN-FACE")
Looks like	A closed cone on top of the rod with a button at the back	An open spool under the rod with a wire bail
How you cast	Hold the button, swing, let go of the button	Hold the line on a finger, open the bail, swing, let go
Best for	Kids under about 8, and the first hour	Everyone else, after 15 minutes of practice