

# The Fishing Line *MENACE*

I feel really peed off whenever I walk at a popular fishing spot and find long lengths of discarded fishing line all over the ground. Then I wonder ... did I do that when I fished? Probably, embarrassing as it is to admit. I'm sure there were times when I dropped off-cuts of line without thinking. If I'd known about the damage fishing line does when it gets caught around a bird's feet I would never have dropped an inch of the rotten stuff.

Light weight line is the worst because it tangles so easily. Discarded fishing line typically gets tangled around a bird's feet when it's walking and foraging for food. The bird will try to kick the line off. If it's lucky it will free itself. If not the fishing line will wrap around its leg and tangle even more. The longer the line stays on the tighter it gets, causing swelling. A tight band of fishing line won't expand with swelling and it cuts into the birds flesh. So begins a long period of intense suffering that will often leave the bird maimed or dead. I regularly catch wild birds with fishing line cutting off their toes or cutting through one of their legs. Many lose toes and some lose a whole foot.

Recently I had to catch a 6 month old cygnet (young swan). It was one of four cygnets that were part of a much loved family of swans living on a Gold Coast canal. At some point a long length of fine fishing line had become wrapped around the cygnet's wing but was hidden under its feathers. The line had tightened and slowly cut off circulation to its wing. By the time people noticed that something was wrong the bird's wing was crippled and gangrene had set in. The cygnet couldn't be saved.

The weeks or months it takes for fishing line to amputate a body part is a time of slow and excruciating torture for a bird.

Line tangles occur mostly in coastal areas where fishing is popular. Birds with blunt beaks suffer the most - pelicans, swans, ducks, oyster catchers, gulls and of course the poor old ibis. Their beaks don't allow them to bite through fishing line and free themselves. Cormorants, kites and ospreys do a bit better because they have sharp hooked beaks that can sometimes bite the line off. Of course biting is no use at all if a fish hook is also involved, as is often the case.

Helping these injured creatures is often very difficult because nearly all line tangled birds can still fly. Fishing line might be causing a crippling injury to its leg but that won't prevent a bird from taking to the air the moment someone

tries to catch it. In fact, the pain of injury causes most birds to be more wary and skittish, making them even harder to catch.

The very nasty wrap of fine fishing line and rusty trace around this pelican's leg would have crippled the bird had it not been discovered in time.



Pic by Rowley Goonan

Of all the line tangled and fish hook affected birds that I rescue more than half can be treated and released immediately. Once a bird is caught the line is cut from the affected leg or toes. Open wounds are doused with diluted betadine (iodine) and the creature is released straight back into the air. It's quick and easy and there's minimal trauma to the bird and no cost to anyone. As long as there's no infection a wound will usually heal quickly, especially as the bird has the advantage of being back in its natural environment. I know they recover because I often see the same bird the next day. Sometimes I'll come across a creature that was barely able to walk when I caught it a few days before. Now it's strutting around as happy as Larry ..... or as happy as Tweety as the case may be.

Deeper wounds and deeply embedded fish hooks require veterinary treatment and sometimes weeks in hospital. Most birds survive and get to have a life albeit without a toe or two and sometimes without a leg.

Some are not so lucky. This lovely tern was too traumatised and its tongue too badly damaged to be saved.



Pic by Rowley Goonan

I could tell you so many stories about fishing line injured birds, but this next one illustrates, quite graphically, how horrible and dangerous discarded hooks and line can be. I find that a little humour helps a lot with these stories.

I got a call from a chap who was staying at the Broadwater Tourist Park in Southport on the Gold Coast. I happened to be camped there myself and had already snared two ibis and one pelican in my first two weeks at the park, all with fishing line and hook injuries.

The caller said he was feeding some ibis by his caravan and noticed that one of the birds had fishing line wrapped around its beak. The bird's beak was lashed firmly shut and it couldn't eat. Ibis that can't eat typically last about 3 days before they starve to death. I asked for his location and was delighted to find that he was only 30 meters up the road. Yahoo! - I dream of getting calls like this. Normally it's 50 k's up the M1.

I was there in a jiffy. The bird had already started to walk off – there was no reason for it to hang around because it couldn't share in the food. I knew this might be a tough capture because 95% of flighted birds are caught using a snare. With that capture method we use food to manoeuvre the bird into position until the snare can be tripped around its leg. If the bird won't come for food it's very difficult to catch.

I decided to set up a snare quite a long way from the bird. Then I convinced some poor unsuspecting passer-by to help me. Little did he know just how bad ibis smell up close and of course there was no time to tell him. We were on a mission and the pressure was on! I was prepared to deal with a hostile and smelly assistant later.

We fanned out and managed to slowly and carefully drive the unsuspecting creature towards the snare. For once luck was with us and it walked right where I wanted. At the last second I threw food and the bird stepped forward in a vain attempt to eat. I tripped the snare and we had him.

My new assistant dived in fearlessly and helped grab the bird. Clearly this man was made of steel and wasn't even slightly put off by stinky feathers, rusty fish hooks or ibis spit. I sometimes wonder why I do this job because all of those things put me right off!

It was immediately evident that the bird had several wraps of braid around its beak. To add insult to injury the poor creature had a ball sinker dangling off the end of the braid. Braid is the worst of the worst. It's a thin, light weight line favoured by lure fishermen because it has no stretch at all. It's almost unbreakable and readily cuts into flesh.

My trusty assistant held the bird down while I went to work with the scissors. We quickly cut the wraps of braid from its beak. Then the question dawned on me - where was the other end of the line? I hadn't even stopped to think about that. You've probably guessed – it was down the bird's throat.

This was not good. If the ibis had swallowed a hook, which was very likely, it was going to be a hospital job. No other way to get swallowed hooks out. We needed to check. I held the bird's beak wide open and peered down its throat. Did I mention ibis breath? No, I didn't think so.

We were in luck although it's doubtful the ibis viewed it that way. I could see the hook. It was small and buried deep in the back of the bird's tongue. Ouch! There were two choices. Put the bird through the trauma and us through the time and expense of a 70k round trip to Currumbin Animal Hospital, **or** attempt to force the point of the hook through the last millimetre of tongue and expose the barb. Sounds gruesome but if teenage girls are willing to pay for tongue studs I was willing to provide a similar service to this ibis - for free.

My assistant - now a veteran - agreed it was the best way to go and definitely the least traumatic option for the bird. The pain would be over in a split second and the creature would be just minutes away from snatching its first hot snagger from the nearest barbie ... possibly its first meal in days.

In an extraordinary display of athleticism my trusty assistant managed to hold the bird still while each of us took one side of its beak and prised its mouth open. I manoeuvred my needle nosed pliers down its throat and onto the shank of the hook. A quick flick and the barb cleared the flesh. The bird didn't even flinch – no doubt dreaming of hot snaggers to come. A quick change to side cutters and the barb was nipped off the hook. This allowed the shank to be backed out of its tongue. It was all over in seconds. I released the bird immediately. Then my assistant and I dutifully inspected each other for lice. I don't think I mentioned lice? Oh well.

Rather than fly off immediately like most birds, this ibis walked casually down to the water's edge and dipped its beak in several times. Then it threw its head back and I swear it was gargling with the salt water. Who said ibis were silly?

I'm delighted to say that I saw that bird the next day strutting around the park looking happy and healthy. I know it was the same one because of its size and a distinctive, draggy left wing. In fact I saw it nearly every day for a month after that.

It's a good feeling to know you've saved a wild bird from a slow and awful death – a by-product of fishing - a sport that's heavily promoted as a family activity, yet we're never told about the terrible consequences it has for so many creatures.

I often go for a walk along the seawall at the Gold Coast Seaway – not just for the exercise or the great view. *In a half hour walk it's not unusual for me to pick up sixty or seventy meters of discarded fishing line.* Any length of discarded

line longer than about 300 millimetres, or a foot in the old language, is potentially fatal for a bird.

You can help too. Simply keep your eyes peeled for discarded fishing line whenever you go walking near the water or at any popular fishing area. If you find a length of line wind it up into a tight ball and bin it, preferably inside a bag or similar. Even better - cut it up into very short lengths before binning it. This is very important because believe it or not many birds, including pelicans, actually get tangled at the rubbish tip by line that's made its way there as rubbish.

If you fish, or you know someone who does, tell them how destructive discarded fishing line and hooks can be.

Take care whenever you pick up fishing line because you never know what's on the end. I copped a rusty fish hook in my thumb the other day that had me checking my tetanus status. Remember that every piece of line you collect could be saving a beautiful wild bird from months of suffering or even the loss of its life.

Sophie and Eliza collect handfuls of discarded fishing line at the Gold Coast Seaway



Pic by Rowley Goonan

Fishing line that's been discarded on land is a big problem, but it's a drop in the ocean compared to what's underwater. Unless you dive you wouldn't believe the spider's web created by the kilometres of broken off fishing line that adorn the rocks at the Gold Coast Seaway. This ghost line forms a silent, non-degradable and lethal trap for diving birds like cormorants, gannets, terns and many underwater creatures, especially turtles. Every day dozens of fishers lose more line when their hooks get snagged on the bottom. Out of sight, out of mind I guess.

I think you'll agree this story raises some serious questions about the consequences of Australia's most popular sport. Even so we can still find opportunity in this sorry situation. If you are a young person looking for direction or an older person seeking a new project, I hope I've provided some useful food for thought. There are so many interesting ways you can get involved and help rectify the god-awful mess we are making of our beautiful planet. Every effort you make will limit the damage that our human activities do to the extraordinary, wild creatures that share our world.

## Rowley Goonan

[A diver fills his bag with broken off fishing line and hooks from the bottom of the Gold Coast Seaway.](#)



Pic by Rowley Goonan

