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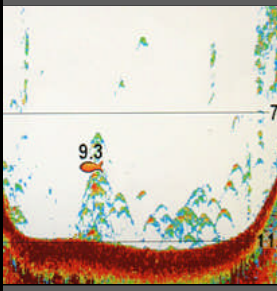
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How to use your depth sounder

"Some experts say the first step towards sounder proficiency is to turn off your fish icon or fish identification settings and concentrate on the raw data. I don't personally agree with these opinions as most have come from tournament anglers on the east coast who mainly fish impoundments"

Author: Andrew Matthews



You don't need to spend a fortune nowadays on a sounder, as some of the latest technological features are standard issue on most models. But like all things, the more money you spend on a fish finder, the better job it will do.

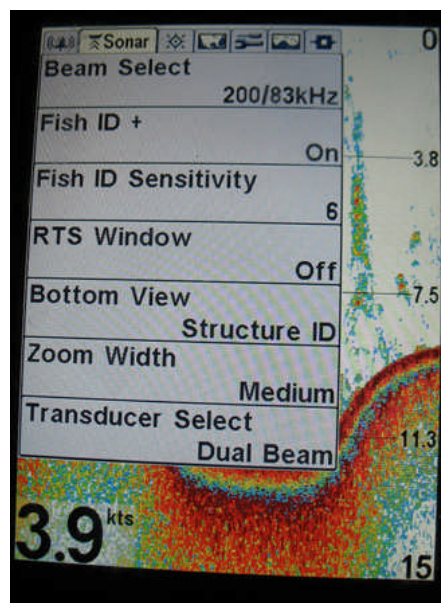
The quandary arises when we have difficulties driving all these new bells and whistles, thus we need to be making sure that our unit is working to the best of its ability. What we will do this month is look at how to best adjust your sounders settings for successfully finding fish. I should quantify that comment because really you may not be looking as much for the fish as you are the structure, and then you can fish it accordingly. Every boat, fish-finder, transducer combination has its own best possible working settings, depending on the type of fishing you do as well as where you fish so this article is a bit of a generalisation but will give you the perfect starting point and will point you in the right direction to getting the most out of your sounder. Just about every sounder will have all the functions I will list below, the only difference between brands will be the units of measurement (eg 1 – 10 vs. 1 – 100) or the functions (gain vs. sensitivity)

Some experts say the first step towards sounder proficiency is to turn off your fish icon or fish identification settings and concentrate on the raw data. I don't personally agree with these opinions as most have come from tournament anglers on the east coast who mainly fish impoundments, so they have a fair idea of what structure is around. I believe there are simple tuning tricks you can use so that you can be confident that the icons are indeed fish and not floating weed.

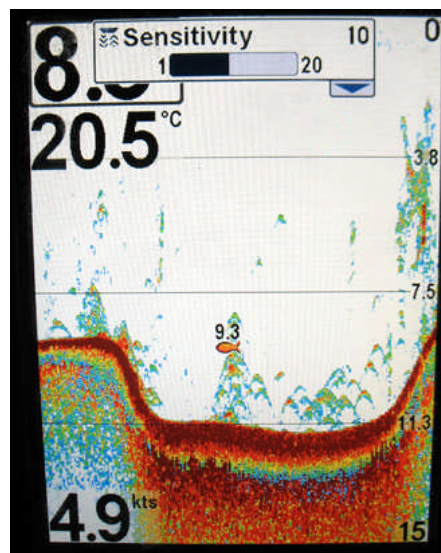
I do agree that to maximise your results you need to work in 'Manual' or 'Advanced' mode. Many anglers leave their fish-finders in 'Auto' because it's easier, but really you need to switch it off if you want to get more "information" out of your unit.

For the average user, the sensitivity or 'gain' adjustment is the most under-utilised function on a sounders menu tab. This often means anglers are failing to get optimum performance out of their fishfinder. Sensitivity controls how much detail is shown on the display. Although your unit will detect echoes from nearly everything in the water column - from reef and fish to sea weed - you can manually set the limit of what you see. Basically you can adjust the 'gain' or 'sensitivity' of the unit to suit the type of fishing, bottom bouncing or trolling.

Most fish-finders have a sensitivity scale from 0 to 10, with a setting above 50 per cent required for the unit to be working at near optimum level. Increasing the sensitivity setting of your sounder shows more sonar returns which means that more information is displayed on your screen. A maximum setting usually means that the display screen is filled with every piece of suspended debris in the water column. The display will then become too cluttered with rubbish which confuses the picture.



Leave you Fish ID function on, just turn down the sensitivity until you get a good picture on the screen



Decreasing it has the opposite effect and gradually information that can be useful is filtered out until you reach the minimum adjustment, where you will only see objects just below the surface. Decreasing the sensitivity eliminates the clutter from the display that is sometimes present in murky or muddy water. If sensitivity is too low the display may not show sonar returns that could very well be fish.

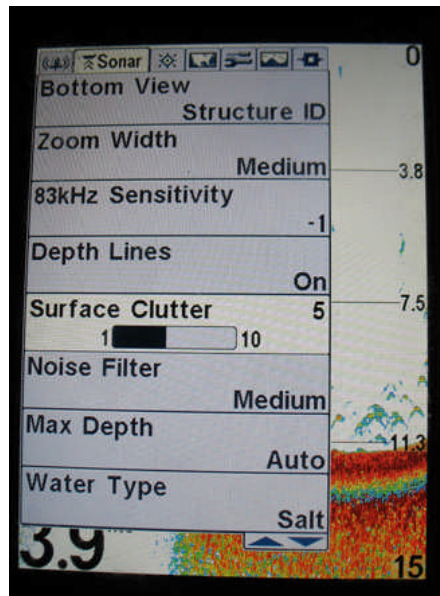
The best way to play around with your sensitivity function is on the water. Get your boat out in say 20m of water and dial up the sensitivity to 100 per cent which will fill the screen from top to bottom with clutter. Now ease the sensitivity level back a little at a time, until the clutter starts to clear near the bottom. You will still have clutter at the surface but we can clear that with the "Surface Clutter Function" in a moment. Once the display is cleared for the current level of the water column that you wish to investigate, the unit is at its optimum setting for that depth. You should now be able to see small objects like baitfish clearly on your screen. Apply the same process when you move to different depths of water, until you become familiar with the optimum settings for the various depths you are fishing in.

As we mentioned after adjusting your sensitivity you will be often left with surface clutter across the top of the screen extending down into the area you are interested in. Most anglers put up with a little clutter on the surface if you're bottom-fishing, although you may be able to clear it using the "Surface Clutter Function" control in your fish-finder's menu. Again this feature is normally scaled at 0 to 10 so it's just a matter of tweaking the levels till you are happy. If searching for pelagic fish like mackerel or tuna which feed close to the surface, a reduced sensitivity level will clear the screen near the top, but by reducing that sensitivity, you won't pick up any detail on or near the bottom of the water column. If searching for fish and structure at depth, maintain the highest possible sensitivity to get the very best out of your unit.

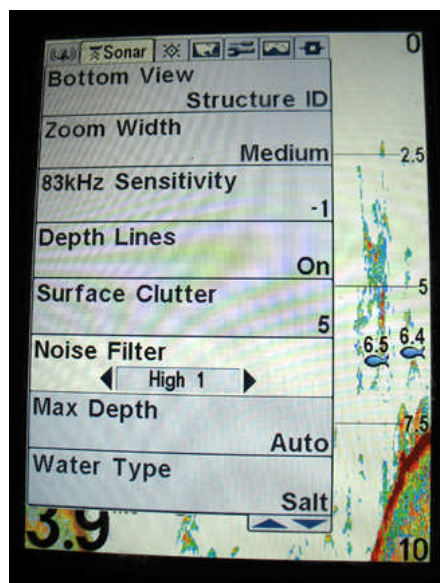
I use a Hummingbird combination Sounder GPS which has additional tuning features other brands don't offer. This includes Fish ID sensitivity which is great as you can increase or decrease the settings depending on conditions or depth you are fishing. You don't need to be using raw data returns to determine whether you are looking at suspended seaweed or real fish. I find the Hummingbird very easy to fine tune while on the go which is handy when moving around a lot prospecting for good ground.

I believe that finding good ground or structure is just as important as finding fish on the sounder. Practise adjusting sensitivities settings as much as you can, ideally in areas where you are already familiar with the terrain. Take note of the structure below so you can interpret what your fish-finder is telling you on the display. Before long you should be able to glance at the screen and tell exactly the type of terrain below and if there are fish close by. Till next month play around with your sensitivity settings and good luck finding the fish.

Here we see the sensitivity or gain properly set. The picture shows a school of bait with a bigger fish hanging around



Adjust your surface clutter so there isn't much fuzz on the surface



The noise filter helps eliminating electronic interference from your motor or other electronics like stereo's