

Angling on the Edge



Surf fishing from a Sonoma Coast State Beach

Time and tide wait for none when fishing the Sonoma Coast

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If there was ever such a thing as an ocean hillbilly, the people with the long surf poles, bait buckets and the thousand-yard stare could most likely fit the category.

After all, most of the folks fishing off the Bodega Bay jetty, or tossing lines into the pounding surf off Salmon Creek beach can't afford to fly to a remote Alaskan fishing lodge or jet to New Zealand to hook up giant steelhead. This latter species of fish, by the way, is descended from eggs taken to New Zealand from Sonoma County streams before the turn of the last century (and before the subsequent decline in abundance of their local cousins here).

To avoid stereotypes, meanwhile, it must be said that fishing can be seasonally democratic. For example, today's shore bait-angler can morph into tomorrow's Sierra Nevada fly fisherman at the April trout opener. Nonetheless, for locals or wanna-be locals looking for simple and affordable piscine pleasures, fishing at the edge of the mighty Pacific, either from the rocks or sand is hard to beat.

For one, the limitless expanse of the ocean and the beauty of the Sonoma Coast give a lift to the human spirit, particularly during winter when the people are fewer, and more importantly, when the surfperch tend to gather to mate along the shore.

For another, even when fishing is slow, the skimming, wave tipping sight of a flight of California brown pelicans or the sight of a dark, undulating string of black Brandt far out to sea amid the sounds of crashing surf, is a blessing few will forget.

When fishing is good, as fishing hillbillies are prone to say, "It don't get much better than that."

Of the two general types of saltwater shore fishing, fishing off the rocks is prob-





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ably the most frustrating, mostly because of the amount of gear lost from the inevitable hang-ups on the rocks or near-shore seaweed waving in the surging water.

The possibility of catching sizable cabezon (an ugly but tasty fish), kelp and rock greenling can also be rewarding, as well as several species of saltwater perch, including striped seaperch, rubberlip seaperch, and pile perch. Rubberlip seaperch, shiner perch, and pile perch are the primary species caught in bays along riprap and piers, according to California State Fish & Game marine biologists.

Before going any farther, it is important to not only have a 2010 fishing license but also a good grasp of regulations, including size limits and the numbers of each species you can keep. A license is not needed for fishing off public piers such as Aquatic Park in San Francisco. Unfortunately there are none in Sonoma County.

As to the regulations, a fisherman can keep two cabezon, for example, that are a minimum of 15 inches and two rock or kelp greenling, which must be at least 12 inches in length. Although there is no size limit on surfperch (aside from redtail

surfperch, which must be 10.5 inches long), the bag limits are more generous, with a combination of 20 species—not more than ten of each—legal to keep.

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Gear for fishing off the rocks can be simple. Many fishermen rig up a sturdy rod from about seven to 10 feet capable of handling 20 or 30-pound line on a comparable saltwater spinning reel. A good



Cabezon, "cab" for short, strike pretty forcibly...The cab [shown above] is a bottom rock dweller that can be difficult to land if allowed to retreat to the rocks or seaweeds after being hooked. Cabezon eggs are poisonous; so do not eat the roe.

idea is to tie a swivel to the fishing end of the line. Attach to that a leader about two feet long of slightly lighter test strength and attach two snelled hooks, size six to four, to the leader.

At the bottom, attach a weight of about three or four ounces; some people use sand bags since they are less likely to hang up on the rock.

For the beginner, one of the easiest baits is squid. It's easy to slice and it stays on the hook in rough water. Other suitable baits include abalone trimmings, mussels, clams, shrimp, worms, cut or strip bait, and live bait when available.

Cast out, looking for openings in the seaweed or rocks, and let it sit. If you get impatient quickly and are prone to try and move the tackle to see what might be there, you will very likely get hung up and lose your gear.

Cabezon, "cab" for short, strike pretty forcibly; perch will tug as will greenlings. Wait for a second tug then set the hook, making care to haul the fish in as quickly as possible before it gets a

chance to make a run for sheltering (and line cutting) rocks below.

The cab is a bottom rock dweller that can be difficult to land if allowed to retreat to the rocks or seaweed after being hooked. Cabezon eggs are poisonous; so do not eat the roe. Check the bait after awhile, hauling in the gear in as fast as possible to avoid any hang-ups. Even then, you should be prepared to replace a lot of terminal (the fishing end) tackle.

As always, when fishing off rocks in an incoming tide, make sure to keep an eye on the ocean to avoid being hit by a “sleeper” (or rogue) wave or getting stranded.

A preferred place to fish is off the sandy beaches, where the surfperch seem to be more plentiful.

Unlike the rocks, fishing off a sand beach means you can't fall on the rocks or get stranded by the tide and you tend to lose a lot less gear—most of time, none. And although cabezon and the various kelp and inshore rockfish are pretty tasty, so are the perch, particularly the larger species that make for great fillets.

Along our coasts, redbait and calico surfperch are among the two species most frequently sought in shallow water along beaches composed of sand and small



rocks. Also caught along sandy beaches are barred, silver, and walleye surfperch.

Fishing for surfperch does not require specialized gear or techniques. Good baits include a variety of natural baits and artificial lures, as well as fly fishing gear in some instances. Like other fishing, the most success tends to occur during low-light periods like early mornings, late afternoons and overcast conditions that coincide with incoming tides or tides changing from high to low, or even the opposite.

In addition, surfperch fishing gets better just before the mating season in late fall and winter, and during the spawning stage in the spring through early summer.

Most of those who fish along the Sonoma Coast from the dry sand tend to use long rods, from ten to twelve feet long, with lines hovering in the 15 to 20-pound test class. Like fishing from the rocks the traditional “fish finder” rig involves tying on hooks one above the other, about a foot apart on the main line.

A pyramid-shaped sinker is often used to keep the line in the water as it lodges against the sand while being moved by the surf. Since the big rods are heavy, many fishermen use sand stakes to hold the rod while they wait for a strike.

Although the best bait for surfperch is freshly caught ghost shrimp, sand crabs are highly prized by surf fish and can be scooped from the sand with a small net in many locations between waves. Lacking those, squid works quite well and will stay on the hook when the fish are biting.

A plastic bucket is handy to hold bait and captured fish. Some old timers even bring a chair to sit in while they wait for a school of fish to discover their bait. Other perch fishermen, however, hit the beach

[Resources] A Superperch Primer

There are more than a dozen species of surfperch living along the California Coast. The species range from Baja California to north of the Oregon border. A few of the more sought after perch along the Sonoma Coast include:

REDBAIT SURFPERCH

The redbait surfperch occurs from Monterey Bay to Vancouver Island and is one of the most prevalent surfperch from Bodega Bay northward. Redtail surfperch are predominantly surf dwellers off sandy beaches, but have been taken in rocky areas adjacent to beaches. They are common in estuaries and protected embayments during the spawning season.

Small crustaceans are the major food items preferred by this species, along with mussels and marine worms. Like all surfperch, the redbait gives birth to live young. The young are carried inside the mother until birth when they emerge as min-

ature replicas of the adults. Males mature at age two and females at age four. They breed in fall and give birth in spring and summer, primarily from June to August.

Redtail surfperch concentrate just before spawning in sheltered inshore waters during the spring and early summer. They are frequently caught in large numbers at this time. The average weight of a redbait surfperch caught by an angler is 1.8 lbs., and three-pound fish are not uncommon.

RUBBERLIPPED SURFPERCH

Rubberlip surfperch occur from Baja California to Russian Gulch State Beach in Mendocino County. They frequent rocky areas, tide pools and kelp beds on the outer coast as well as bays and harbors.

Adults feed upon crab, shrimp and octopus. Juveniles feed on typical surfperch food such

as worms, small crabs, mussels, and tiny snails. Recreational anglers catch rubberlip surfperch from skiffs, piers and the shore.

BARRED SURFPERCH

The barred surfperch occurs from Baja California to Bodega Bay. Barred surfperch are found in the surf zone along sandy beaches where they seem to congregate in depressions on the bottom.

The major portion of the barred surfperch diet is sand crab, with other crustaceans, bean clams and small crabs comprising the remainder. Barred surfperch give birth from March to July. This species is relatively short lived with the oldest males being about six years old and 12 inches long. The oldest females are about nine years old and up to 17 inches long.

— California Department of Fish and Game.

using a lighter rod and line, and maybe just a backpack.

These fishermen, many of them using artificial baits that include various colored “grubs,” will stalk the beach, casting periodically as they walk along trying to locate moving perch schools.

For this kind of work, a seven-foot rod that handles from 10 to 15-pound test works well. Although the standard “fish finder” rig will work, most anglers with grubs will use what is called a “Carolina” rig. It basically consists of an egg sinker slid on the main line above a swivel and a leader of perhaps five to six feet of lighter line to which is attached a number-six hook and a plastic grub.

The angler, understanding that many surfperch may lie in the churning surf at his feet, will cast out into the waves and slowly crank the lure back in.

In addition, this kind of surf fishing is interesting because, much like fresh water trout fishing, the angler needs to “read” the surf, looking for indications of troughs or other areas that might be darker, hence deeper, than the surrounding water and which tend to hold fish.

The angler on the move also will look for seals or sea lions working offshore, as well as diving pelicans and other sea birds—good indications of the presence of fish.

The great thing about it all is that this kind of local knowledge, as well as the feel for the surf, is probably best garnered by fishing in one of the most wonderful places to be there is... at the edge of the ocean.

For more information on surf fishing along the Sonoma Coast, be sure to check the California Department of Fish & Game’s web site at www.dfg.ca.gov. Also, local fishing tackle stores such as King’s Sport & Tackle in Guerneville and Will’s Bait and Tackle and the Bodega Bay Sport Fishing Center in Bodega Bay all have web sites. And there are any number of resources available by typing “surf fishing” into your web browser’s search box.