

Surf Fishing: Using Clams and Mussel in the Surf

By Bill Varney



This time of year always reminds me of a story my son told me one day after coming home from surf team practice. The story starts out the day I met a fellow fisherman on the beach who turned out to be a marine biologist doing an extensive study on corbina. Although the biologist's focus was to catch, examine and catalog corbina, they always seemed to catch other common surf fish during their research. Once all the fish had been examined they discovered that every fish from the surf had one thing in common: their stomachs all contained mussel and clam bivalves—and not just one or a few—but every one they caught over a nine month period.

I had always known clams and mussel worked in the surf and had noticed some time ago that they seemed to work best starting in October. So one day a few years ago my son came to me after surf practice and told me the story of how one of the kids on the team was thrown from their board and tossed to the bottom. When they came to shore their face was torn, scraped, bloody and covered with clams. Immediately the light went off in my head and I excused myself, collected my gear (*and a few clams*) and made my way down to the beach to have some of the best spotfin croaker fishing ever!

With more than 15,000 species of clam, oyster and mussel bivalve mollusks to choose from it makes sense that this bait works well in the surf. The most common bivalve may be mussels which are found anywhere you have substantial tidal movement, in conjunction with rock, pilings or jetty structure. More than anywhere else, mussels seem to thrive on pier pilings, docks, jetties and inside wave-protected harbors.

Two different kinds of mussel work great for surf bait. One is common rock or piling mussel, which contains orange and brown meat (*Mytilus californianus*). The other is the green bay mussel, which is full of bright chartreuse meat and can be found under small intertidal rocks (*Mytilus edulis diegensis*).



Beach Mussel and Bay Mussel

The best time to collect mussels is at low tide. Rock and jetty mussel will be found in groups on rocks facing the open ocean. Bay mussel is found inside harbor areas on the bottom of small rocks where only one or two may live.

Rather than wrestling with bait in the morning's half-light, I like to clean my mussels before going to the beach. When shucking mussel use a small knife to cut the tendons near the rear of the shell. On one side, near the back, there is a small indentation or hole. Insert your knife into this hole and slowly pull the knife forward toward the front of the shell. As you move along it will cut the tendon and once the shell is partly open you can pry it apart with your fingers. Inside the mussel you will find two different bait textures: one very soft and pliable another very rubbery and strong. Both make good bait.

Mussel work great as fresh bait, but you may also want to collect a few extra, shuck them from their shells and freeze them for later use. I divide them into small zip top bags and freeze them. Only thaw once. Mussels

thawed and refrozen may become too mushy for bait. Always take only as many as you will need.

For hooking mussel, I'll wrap it around an octopus (seems ironic!), mosquito or split shot hook then pierce the rubber lip membrane last so that it holds the bait in place. Be sure to puncture the lip membrane past the barb to hold it securely. Some anglers use dental floss or silk string to secure mussel to the hook and also *include some of the shell in their bait presentation*.



Another hooking technique is to feed the mussel lip up the hook just as if you were using a worm. This can be done by inserting the hook into the center of the mussel lip membrane and then pulling the mussel up over the hook and eventually onto your line. Rather than wrapping the bait around the hook (like above) you are pulling the hook down the center of the bait so it appears to look like a worm. If a bite takes off the bottom half of your bait just slide more mussel lip below the hook and poke the point of the hook back through the membrane.

Mussel is very hardy and will last in a cool moist plastic tray for several days. They can be cleaned immediately or are a bit easier to shuck after being stored overnight. By all means, do not eat mussel that you collect. It's a filter organism that when feeding passes huge quantities of water through its membrane. It's "muscle" then retains and concentrates toxins it filters from the water including "Domoic Acid" the neurotoxin that causes amnesic shellfish poisoning which may be fatal.

Besides mussel, there are several different types of clams that work well in the surf. My favorites include little neck clams(*Protothaca staminea*), cockles(*Clinocardium californiense*) and Pacific razor clams(*Siliqua patula*). Some of the largest spotfin croaker I've seen caught were those caught on fresh clam.



Littleneck Clams

The best place to find these clams (with the exception of pismo clams) is in inlet areas that are flushed by daily tides. Harbors, inlets, estuaries and any marine environment where saltwater washes over rocks are good places to look for them. Most clams occur near or under rocks.

I look for areas that have small rocks (about the size of a shoe box) and turn them over. By using a small hand cultivator you can turn over the mud and sand near the rocks and find clams. I use gloves and the cultivator because of the many barnacles on the rocks and sharp objects in the sand.

The best tide to find clams is always low tide. This allows you to harvest an area that is covered by water at high tide. As with collecting most types of bait, go down to your local harbor or inlet to explore and dig around at low tide. You will be amazed at what you find and you'll know exactly where to go when you next need bait.

When you're finished hunting the elusive clam replace the rocks and try to leave the spot as undisturbed as possible. Just take what you will need for a couple of days fishing.



Razor Clam

Clams will last in your refrigerator for about one week. Be sure they are in a tight container. I open clams at the beach by crushing their shell with my pliers. You may also open them at home the night before. Be sure to keep them in their own juice so they don't dry out.

When you open clams you will find two distinct meats. One meat is very soft and should be put on the hook first. The other meat is very rubbery and is sometimes characterized by a bright orange or a dull yellow color.

Now it's time to hook the clam. Once you've opened the clam carefully pull out all of the meat. First hook the soft part of the bait. Then hook the rubbery (a heart shaped normally yellow or orange) section. This will help the clam stay on your hook for a good cast.

Clams are stable on the hook and easy to cast. Check your bait periodically to make sure it's securely hooked. You'll find that clams are durable and work great for surfperch, corbina, yellowfin and spotfin croaker.

Fall and winter months have always been a great time for using clams and mussel in the surf. If you are collecting them yourself take a few moments to become familiar with the DFW rules by going to: <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Fishing/Ocean#310671027-finfish-and-invertebrates>. Always take just what you need for bait and catch, photo and release your surf fish whenever possible.

Tip:

Clams seem to work their best in the months of October through January. As a clue to what fish are eating I look for beds of clams(Donax gouldii, bean clams) that form near the low tide mark in huge beds. You can usually find these in October and although they are not the clams we use for bait, it lets us know this is what fish are eating.



Another trick when using mussel is to leave it in its natural state. As with the picture at the beginning of this article....when shucking mussel, leave a portion of the shell on the meat to give your bait a more realistic look. When mussel falls or are ripped from the rocks it is never perfectly shucked. Leaving a bit of shell on will provide a more natural look and because surf fish commonly see mussel this way they tend to be attracted to this type of bait presentation.