

Finding Halibut in the Surf

By Bill Varney, Jr.



Dan Morita with a beautiful beach halibut

With spring just around the corner and grunion on their way it's that time of year again to hunt the elusive California halibut. This year's warm water has already prompted grunion to stage just

outside the surf line. With the first of the season's grunion runs to begin this week halibut anxiously wait to rush the beach for food.

In this issue we look at how to prepare our tackle, rigging and what places, times and tides are best for catching halibut.

When it comes to tackle you have a couple of different choices of *rod and reel combinations* depending on whether you will be using live bait or lures.

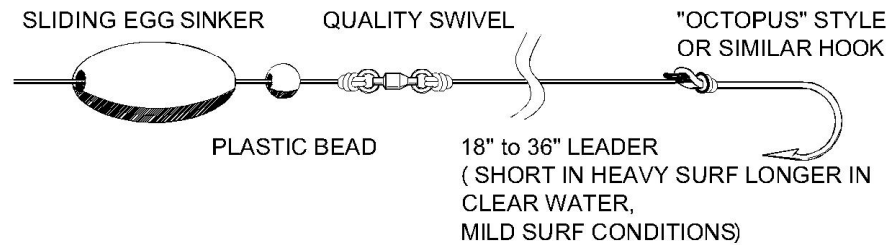
For fishing lures it's good to get started with an 8' rod rated for 8-20lb line. Spinning and conventional reels both work well. For lure fishing, I prefer a conventional reel because it seems better matched to my rod when it comes to fighting the fish and directing it away from snags. There are many good conventional reels on the market so just make sure you have a smooth casting reel with at least 300 yards of 8-20lb line (I prefer monofilament but braided lines also work but may be prone to abrasion and line failure).

Conversely, when it comes to fishing live bait I like to use a spinning reel because it seems easier to cast with a set up that includes a long leader and sinker. Once again I like to use a longer 7-9' rod rated 8-16lb test and a 2500 or 4000 size-spinning reel rated for 300 yards of 6 or 8lb test monofilament. I also recommend a spinning outfit for lures when you're fishing in a tight area like under a bridge or near a pier or anywhere casting is restricted.

When it comes to *halibut rigging* I use two basic setups. The first is the Carolina rig which works best with bait (and also has some lure applications). The second rig is a lure tied directly to my

monofilament.

CAROLINA RIG



Carolina rigging consists of a sliding egg sinker, bead, swivel, 18"-36" leader and a hook. In small surf a ½ ounce egg sinker works well. In bigger surf or when fishing in the wind use a 1-ounce or heavier sinker to keep my bait on the bottom.

I like to use a black swivel, a clear bead and 6lb fluorocarbon leader. In *small* surf my leader may be as long as 36". In *large* surf always use a shorter leader (12"-18) to be sure your bait stays in constant contact with the bottom.

The hook I like to tie to the end of my leader is a conventional "j" hook, which is very sharp and made of thin black wire.

The most important part of the rig is the hook so be sure your hooks are new, in good condition and very sharp. Some good hook

choices include split shot, mosquito and octopus hooks in sizes 1, 2 and 4.

The Carolina rig works best with all live and fresh dead baits and also with a fly tied to the end of the leader in place of a hook.

The second setup I use when fishing with lures is either a straight connection of the lure to my mono or using a uni to uni knot to connect my main line to 10+lb fluorocarbon leader and then tying on my lure.

Fluorocarbon leader is a good idea whenever I'm fishing near rocks or over structure. Fluorocarbon allows me to use a heavier leader and it's much more abrasion resistant than monofilament and less visible to fish.

So in open beach areas I'll tie directly to mono; while in rocky areas like jettys and reefs, I'll always use the fluorocarbon leader because of its abrasion resistant qualities.

There are several places at the beach where you should be concentrating your efforts to catch halibut. Look along open beaches, the edges of jetties and harbor, river and estuary entrances. Halibut congregate in these areas looking for food and a safe place to rest.



Open beaches offer a challenge when looking to target halibut. When you arrive at the beach find a high spot near the water's edge and look up and down the beach for signs of fish. Because surf fish congregate near areas of jumbled or foaming water look for small rip currents that form plumes of off-colored water just off shore. Another area to target is offshore structure including holes, kelp beds and reefs. Once you spot these areas, cast your bait or lure along the edge of a rip current, structure or where rocks meet sand--this is where fish will be waiting to ambush bait.

Halibut also congregate in the offshore troughs that are formed by wave action as the sand is deposited in shallow bars. These troughs are easiest to find at low tide and run parallel to the beach. One trough will form outside where the waves break farthest out from the beach (at low tide), another trough will form where the waves break (during high tide) near the shore. Cast over and drag your bait through these troughs to entice halibut to bite. Fan casting at various angles will allow you to cover the greatest area including the inshore trough.

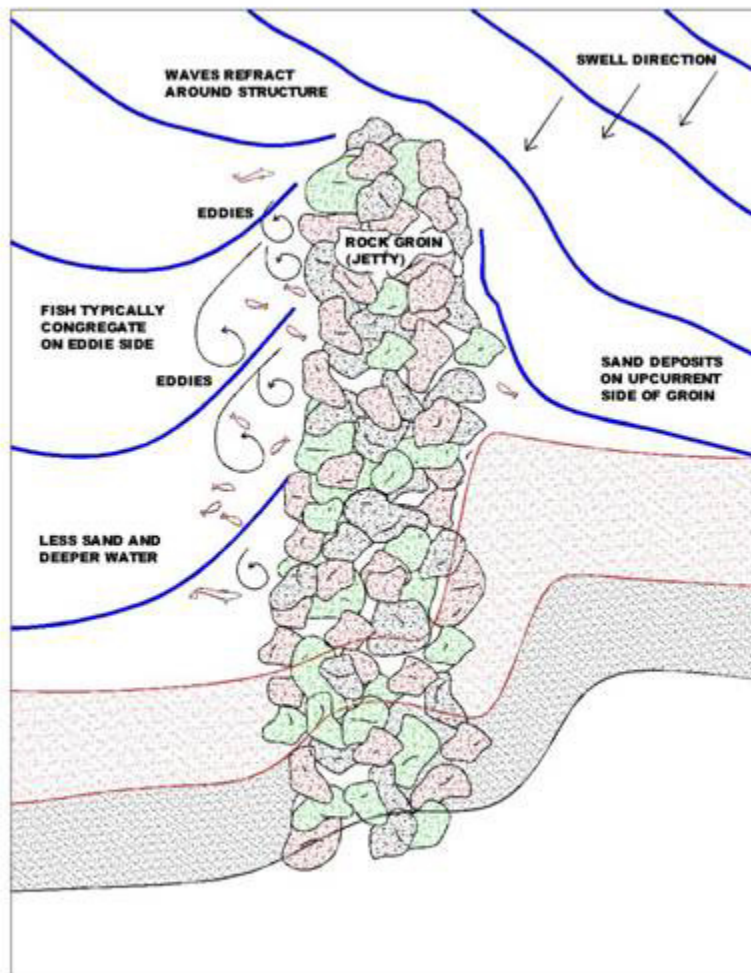
Open beaches that have a rocky point adjacent to them are also great areas to target fish. Find where the sand meets the rocks and fish along this edge.

The best way to find halibut along an open beach is by knowing just where the grunion have come ashore to spawn. Get to know your local lifeguard or park ranger. They will always be the first to know where the grunion were and a priceless resource for you to find out too.



Jetties also offer some great opportunities to catch halibut. The California coast is blessed with man-made and natural jetties that provide structure and habitat for bait fish and feeding halibut. As with open-beach fishing, it's always smart to cast along the edge of rock where it meets sand to find the fish. But there are some subtle differences to also look for when fishing along a jetty.

When approaching the base of the jetty, where it meets the sand, look out to sea and take note of the direction of approaching waves and swells. If the waves are approaching the jetty from the right, a natural eddy will be generated on the jetty's opposite side (left side). If waves are coming from the left, an eddy will form on the jetty's right side.



Eddies are much like a rip current and are characterized by swirling, foaming off-colored water. Fish congregate in an eddy

where moving water churns up bait and allows them to stay hidden while they wait to ambush food. Once you find the eddy, fish along its edges and cast through the middle to find the fish. Don't be surprised when the tide or swell direction changes and the opposite side of the jetty becomes the best place to fish.



Estuaries and river mouths are almost always connected with a channel for fish to run from warmer breeding grounds out into open-ocean. The California coast was once blessed with hundreds of natural estuaries that acted as rookeries for growing fish stocks. After unprecedented development and growth many of these breeding grounds were filled or closed off to ocean circulation. Still there remain a few in almost every beach community that offer fantastic opportunity for surf fishing.

When approaching an estuary or river mouth area use the same rule of observation as with jetties—determine the direction of the swell and tidal current and how it effects water movement. Unlike with jetties, tide flow will have a much greater effect on fishing the river mouth. A high going to a low tide will pull water out of the

estuary and toward the open ocean. A low going to a high tide will push water and waves up into the estuary and change the direction and movement of fish.

Again, look for the formation of eddys. On an incoming tide, an eddy may form just inside the river mouth. As tides recede, an eddy may form just outside the river mouth in an area of open-ocean. This is where the fish will congregate to lay-in-wait for your bait. Fish your bait along these edges and allow it to be pulled by the tide and current into the strike zone. Try to stay away from areas where the water is moving too quickly as fish here will not be willing to chase your bait.

Fish will normally be reluctant to expend excessive energy to pursue bait in a heavy current, preferring to utilize slack water and eddies to lay-in-wait for a morsel of food to drift past.

Each beach will have its own special *time and tide* where fishing is best but here's a general guideline that you can follow. When fishing the open beach, halibut fishing seems to be best at or near low tide. Lower tides give you the advantage to wade into the surf and cast well beyond the surf line. Low tides also allow you to reach the outside holes and structure that hold fish.

Although some spots do fish well at high tide, our best luck on the open beach has come at peak low minus tides and the first push of incoming tide.

Near jetties I've found the best tides to be medium to high tide where the halibut come in close to the rocks to feed and spawn. Watch for high and low astronomical tides (the greatest swings in tidal movement because of moon phase), which move more water and create a larger eddy circulation. These tides improve jetty fishing and really stir the water up for halibut. If fishing the rocks at low tide, try using the jetty as a platform for casting to areas outside the rocks that don't usually get fished.

Estuaries that are connected to the open ocean by a series of jetties or a river have always been very productive. Because fish use these river inlets to enter and exit the estuary there is no better place to target big fish. Strong currents during incoming and outgoing tidal flows sometimes makes it almost impossible to fish for halibut in these rivers.

That's why fishing just minutes before, during and after low tide *and* high tide will give you your best chance at catching a keeper.

Halibut are characteristically ambush predators lying-in-wait either partially or entirely concealed beneath the bottom sand or gravel. They will occasionally actively pursue bait and lures but prefer to wait for food to come to them. During *slack tide periods* your bait is presented in a more natural manner giving halibut a better chance to attack your bait.

Halibut on your dinner table are just around the corner. Take some time to prepare your rod, reel and rigging to hit the beach. Watch the tide movement and scope out a few different areas to fish. By putting a bit more effort into preparing for surf fishing you can be sure to find the perfect spot and bring home table fare that will bring a smile to your entire family!