

# Surf Fishing: How To Preserve Bait

By, Bill Varney



Just like fishing, bait has a season too. As the summer winds down I like to take time to preserve surf fishing baits for winter. As the water cools in fall, sand crabs begin their process of finding structure and going into hibernation. Although a few may be found during winter under piers, most crabs are several feet below the surface. Other baits like ghost shrimp, mussel and clams can be found year-round but are often inaccessible during winter storms.

Preserving bait is a great solution when you plan to keep it for an extended period. Bait is often preserved with salt or by freezing. Treated bait tends to be denser than fresh bait and is heavier allowing it to sink to zone where fish feed. These baits can be kept for long periods of time in both the freezer and on the shelf and are ready at a moment's notice for you to cast into the surf.



Mussels can be preserved both by salting/dehydration and by freezing. Look for mussels to be attached to rocks inside harbor jetties and open ocean jetties. You'll find the largest mussel on jetties that face surf and active currents. Inside harbors you'll find mussel attached to rocks, docks and pilings. These mussels are smaller and have a much thinner shell. In rocky areas inside harbors you may also find green mussel. Growing to about six inches in length the meat is bright chartreuse and works as a great fish attractant in the off-colored waters inside harbors and estuaries. All other mussel has a brown, olive green and orange color.



Mussels are made up of three types of meat. Soft center meat, tough outside lip and a white mussel used by the mollusk to open and close it's shell. With both freezing and salting you may want to separate the lip from the other meat. I prefer to use the lip in the surf because I can use a long shank hook and present it on my rig like a worm.

After collecting mussel let it sit overnight in a bucket outside. In the morning the mussel will have opened and make it much easier to shuck. Be sure to catch and set aside any water that spills from the shell as they are opened. Once you've removed the meat separate it into groups of soft center bait and lip. Use small zip top bags and fill them with enough for one outing, include a bit of "juice" you collected. Once you freeze each packet, it will take about 20 minutes to thaw with your bait now ready to go on the hook. Mussel can also be salted which we will discuss a bit later.



Sand crabs are one of my favorite baits to preserve for winter use. Salting crabs tends to dry them out and make them very brittle. I prefer



to freeze them. Sand crabs come to the beach in May when the water warms to sixty degrees. In October, they leave the beach and hibernate when the water drops below that. Start by collecting crabs in late September. Look for the hardest crabs you can find. Avoid sand crabs that are semi-soft or soft-shelled as they will become mush when thawed. Also try to find crabs that are between the size of a dime to a quarter. This is the perfect size for most surf fish.

Place one dozen sand crabs in a small zip top bag and freeze. They will last throughout winter and can be tossed when crabs come back in spring. A great variation, and one I use often, is to place a piece of soft mussel in with the crabs and freeze them. As this thaws it will coat the sand crabs, turn them a bit orange and give off an irresistible odor to fish. Another option for your frozen sand crabs is to add a pack or two of hot sauce (Taco Bell, Del Taco, etc.) as they are defrosting on the way to the beach. This takes the place of the mussel and creates a coating that perch just can't resist.

Ghost Shrimp can only be salted for later use. Freezing shrimp is not suggested because once thawed they turn to mush. Salting and dehydrating shrimp is an excellent way to preserve them for winter. We will discuss the salting process next.

Salting anchovy, sardine, smelt, grunion, mackerel, squid, mussel and ghost shrimp is an excellent way to preserve baits for winter surf fishing. Salting draws the moisture out of the flesh and creates a high content of salt that deters the growth of bacteria. Salted baits will last in the freezer or shelf for months.

Salting bait is simple and inexpensive. Start with fresh dead or freshly defrosted bait. Most surf baits, with the exception of sand crabs, work great, last long and retain a more natural look when thawed.



Start with a plastic container with a lid, sandwich or larger size. Remove the top and drill 10-15  $\frac{1}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> inch holes in the bottom so the mix may drain. You'll need a catch pan below this because the salt mix is caustic and will remove paint and discolor items.

Fill the container about  $\frac{1}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> way full with course non-iodized (kosher) rock salt. Be sure to cover the bottom and all holes with salt. Place the bait in rows on the salt keeping each piece as straight as possible. Cover the bait with a  $\frac{1}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> inch layer of salt. Replace lid, place in drip pan and store for 24 hours or more in a cool dry place. The rock salt will now begin to leach the moisture out of the bait.

After a day or two remove bait from container and place it in a plastic container or zip top bag. They should now be firm, rubbery and dry.

Bait can then be left in a cool, dry, well ventilated shelf in the shed. They can also be frozen. Salting has helped to preserve their color, shape and freshness.

With a little effort and patience you can stock up for winter surf fishing by preserving some of the baits found for free along our shores. It is often that cold water surf fishing is tough but when you have an advantage using natural baits that are preserved to retain their flavor, shape and color you certainly have a chance for the fish of a lifetime.