

Surf Fishing With Flies

By, Bill Varney



In spring, summer and fall surf fish prowl the beach in search of fresh food. They forage on sand crabs, ghost shrimp, worms, clams, mussel and almost anything they can find. When winter comes many of the foods they find in warmer months disappears but their search continues. That's why artificial baits work so well in winter...simply because there is little competition with fresh, live bait.

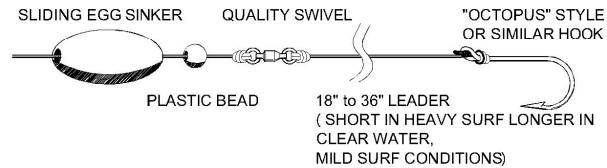
A great many surf anglers transition in winter to using artificial lures. Spoons, hard baits and lures come to mind but probably one of the best and most neglected artificial lures is the surf fly. Successful anglers look for what occurs naturally in the area they fish and try to find lures that match the shape, size and color of natural baits. Nothing does this better than a properly tied fly designed for the surf.

Anglers often shy away from using flies in the surf because they are not acquainted with the equipment and technique to use a fly rod. But fret not! Flies work just as well (and maybe better in many cases) when fished on a spinning rod.

For spinning fishing use a light-action 7-9' rod matched with a 2500-3000 series spinning reel (a steelhead rod for example). Load the reel with 6-8lb

monofilament or braid. The longer the rod the farther you'll be able to cast and ultimately cover more surface area.

CAROLINA RIG



Rigging is simple. For surf flies use the Carolina Rig. A ½ - ¾ ounce sliding sinker, a 6mm red bead, #12 black swivel, 30" of fluorocarbon leader and your fly. This rig will give you advantages over using sinking fly line and a fly rod. Surf, especially winter surf, can be very rough and be complemented by strong long shore currents. By using a sliding sinker your rig and fly will likely stay on the bottom where surf fish feed.

Having a longer rod will allow you to cast farther and cover more surface area on the bottom. The more surface area you cover the better chance you'll have to find fish and ultimately catch them. The most effective way to cover areas of fish is by employing a fan casting motion. That would be: cast to the left and retrieve, cast straight out and retrieve and cast to the right and retrieve (i.e. 10 o'clock, 12 o'clock, 2 o'clock).

In winter your retrieve should be slow, slower, the colder the water. It's best to scent your baits as this will help fish to hold on to your fly long enough to set the hook. There are a great many scents on the market and they all seem to work. If you're in a pinch for cash do what I do...take two packets of hot sauce (Taco Bell, Panda Express, Del Taco) squirt them into a snack-size zip top bag and presto...you've got dip!

When it comes to the speed or action of your retrieve I like to start out by trying several different techniques. Fast, slow, stop and go and stop and

twitch are all good to start with until you learn what action the fish are looking for. Dip your baits, fan casting and vary your retrieve will all help you to get more bites.



When choosing a fly for the surf keep in mind you are trying to match what surf fish eat. Along the beach, fish often forage on perch fry, worms, crabs, mussel and clams. So shape is important, long flies for worms, round flies for sand crabs, and flies shaped as fry to represent baby perch. Colors are also important. You want to match the colors that occur naturally in the surf. Orange for sand crab eggs, brown and burnt orange for mussel or brick red for worms. Be sure to match your bait to be about the same size of each of these foods. Lastly, pay special attention to the time of day and overhead light. In early morning and evening use dark colors as they cast a dense shadow. In mid-day use bright colors that reflect light from the sun.

So, now that you are set up to hit the beach, where will you have your best chance of finding fish? Three key items to keep in mind are time of day, weather conditions and topography of the beach.

When it comes to time of day we often find that morning and evening provide the best opportunity to catch fish. The exception, on warm Santa Ana days when the morning starts cool then warms with an offshore breeze at your back. Weather conditions will also dictate when you might fish as high winds and big surf may make the beach unfishable.

The most important factor in finding fish is finding their winter home and the areas they congregate. This is where knowing the topography of the beach comes in. Taking time to walk the beach at low tide will help you find the long-shore trench and inshore holes. You can then line them up and come back at a higher tide, when they are covered by water and fish them.



Look for jetties and structure just off shore. Surf fish in winter will congregate near these areas hoping for protection and looking for food. Fish the edges of these rocky areas, where sand meets rock and you'll find fish here. Lastly, pay attention to the water. Look for off-colored, churning, foaming water. This is where you'll find rip currents churning up the bottom and all the bait that lives there. Cast along the edges of the rip current and retrieve your fly slowly between turbid and clear water. Fish will use these "rips" as both a place to hide and a place to forage.



Using flies in the winter surf is our secret weapon! By matching your flies to the bait that occurs in the area you are fishing will greatly enhance your success. Take time to find the spots where fish congregate along long-shore troughs, jetties or rip currents. Cast your fly along these edges and retrieve them with varied speeds. This is where you'll find the fish and especially those trophy-sized cruisers who hide in skinny water waiting for their chance to crush your winter fly.