

Surf Fishing with Worms

By Bill Varney



Every time I think about fishing with worms it reminds me of Huck, Tom and ol' Jim sitting on the banks of the lazy Mississippi snoozing in the sun. But when fishing worms at the beach there's no snoozing. Especially when it's winter and surf fish are attacking the worm!

In the surf there are (*at least*) four worms that work great for catching fish. Bloodworms, sand worms and innkeeper worms are just four of the 700 species that can be found along the California coast. Another option is a worm that comes from the Orient. Lugworms, which are grown in Korea, work great for bait too.

All four work great when used for bait and can be found in tackle shops and on the beach depending on the worm. Both blood and lugworms are imported to California. Most bloodworms come from New England and are hand harvested from estuaries and bays. Lugworms are grown or farmed in Korea and shipped here for sale.

Other worms such as sand worms and innkeeper worms can be found right on our local beaches and inside harbors and estuaries. With a bit of practice you may be able to collect them yourself, save some money and have the freshest bait ever.



Bloodworms (*Glycera dibranchiata*) are one of the classic surf baits. Talk to any seasoned surf fisherman and they'll have a story about the huge fish they caught on this worm. Fish are attracted to bloodworms because of their size, taste and dark red color. Bloodworms are very hardy and have a strong casing that allows them to stay intact on the hook longer. This means that when hooked correctly you can easily catch several fish on the same bait. It's not unusual to catch perch, corbina, spotfin croaker and just about any other fish on this bait.



Pacific Lugworms (*Abarenicola pacifica*) are similar to blood worms but have a thinner casing and are somewhat less hearty. They also work great as bait and have just the right colors to attract surf fish. Olive green on one side and tan on the other, these worms are less expensive than bloodworms but tend break apart, especially when catching multiple fish on a single bait. Both bloodworms and lugworms can be purchased at tackle stores that specialize in surf fishing.



Sand worms (*Nereis vexillosa*) can be found on your local beach and live beneath the sand near the high tide mark. They make fantastic surf bait for perch, croaker and the occasional halibut. These worms can be found at the beach throughout the year but are most active during spring and summer grunion runs. Their color reflects what they have eaten. Many times, they are olive green and orange from eating clams and other times they may be red and green from eating grunion eggs.

When collecting sand worms (*this should be done at low tide*) start by digging ten to twenty feet below the high tide mark. Most worms are down about 12"-36" and occasionally can be found in groups. Begin by digging a hole three feet wide and one foot deep.

Look for the worms as you dig. Remember, they dig and slither away in an instant, so keep a close eye. Catching worms takes a bit of practice and patience. Dig the sand away slowly and look for worms as they dig away from your cut. Once you find one start by gently grabbing the worm as it digs away. You may dig around it to catch the worm or pull it slowly backwards until it lets loose and comes out. Be gentle because if you pull too hard they'll break off and you will only have one-half a bait!

Sand worms are hardy and easy to keep. Simply put them in a sealed plastic container and place it in the refrigerator. They will bunch up and stay lively for about one week. I like to use a #2 split shot hook and thread one or two worms, depending on size, up the hook for bait.

All three worms should be hooked the same way. I like to use a #2 Sproat worm hook. This hook looks a lot like the common “bait holder” hook. It has a long shaft and two small barbs to hold the bait in place. To start, hold the worm between your thumb and index finger and insert the hook into the center or mouth of the worm. Run the hook down the center of the worm and work the worm up your hook and eventually over the eye and onto your line. Now poke the sharp end of the hook through the casing of the worm and leave a 2” section dangling below the hook.

After getting a bite or even catching a fish just pull down another 2” section and your ready to fish.



Unlike sand worms, **innkeeper worms** (*Urechis caupo*) seem to work best for bait when fishing inside a harbor or estuary. Found in many back bays, harbors and estuaries they work great for corbina and spotfin croaker.

Innkeeper worms live in sand and areas of soft mud where they burrow and use their suction and filter motion to pump water that brings food into the slime net they excrete. Innkeepers are much less prolific so only a few should be used for bait. I try to use just a handful each year as they are very slow to reproduce and can easily be fished out---so maybe that's why fish love them and they make such great bait!

Finding innkeeper worms is very similar to finding buried clams or ghost shrimp. Innkeepers live in a hole in the sand just like other creatures but have one distinct difference: Above their hole they produce a cone that seems to be nothing more than sand glued together by a mucus-like secretion. Look for them beneath their volcano-shaped secretion. They seem to prefer shady places like under docks, bridges and other shade producing structure.

Once you find their holes and the volcano tops use a ghost shrimp suction pump to pull them from the sand. You will know when you find one as the worm looks much like a hot dog in both color and size. They will keep in a cool place like a refrigerator or ice chest for several days.

There are a couple of ways to prepare and hook innkeeper worms. When fishing in inner bay areas such as a harbor or estuary use the entire worm. Place a #2 Octopus style hook in the top or along the upper side of the bait. Another method when fishing near rocks is to cut the bait into lengthwise strips (about 5" long) and hook them by running the hook down the middle of the bait and pulling it up onto the hook.

For all four baits I like to use the Carolina Rig. This rig is easy to use and starts with a sliding sinker (1/4th to 1 ounce), a bead, #12 swivel, 18"-24" leader and a #2 Sproat hook.

With all four baits the best way to keep them fresh is to place them in a dry sealed plastic container. They prefer cool temperatures so they'll do fine in the refrigerator or in an ice chest for several days. If possible rinse them each day with a cup of salt water and then place them back into a cool storage area. Most worms will last for about one week.

The cool water of winter means that fish will be searching the bottom for worms. You'll find these baits at local surf fishing tackle stores, in the bay and on the beach. Take a bit of time and try these different baits and don't be surprised if next time you catch the fish of a lifetime.