

Surf Fishing and Beach Safety

By Bill Varney Jr.



Surf fishing, as with any outdoor sport, has its dangers. Every time I go to the beach I think about what bait, rig and spot I'm going to fish but I also think about what dangers might be awaiting me and how to prepare for them. Walking a gentle sand beach doesn't seem to be the place where one might find themselves in trouble but you would be amazed with how many ways you can get yourself in trouble.

Just the right (or wrong!) sand berms, rogue waves, stingrays, slippery rocks and sharp hooks can all ruin your day. Being aware of your surroundings and keeping in mind the inherent dangers that may occur will give you peace of mind and a better chance of landing the record fish you hope to catch.

One of the most painful and most often occurring injuries is caused by stingrays sunning themselves in the warm summer water. With just a swipe of their tail, stingrays are sharp reminders of how painful and unpleasant a misplaced step can be.

To protect themselves and injure their prey stingrays have an extremely sharp and barbed stinger loaded with a neurotoxin that is activated by cold water. This stinger is located near the base of their tail and when threatened (or hungry) they slap it against their victim. The stinger then releases a toxin that is activated and intensified by cold water.

Should you encounter a stingray's barb immediately soak the effected area in *hot water*—as hot as you can stand. This will reduce the severity and lessen the duration of the pain.



Here are a few tips on how to avoid the rays of summer. First, do everything possible to keep from being stung. When entering the water, shuffle your feet both ways as you go out into the surf and

while coming back in. When de-hooking a ray use a long set of hemostats or cut the leader. Don't try to put a rag on the fish.

If you do get stung get help fast. All lifeguard services have a facility to treat stingray victims. Lifeguards will treat the effected area with hot water. If part of the barb is left in you, seek professional help. Also, any puncture wound that occurs at the beach may become infected. Watch it carefully for reddening.

Another sinister place at the beach is along the sand where the wave berm forms. As waves crash along the beach they often form berms from two inches to ten feet high. These "sand walls" form near the high tide mark and run the length of the beach.

The obvious hazard might be getting stuck between the wall and an oncoming wave and getting wet. But the one that always gets me is the two to four inch berm. Just when you are backing up to move away from the surf or fight a fish, your heel catches it and you go head over keester onto the sand. *The obvious lesson here* is always look back in advance and see where the berm is, so when you do need to run backwards you can do so safely.

One other thing to keep in mind is the waves themselves. When tying hooks, replacing leaders or putting on bait we many times take our eye off the water. Be aware of where you are in relation to the surf and when you cannot keep an eye on the waves--move up the beach.

Waves also come into play when fighting a fish. When fighting a big fish you will be pulled toward the ocean as the current pushes away from shore. This is the time to keep an eye on the incoming waves so you can time your retreat up the beach as the wave approaches. Just like in baseball, don't take your eye off the ball for long or it might clobber you!

Besides keeping an eye on the incoming surf other factors come into play when fishing from the rocks. Fishing from jetties, rock points and breakwaters can provide some dangerous conditions.



Before you go out on the rocks look to make sure it's safe from dangerous surf, then plan your route. Remember it's "slippery when wet". Rocks splashed by waves at high tide may become very slick because of bait, bird guano, moss and other substances deposited on them.

Be sure to wear a good shoe with traction (like a sneaker or boot) and avoid fishing, no matter how tempting it may be, in flip-flops or sandals. When walking on rocks know that they may be uneven or unstable *or* both. Always look down and forward as you walk to measure each step and plan your next.

Check the conditions before you go and avoid big surf. Rogue sets of waves are common and can sweep everything from the rocks.

Once at your desired fishing spot survey the area and make an escape plan should big waves and high tides combine. Know the path off the rocks and too safety *before* a calamity occurs.

When retying hooks, hooking baits and taking pictures always step back to a safer area far enough away from the crashing waves.

With challenge comes reward—and although you always need to use extreme caution when fishing from rocks the payoff with big fish always keeps you coming back.



On last suggestion...and this has to do with beach etiquette. When you go to the beach remember you're there for recreation and not confrontation. Every so often we run into some bonehead and have to remind ourselves to keep cool. Be patient and enjoy yourself.

If you see someone fishing the beach give them space. If you choose to fish near them, let's say from the rocks or on the beach, take a moment to ask them for their permission. If they say no, move on. Most often they'll say yes and may let you in on what they're doing to be successful.

When dealing with swimmers and surfers here are a few things to remember: Be respectful: Most swimmers and surfers have little knowledge of fishing and don't know when they're in danger or in your way. If you can move a bit, or wait for the drift to take them away, you'll be able to get back to fishing in no time.

Give way to the crowd: If you approach the beach and find it crowded with swimmers and surfers, don't fish there. Find another place to fish or return earlier and later once they're gone.

Let them know you're there: If swimmers or surfers paddle out right where you are fishing let them know with a call or whistle and point out as to where your line is. Most of the time they will move on down the beach. If they don't, you move on.

These are just a few of the many ways to keep yourself out of trouble at the beach. So take it from me, I've had plenty of skinned knees and soaked clothes but I've learned my lesson: Take safety first and good fishing always follows!