

# Surf Fishing and the California Grunion

By, Bill Varney



**Irony has a unique way of playing its hand when you least expect it.**

Last year, the Fish and Game Commission passed “emergency” regulations to restrict the take of California grunion (*Leuresthes tenuis*) and to limit the season by adding an additional month to their “observation” only periods. Now anglers are restricted to thirty grunion, taken by hand and no take (only observe) in April, May and June. Decades ago they implemented no parking and beach closures during grunion runs at many Los Angeles County and Orange County beaches, in effect, providing a de-facto closure for anglers interested in both observing and collecting grunion. So now they’ve accomplished both the de-facto and actual closing restrictions.

Their purpose for limiting take and closing more of the season was based on “science” provided by DFW observers and a citizen-science group, The Grunion Greeters. Throughout the scientific advisory document, presented to influence the decision, there were many inconsistencies, references to global warming and an

emphasis on the exclusion of human interaction with grunion. All of which are bunk.



As our friend Irony would have it, this year's grunion runs opened in March with some of the largest aggregations of grunion we've ever seen! In fact, the runs that just passed have continued to hold some of the largest schools to flood the beach ever recorded. Our surf fishing army saw millions of grunion come ashore along twelve beaches from Santa Barbara to San Diego. As expected, we have a very healthy grunion population and the number of halibut and huge perch caught around the runs is nothing less than phenomenal.

So how can an angler take advantage of grunion runs and become better surf fisherman?

Let's first start with the run itself. Grunion spend days staging outside the surf before they come ashore. If you go to the beach along the Southern California coast you can see them offshore staging up and down the beach. For several days,



they move up and down the coast just off the beach, looking much like the shade of a passing cloud. Grunion, unlike other fin-baits, do not school but form lines outside the surf. This configuration is used for both separating out the scouts (who go to shore first to make sure it's safe) and reduce predation. The biomass moves up and down the beach during the day and then, when the time is right, move to shore and spawn.



Surf fishing can be phenomenal around a grunion run. But, to be successful during and after these spawns an angler must know exactly where the grunion came ashore.

So where is that? Here's three suggestions to find where the grunion came ashore: First, if you decide to see the run for yourself come prepared to possibly walk some distance before you find them. Wear a headlamp or use a flashlight to forge along the beach. They will reflect from quite a distance. Stay back. Do not disturb the first batch that come to shore. These are the "scouts" and will spawn, then go back out and update the others. Once you find the beginning and end of the spawning area mark it by finding something permanent on land that you can recognize during daytime.

Your next best bet is to ask someone who knows where they came ashore. Learn to make friends with the lifeguards, wardens or interpretative specialists that roam the beaches. Although they may not have seen them the night before, you'll find they often have heard from coworkers or the public exactly where they came ashore.

Another growing body of information about the location, duration and intensity of grunion runs is on social media. Many fishing groups now post pictures and videos of the runs. Often times they may include many details including location.

So now that you've found the grunion is it best to fish in the surf before, during or after a run?

Grunions congregate offshore two to three days before a run. During that time predators like halibut and seabass take their swipes at the school and move it closer to shore. For anglers the best time to fish is both during and after the run for up to two weeks. Additionally, grunion eggs become fry in about 10 days and are washed to sea during the next highest high tide. So fishing during the run, up to two weeks after and also around the ninth day since the first day of the run will be your most productive periods.

So now we come to the important part, the rigging for fishing areas frequented by California grunion. Both live or frozen grunion and a variety of lures work great when fishing spawning areas. When using lures, be sure to try to match the lure color and sizes to the grunion in the run. Battlestar and Lucky Craft hardbaits will all work well, along with spoons like Krocodile and Kastmasters. You'll additionally find that drop shot and swimbaits also work well as all of these tend to imitate grunion in the surf.

You may also wish to collect live grunion and use them for bait. If you're there during the run and want to use them as live bait, the Carolina Rig works well. Remember to shorten your leader and upsize your sliding sinker the larger the surf is. I've found that fishing the edges of the run seems to be best if the grunion are spawning on shore.

If you collect grunion for use later, the best way to prepare and preserve them is to straighten them out on a paper plate and freeze them. Once you get to the beach,

fishing them frozen seems to work well because they tend not to spin. Hook them from the bottom jaw up through the nose to pin their mouth closed. I like to fish them like live grunion, on the Carolina Rig, casting out and slowly retrieving them to shore.

The good news is that our California grunion population is nowhere close to collapse...as some may have you believe. Discover where they came ashore and with a little preparation and the right bait you are sure to find the biggest surf fish of the season inside the grunion corral.

