

Surf Fishing with Sidewinder Crabs for Monster Perch

By Bill Varney Jr.



I don't know about you but for surf anglers we have been battered around lately by early winter storms and huge swells. Beach structure has been ripped to shreds, like a school of anchovy by albacore.

But good surf fishing is still out there with even a few corbina still being caught. So where do the fish go in winter when the swells and surge make life impossible? Simple answer, they run for cover. Surf fish seek out places to rest, feed and hide during the winter months by bedding down in estuaries and around rock structure. Because they now call the rocks their home what also changes is the food they find to forage on.

As huge winter swells smash against rocks they wash off barnacles, mussel and anywhere there are rocks and a marine environment, lined shore crabs too. During the cold-water months of winter this becomes the cherished food for huge perch and hungry spotfin croaker.



If you're tired of catching small fish in the surf this is the one bait that almost guarantees big fish bites. So let's take a look at where to find, catch, rig and fish these little tasty creatures.

Sidewinder Rock Crabs (*Pachygrapsus crassipes* or lined shore crabs) are green and brown in color with lined markings on the back and legs. The larger crabs will have some purple marking as well. It possesses two respectable (and somewhat painful!) claws. They live between rocks in nooks, crannies and crevices.

The best place to find sidewinders is just above the waterline on rock jetties and in tide pool areas. Look for them between mussel clusters, in crevices or by flipping over small rocks. These crabs

can be found at both low and high tide. Due to their keen eyesight, once they detect motion, they scurry off. When approaching, move slowly. Stop, look and see where they are positioned on the rock. Pick out a single crab (after some practice, a bunch of crabs) and as you approach watch carefully as to where that crab ends up. Take notice that they can run sideways very quickly; hence, why they are known as “sidewinders.”



Now that you’ve located the crab the best way to catch it is to pin it to the rock with your fingers. Get a grip and pull them from the rock to your waist bait bucket. Pinching hurts, so the best way to avoid that is to hold the crab by the back of its body pinching it between your thumb and forefinger. Start with one finger on top of the crab’s back and one finger on the crab’s underside. Hold him by the back with his claws forward.

Another great place to collect crabs is in estuaries where rocks the size of shoeboxes line the banks. Pick an area and turn over the small rocks. Catch the scurrying sidewinders as they run off. In some areas these crabs will also live in mud burrows. By replacing the rocks after searching for crabs you will ensure that there will be

even more the next time you return. Make sure the area where you collect your crabs is not a protected habitat, so check for restrictions, as stiff fines may be your reward for not doing so.

Sidewinder crabs are very hardy and last quite a long time in the captivity of your garage. In fact, and I hate to admit it, when I was a kid, and zip-top bags were just introduced, one night while surf fishing I lost track of a bag of crabs. One week later, when I was surfing at the same spot, I found *the* bag of crabs. To my amazement the crabs were still alive.

Sidewinders, if kept in a cool plastic container with wet paper or burlap over them, will live for a solid week. Just enough time to slow their pinch down so you can get “*them*” on the hook without them getting you!



Ron Schmidt With a Nice Sidewinder Perch

I place them in a vented, covered plastic container with a single mussel and a few small rocks. If they are going to be with me for several days I will open the mussel and they will feast on it. Each

day, I rinse them in their container with a cup of salt water and allowing them to stay fresh for some time.

Now that you have caught the crabs let's set up the rigging. I like to use the Carolina Rig. This is the basic rig of surf fishing and is made up of a sliding egg sinker, bead, swivel, leader and hook. Because I'll be fishing near rocks I want to downsize my sliding egg sinker to 1/8th ounce and shorten my leader to about ten inches. I use six-pound fluorocarbon leader because it both abrasion resistant and invisible. For hooks use a #2 Owner Mosquito, Gamahatsu Split Shot/Drop Shot or a Mustad Ultra Point hook.



Hooking the sidewinder is easy. Just turn the crab over so it's legs are pointing up. On the bottom back side you will see an egg flap. Pierce the flap with the sharp end of the hook and pull it through the crab. No need to hide the hook here. Just be sure the exposed hook tip is on the top side of the crab and the eye of the hook is on the bottom.

Now comes the important part—fishing the crab. Whenever you fish sidewinders it will always be near rocks. In fact, the biggest perch and croaker that live in the surf actually live between the rocks. Large fish got that way by being smart and not by swimming in the open ocean where they might become a meal. In fact, some of the largest perch I've ever caught have been pulled from between the rocks.

One of the most effective places to find these big fish is along ocean jetties. Rather than casting away from the jetty try this instead: Drop your rig about one foot from the rocks below you where the open ocean splashed. Keep tight to your sinker but allow you bait to move in and out of the rocks as it pushed by the surge and surf.

The second you feel a tug on your line reel down, lift up and the fight is on. Never allow fish so close to rocks to have your bait too long, or you're sure to end up with a rock and the fish with your bait.

Sidewinders make great bait for big fish and work best in the cold-water months. Take a few minutes to find a couple scurrying across the rocks, pin one on and cast it out. Although you may get a pinch or two you'll also have a shot at the fish of a lifetime!