

# Perch Fishing for Winter Slabs

By Bill Varney Jr.

Illustrations, Brad Baier



Barred Surfperch

Over the last several years our El Nino has subsided (although it's making a comeback) and the near shore waters have cooled. This cooler water has helped the perch population rebound and grow because of the reemergence of a healthy sand crab population. Warmer water, associated with El Nino events, reduces the biomass of sand crabs and often influences perch populations to move northward in search of cooler water and food. But, should last year be any indication, big perch this winter are on their way back and it's high time we get ready to catch them.

Many surfperch fishermen wait until early spring to fish the beach, as this has often been the time when large spawning perch go wide open. But traditionally some of the largest perch you will ever see have been caught throughout the entire winter.

There are many types of perch in the California surf but three of my favorites to target are barred, walleye and calico surfperch. All three use their throat to crush bait and spend most of their time in the inshore trough just a few yards from shore. Barred surfperch are by far the most notable perch along the California coast. The current state record was set by my old boss, Fred Oakley, with a 4lb 2oz slab caught in Ventura. Walleye surfperch are found all along the coast but no record has been currently set. When it comes to Calico surfperch, they may be one of the hardest fish to locate along the coast. Although they can school in large numbers they are often

found in specific areas and do not tend to migrate. In 2023 Richard Chew set the record on the beach in Santa Cruz with a hefty 2lb 4oz calico.



Calico Surfperch

During the late fall and early winter, perch veraciously forage during their mating period. They become active eaters during this period as they prepare to give birth to live offspring. The gestation period is around three-five months so they generally bear their young in winter and early spring. Juvenile perch inundate the beaches during summer so winter always seems to be the best time to catch the largest fish.

To prepare for catching these three-pound perch I like to use a light-weight nine-foot parabolic spinning rod matched with a 2500-4000 size reel, loaded with six-pound pink or red monofilament. For rigging use the Carolina rig. It a simple rig made up of a sliding sinker, a bead, swivel, eighteen inches of leader and a very *sharp* hook.

If the surf is small and the current light I will use as-little-as a one-fourth ounce sinker. If the surf is large, with a strong current or winds I will use up to a one-ounce slider. A bead is essential to keep your sinker from loading with sand and binding on your line. I prefer six-pound fluorocarbon as my leader material because it's "invisible" and abrasion resistant. As for a hook it must be *sharp*. Yes, I mentioned that twice because it's so important that your hook is *sharp*. Ok, that's three times.



Walleye Surfperch

Surfperch love a variety of baits. Perch by nature are scavengers and feed on just about anything. My favorite baits are ghost shrimp, mussel, sidewinder crabs, clams, and both lug and bloodworms. Although perch also love sand crabs, sand crabs are generally much harder to find during winter. For artificial baits, perch will chase Gulp! Sandworms, plastic grubs, minnow hard-baits and spoons.

Finding perch at the beach can be a daunting task without a plan. Here are a few tips that will help you find the fish.

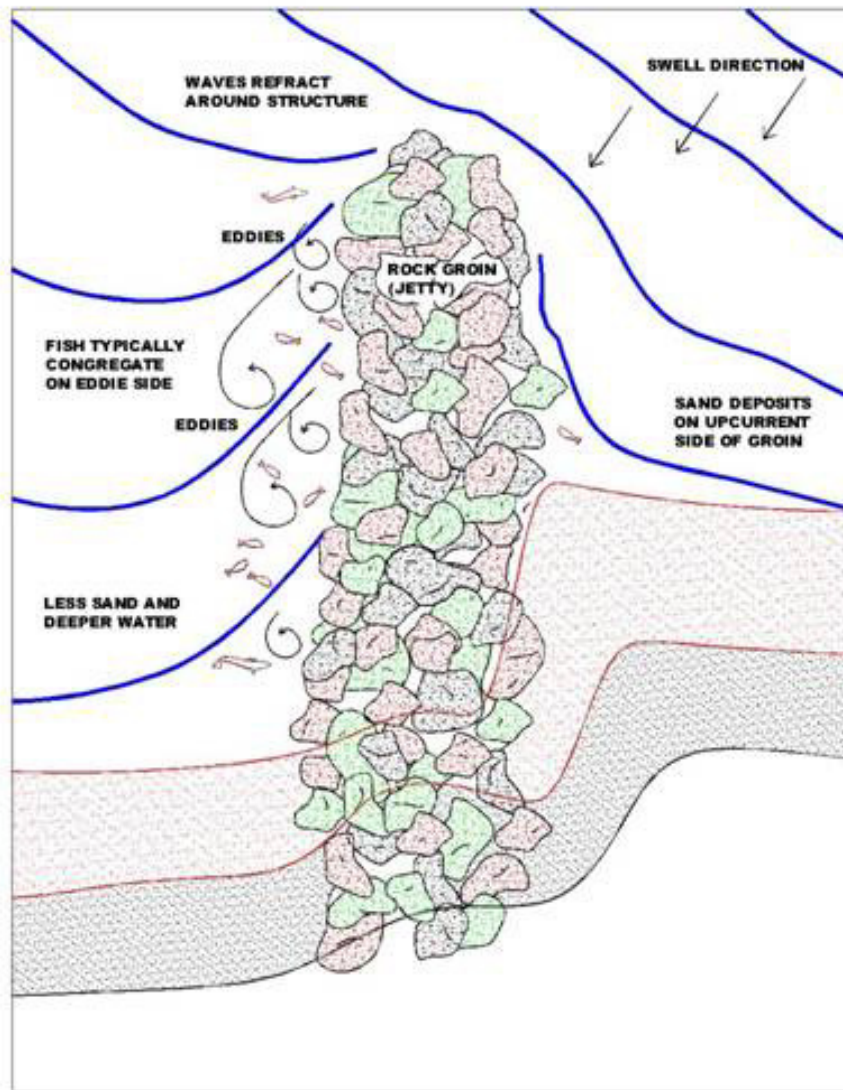
If you plan to fish on an open beach you will need to find the troughs where surfperch hide. The easiest way to find them is to go to your favorite beach at low tide. Walk along the beach and take note as to where the inshore trough is and line it up with something permanent behind it, then, go back at high tide and fish it. There are generally two inshore troughs: one that is near shore, which is carved out by waves breaking in the shallows (It is about ten to fifty feet out from dry sand) and another that is formed by waves breaking off shore at low tide.





I've found that fishing the inside trough two hours before to two hours after high tide is most productive. Simply cast over the trough and slowly retrieve your bait through it. Once your sinker reaches dry sand check your bait and repeat. As an alternative, when using artificial baits, deploy a fan casting pattern (10 o'clock, 12, 2) and cast your lure as far as possible, retrieving slowly to cover as much bottom surface area as possible.

Besides open beach you'll always find perch around structure areas like rocks, jetties, reefs and pilings. Surfperch gather around rock areas for both protection and to feed. When the winter months arrive, surf fish generally make their way to rock outcroppings because much of their winter food clings to and is washed from the rocks.



When fishing rock outcroppings, jetties and harbor entrances it is important to find the area where an eddy has been created, as this is where the fish will hide to ambush food. When first approaching a rock area identify the direction of the swell as it reaches the rocks. Look on the *opposite* side of where waves meet rock for swirling, foaming and off colored-water. This most likely is where you will find the fish.

A common mistake when fishing near and from the rocks for perch and other surf fish is that anglers cast away from the rocks. Remember, fish

grew big by being smart and although it's embarrassing to match your wits to that of a fish, they will surely out fish you if you don't keep this in mind: Fish of all sizes use the rocks for protection. They back into the rocks and only come out for a short while to feed. You'll miss the big ones if you cast away from the rocks.

So when fishing from the rocks cast your bait roughly five-feet in front of where water meets rock and let the current wash your bait in and out; and because this many times results in snags, just downsize your sinker to one-fourth ounce and also shorten your leader to twelve inches-or less. If your line does get snagged in the rocks, jiggle it gently and often times it will come free.

Using this technique and allowing your bait to wash in and out of the rocks presents food in its most natural state. Fish will come out from the rocks, pick up your bait and move right back into their "garage." So always keep your line tight to your sinker and as soon as your line begins to come tight (almost like you are snagging) reel quickly and raise your rod tip to set the hook and pull the fish from between the rocks.

Take some responsibility to insure the health of the perch population by quickly and carefully releasing pregnant female perch. This will insure the fish will be there the next time you go. With so many huge barred, calico and walleye perch out there, now is the time to get down to the beach. Don't wait for summer to pull on your next fish when you can pull on a slab today!