

Pier Fishing in California

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Santa Cruz Wharf

When you discuss this pier, you almost don't know where to start. Do you talk about the beach and the beach area which used to be known as the Coney Island of the west - with its boardwalk, casino, and famous Giant Dipper, one of the last wooden roller coasters on the West Coast? Do you talk about the pier itself, the municipal wharf built in 1913, the wharf which is the longest of the five wharfs built here since 1853, and a wharf which is still one of the largest piers on the coast - measuring 2,745 feet in length? Do you talk about the crowds on the pier - an estimated 3-4 million people a year (which translates into about 10,000 people a day)? Or do you talk about the fishing which, because of the size of the pier, can be great at one spot on the pier and, at the same time, be terrible just a short distance away. Since this is a site about fishing, let's discuss it.

Environment

More than a half mile in length, the pier offers several different types of fishing. Inshore, along the beach, an angler can fish most of the year for barred and calico surfperch, and most days will yield a few fish. Once in a while, an angler will also hook onto a skate, flounder, or small shark - usually a leopard shark. In addition, a few old-timers (who usually know the most about the piers) will bring a few mussels or worms and fish around the pilings themselves, just outside the breaker area. Their goals are primarily rubberlip, rainbow, and white seaperch as well as blackperch.

Midway out on the pier, the pier widens to accommodate restaurants, fish markets, tourist shops and two bait and tackle shops. The east side of the pier is reserved for fishing, launching skiff rentals, and boarding the Stagnaro sportfishing boats which operate from the pier. This area is heavily fished, has a sandy bottom, and yields mostly kingfish (white croaker), walleye surfperch, silver surfperch, white seaperch, sanddabs, small sole and far, far too many shinerperch.

The area at the end is different once again; although the bottom is still sand, various debris has built up under and around the pier. This has formed an artificial reef and, as a result, catches of rocky-shore species are common. In addition, several holes are located in the middle of the pier; these are fishing wells which allow an angler to fish straight down among the pilings (an excellent idea which more piers should copy). Of course, the noise around these wells can be deafening. Sea lions always seem to be sleeping on the crossbeams between the pilings or swimming in and out of the area. Surprisingly, the fishing in these wells can still be excellent. In fact, almost all of the rockfish I have caught on this pier have been caught while fishing in these wells. The wells are also the best spots to catch large, legal size lingcod (normally during the fall or winter months). Around the outer end, an angler can still catch a few rocky-shore species, but sandy-bottom species will predominate. When pelagic species are around, like mackerel and salmon, the end is generally the best area to fish.

One problem here can be infestations of smaller fish - as well as non-fish. Several times over the years I have had to switch to larger hooks and stop using pile worms as bait. Why? Because the shinerperch were so thick that they would virtually hook themselves on every cast. This was true in both winter and summer visits, although generally only in the mid-pier areas.

A different problem arose during visits to the pier in August of 1988. When fishing from the far right end of the pier, the bottom seemed to be covered with small speckled sanddab and small red octopus. I was fishing on the bottom using a high/low leader. Literally every cast yielded two sanddab, two octopus, or one of each. Other parts of the pier saw few of either species but at that particular spot it was almost impossible to keep the small critters off your hook. I finally switched to bigger hooks which solved the sanddab problem but didn't affect the octopus; they simply latched on to whatever came their way. Fortunately, I did get some revenge as octopus are tasty when sliced up and deep-fried with a little batter. In addition, I kept a few of the octopus for shark bait which proved effective when fishing in San Francisco Bay.

Fishing Tips

An advantage at this pier is that you can pick what type of fish you want to seek - and you have variety from which to choose. A disadvantage is that fishing is rarely great unless you happen to arrive when a school is in the area. It is a huge pier and gets tremendous fishing pressure year-round.

If fishing during the spring, April through June, try inshore from the breaker area out to the lifeguard station. Most springs will see perch coming into the shallow waters to spawn and sometimes tremendous catches can be made. Try pile worms or fresh mussels on a size 6 or 8 hook and fish under the pier, next to the pilings, for barred surfperch, rubberlip, rainbow, white, black and even a few striped seaperch. In addition, a few pileperch may join in the fun. Since the barred surfperch, rubberlip seaperch, and pileperch are the largest members of the perch family, anglers can often get some real quality along with the quantity. Locals will often use small plastic grubs with a sliding rig to coax these big perch. During the same time, but usually just a little bit further out on the pier, large schools of walleye and silver surfperch may be available to interested anglers. Fish for these smaller perch mid depth using a multi-hook rigging sweetened with small pieces of anchovy or shrimp.

Much of the year will see the inshore area, especially the area just past the breakers, yield barred and calico surfperch. Most anglers use pile worms or mussels for bait and a high/low leader set up using size 4 or 6 hooks (although ghost shrimp can be a GREAT bait). You generally will not catch a lot of barred or calico surfperch, but the ones you will catch are often nice sized fish. Again, locals often prefer to use artificial lures and these often catch a majority of the big fish. Favorites include root beer and motor oil colored grubs and the camo or pumpkin seed Berkley Power sand worms cut in 2-inch strips.

Finally, you may want to try at night in the nearshore or mid-pier area for sharks, skates and rays. Here the best bait will be squid, and a medium-sized piece, not the whole squid, is the ticket. The period from 10 p.m. to midnight seems best, but I have never really seen that many sharks caught off this pier.

If fishing during the summer or fall, check out the mid-pier area. Fish on the bottom using a small piece of anchovy, and the result will often be kingfish (white croaker), white seaperch, Pacific sanddab, speckled sanddab, English sole, sand sole or an occasional starry flounder. In addition, some years will see relatively rare sharpnose seaperch landed, generally July to August. Although this is one of the very few piers where I've seen innkeeper worms used as bait, they seem to be a good bait here for starry flounder and sole.

During those years when schools of juvenile bocaccio visit the pier, this mid-pier area generally will be the hot spot for these small fish and yield nonstop action for anglers using a snagline or Lucky Joe/Lucky Lura type multi-hook leaders. The last few years have also seen quite a few Pacific mackerel (as well as jack mackerel and sardines) and these bait leaders are also good for these species. Unfortunately, as the number of mackerel and sardines have risen, so the number of bocaccio has decreased. Only time will tell if it's a natural up and down cycle for the fish.

For the dyed-in-the-wool halibut fishermen, April through August will yield a few fish with best fishing being from mid-May to mid-June, and the best bait being live shiners, smelt, or small jack mackerel fished on the bottom. However, I've also heard of good success on the halibut using Hair Raisers (which are normally used for striped bass). Most years will yield at least a couple of large, impressive sized halibut, some over 30 pounds in weight. King salmon will also generally make a showing with most falling to anglers with the know how of using live bait fished under a float. When the small mackerel are around, they are hard to beat for live bait (and bring a small bucket and aerator with you to keep them alive). Although less common, an occasional striped bass will also be taken (and a surprised angler in 1995 pulled in a 33-pound lineside). Since the pier

sits 22 feet above the water, be sure to bring a net if you seek these larger fish. Although the stripers may show up anywhere from the surf line to the end, most of the halibut and salmon are taken in the deeper waters of the pier, mid-pier to the end.

Summer to fall is also the prime time for small rockfish. For blue, brown, gopher, grass, kelp, and black and yellow rockfish, and a possible seaperch - striped, black, rubberlip or white - try fishing in the wells out toward the end of the pier. Use size 6 or 8 hooks, and pile worms, mussels, ghost shrimp or small pieces of market shrimp for bait.

Be cautioned that bigger fish do lurk in these holes. In August of '97, I was returning from one of my normal summertime pier fishing trips along the coast when I decided to make a short visit to the pier. This would be the last pier I would visit on the trip, and I had used up most of my bait. So, I rigged up a high /low leader with number 6 hooks and small pieces of fresh mackerel that I had caught in San Diego. Looking down into the last well at the end of the wharf showed a number of large sea lions taking their mid-morning siestas; I hoped they didn't bother my line. As soon as the sinker hit the bottom I began to feel sharp taps on the bait which is common for perch and small rockfish. Be patient and let them hook themselves, but also be prepared to strike quickly if needed. That's what happened when there was a strong hit and the tip of the pole pulled south toward China. I immediately began to reel but would only gain a couple of yards of line before the fish would pull it back out. It definitely was not a small rockfish! It took a few minutes of fight, along with worry about the pilings, seaweed, and sea lions, before I got the fish to the top of the water. But it wasn't one fish, it was a nice sized lingcod on one hook and another fish on the other hook. Since I had left my treble-hook gaff in the truck (dumb, dumb, dumb) I worried just a little bit more as I hand lined the fish up to the pier.

The larger fish was a beautiful blue lingcod that I estimated would weigh five pounds, the other fish was a 14" kelp greenling. Not bad for the first drop of the day but it would also prove to be the best. Another hour's fishing produced six more fish - gopher, brown and blue rockfish, but no more lings. My experience with lings is that if there are small rockfish or greenling in the area, there will be hungry lingcod around to eat them. Be forewarned. If you want to try specifically for the lings, use a heavier line, bigger hooks, and a strip of greenling or rockcod on your hooks. Even better is to catch one of the small rockfish and use them for live bait. Finally, try artificial lures straight down in the wells - they'll produce fish. Also, don't be surprised if you get a mass of onlookers watching your every move. As soon as you catch one fish there will be people who want to see another, and another, and another.

Lastly, fall and winter will usually see a few steelhead landed, most in the 15-20 inch size category, although a few range up to about 8-pounds. Best bait seem to be a worm or cut anchovy fished under a bobber; those who prefer artificials generally use small spoons like Kastmasters.

Facts

Hours

Open from 5 A.M. to 2 A.M.

Facilities

The pier has lights, fish cleaning stations, parking on the pier (\$1 per hour but no charge from 10 p.m. to 9 a.m.), limited benches, snack bars and restaurants, restrooms, and two bait and tackle shops, one where the pier first widens, and one out near the end.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking is available (although in many spots you can park right next to where you want to fish) and handicapped restroom facilities are available at several spots on the pier. A 38" railing extends around the wharf and the surface is wood decking. A wooden curb also extends the length of the parking area but it has occasional openings for wheelchair access. Posted for handicapped..

How To Get There

There are many ways to get to the wharf, the way I usually go is to take Ocean Street south from Highway 1, when you get to Laurel Street turn right and follow it to Pacific Street, turn left and follow Pacific to the wharf.

Management

City of Santa Cruz.

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Capitola Wharf

While some piers along the coast have characteristics which help define and give identity to the pier, here it is the area itself that makes the pier special. Supposedly the oldest seaside resort along the Pacific coast, Capitola, since 1869, has been a destination for inlanders headed to the coast. The area today is one of restaurants, stylish tourist shops and art galleries. The main area near the beach is really only a few square blocks, but it is made up of commercial buildings, old Victorian houses, an old railroad depot and, at the front of the pier, a 1920s condominium-type area known as the Venetian Court, complete with pastel colors and ornate architecture. People in Capitola seem to regard their "village" as an upclass, perhaps more dignified, version of a beach town, in contrast to Santa Cruz and its weekend hordes.

Environment

The pier itself is fairly new, having been rebuilt in the mid-1980s following storm damage which nearly destroyed the old pier. Luckily, the new pier is wood (which I always prefer) and although the pier is only 855-foot-long, it is rarely crowded with pier anglers unless there is a "big run" of fish present. The majority of fishermen here are boat anglers heading out to fish the nearby reefs. Some come to launch their own boats, some come to rent the boats which are available on the pier. Excellent fishing is found fairly close to the pier for several species.

The shore end of the pier sees a typical sandy beach area. Further out on the pier sees a bottom that is a mixture of sand and mud. Pilings have a fair buildup of mussels and there is often a fairly thick buildup of kelp around the pier from the midsummer months to the fall.

What all of this means is that an angler can choose to fish the surf area for the larger barred and calico surfperch, or fish deeper water for white croaker, several smaller species of perch, jacksmelt, flounder, sole, sand dabs and halibut. The far end will also yield a few striped bass and sharks, and several varieties have been landed here including smoothhounds, leopard sharks, blue sharks and thresher sharks.

In addition, Soquel Creek runs into the ocean just down the beach from the pier. During the winter, the mouth of the creek stays open; during the summer, it usually closes and a small lagoon, mostly used for swimming, forms just inside the city beach. Because of the creek, most years will see a few steelhead caught during the fall and winter months (and sometimes even into the spring).

Rarely seen fish that have been caught in these waters include barracuda, triggerfish, black sea bass and sturgeon; but your chances of landing one of these are about the same as hitting a Lotto Jackpot.

Fishing Tips

The best fishing seems to be in the surf area, on an incoming tide, for the larger barred and calico surfperch. For these, use sand crabs, pile worms, or mussels. If you like artificials, try a plastic grub; and root beer or

petroleum colored lures seem to produce the most fish. By far, the winter months and spring months are the best for these perch but some will be caught throughout the year.

The next best bet would be to use cut anchovy, or small strips of squid, for kingfish (white croaker). Use size 4 hooks, fish on the bottom, and cast out from almost any area of the pier. This has always been one of the top piers in the state for white croaker; I've only experienced one trip to the pier when I failed to catch a kingfish. Given that fact, it should be noted that the size of the kingfish has seemed to decrease over the past decade. Small kingfish that never would have been kept in the past are now routinely kept by some anglers. Come on, let them grow up!

Another good bet is to try small pieces of anchovy, with a size 6 hook, fished mid-depth to the bottom, for walleye and silver surfperch. A place worth trying is around the pilings under the pier; use fresh mussels or pile worms for bait, a size 6-8 hook, and fish as close to the pilings as possible. Although winter and spring are best times, you may catch a large pileperch, rubberlip seaperch, or blackperch at almost any time of the year. Grass, gopher and kelp rockfish also like to hang around the pilings.

For something larger, you might want to try for halibut, May through July. Each year will see a few of these large flatfish landed. Most will be caught on live bait such as anchovies, shinerperch, small kingfish, or small mackerel (some years), and all should be fished on the bottom with a live bait rigging. A similar rigging may also attract a striped bass but they are less particular and will often hit a piece of mackerel or sardine, shrimp, or a pile worm that is graciously offering up its life so that our noble anglers can experience the thrill of a striper. Stripers over 30 pounds in weight have been landed here. (November of 1997 proved interesting when a school of about 70 stripers came into the shallow water by the pier and teased the anglers on the pier; only a couple were caught, one an eight pounder.)

Try for sharks or rays off the far end of the pier; use squid and a fairly heavy saltwater outfit. Summer and fall seem the best times for brown smoothhound shark (sand sharks), leopard sharks, bat rays, and skates, and a skate weighing 130 pounds was caught a few years ago. Wintertime sometimes seems to be good for dog sharks (dogfish), hornback sharks (horn sharks), and the smaller baby bat rays. Be sure, if you are fishing for the larger game, to come prepared with either a net (preferred) or a treble-hook gaff to bring the fish up onto the pier. Also, more and more anglers are practicing catch and release. One day I witnessed a young angler land a Pacific angel shark. After a quick picture, the handsome creature was gently lowered back down to the water to the applause of interested onlookers.

Late spring through the fall are also times when Pacific mackerel, jack mackerel, sardines and a few white seabass may be in local waters. Most mackerel and sardines will be caught on multi-hook riggings fished at mid-depth or fished near the top with the assistance of a large bobber or Styrofoam float. Jacksmelt can also be caught on these multi-hook riggings but often a few size 8 hooks on a line, baited with small pieces of pile worms, or small strips of squid, will be just as productive. Although I've seen many species landed here, I have yet to see a white seabass (although a few are landed out on the boats). If you want to give the large fish a try, use live bait and fish the early morning or twilight hours. Do remember to return any small, illegal white seabass (called seatrout) to the water.

Salmon and steelhead are also occasionally caught. Most salmon will be landed April through July on anchovies or lures; most steelhead are landed during the winter and spring on live bait (anchovies, if available), pile worms, frozen anchovies or lures (and roostertails seem to be the preference of the local experts). Salmon are most common in the deepest waters of the pier while the steelhead often like to school in the fairly shallow, mid-pier waters on the north side of the pier.

A few additional fish will also be landed. These include small rockfish (such as bocaccio, blue rockfish, and kelp rockfish), and flatfish such as sanddabs, flounder and sand sole (up to about 4 pounds in size). At times a few large cabezon and lingcod will also show up but neither is particularly common.

Unfortunately, staghorn sculpin (bullheads) are common, in fact too common. I had one trip here where I stopped fishing simply because I couldn't keep them off my line. Although these sculpin are notorious for hitting hooks on the bottom baited with pile worms, that day they seemed to hit any bait and hit it not only on the bottom but at mid-depth. I tried artificials for a while but when a sculpin finally hit one of those, I decided it was time to move on. If in doubt, consult the folks at the bait and tackle shop on the pier, they seem both knowledgeable and ready to help an angler.

Special Tip

Like many beach areas in California, parking can be a nightmare at times, especially on summer weekends. In fact, the city runs shuttle buses to the beach most weekends. The best way to alleviate this problem is to arrive early in the day when the pier is first opening up. Free parking and metered parking is available at several spots (see the list below) but wherever the spot, the question is often availability, not cost. In other words, if parking spaces aren't available, it really doesn't matter if they are free. Fish early or fish late! Nevertheless, anglers do find their way to the pier and they do catch fish.

Author's Note

Capitola Boat & Bait is located out toward the end of the pier; it is one of the best run pier tackle shops that I have seen and deserves a congratulations for a job well done. A full line of fresh and frozen baits are available as is tackle, rod and reel rentals, crab nets, snacks and drinks, and a wide variety of odds and ends catering to both anglers and non-anglers. Boats, of course, can be rented and pictures of the catches are pretty impressive. Of note is that live anchovies are available most summers. This is one of the few remaining piers in California that offers live anchovies (and the only pier in northern California). The shop even offers free pier fishing seminars ("Learn to Fish Off the Wharf"). Perhaps most impressive to me is the professionalism of every employee that I have met.

History Note

The name Capitola is Spanish for capital and was apparently first used by F.H. Hihn of Santa Cruz when he laid out a new resort in the area in 1869. The good residents of Soquel had offered to let the State of California establish its capital in the upstairs rooms of Ned Porter's local store but California politicians (wisely) declined the offer. Hihn used that information when he named the site; it had been called La Playa de Soquel, the beach of Soquel, during Mexican rule, and Soquel Landing under American rule.

Apparently Soquel Landing had a small pier prior to 1857 but a new wharf was started that year by Hihn and the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. In 1860, it was lengthened to 1,100 feet (some reports say it was lengthened to 1,200 feet in 1863) but a storm in November of 1865 destroyed the outer 500 feet of the wharf and made the inshore part of the pier unsafe. The pier was soon rebuilt by the steamship company. The beach itself became a favorite of vacationers from San Francisco, brought initially by horse-drawn vehicles, and then, after 1876, by the Santa Cruz-Watsonville narrow gauge railroad whose depot sat on Soquel Landing road, a short distance up the road from the wharf. However, the railroads began to take business away from the shipping line and the wharf was abandoned in 1879. As mentioned, the pier has been damaged many times. In fact, I have a picture, dated 1913, which shows the wharf split in half (as a result of a 1912 storm); the picture is remarkably similar to one I took in the mid-'80s following the storm of 1983. Although the wharf looks to be in good condition, it really isn't; Capitola recently committed nearly \$1 million to restore the wharf during 1998.

Facts

Hours

Open from sunrise to 10:30 p.m.

Facilities

Fish cleaning stations, restrooms, benches, lights, the Wharf House Restaurant and the Capitola Boat and Bait Shop are located on the pier. Free parking can be found just up the hill on East Cliff Drive, on Prospect Drive (above the railroad tracks and stairs) and on side streets north of Capitola Road (near the Shadowbrook

Restaurant). Limited metered parking is available on the streets in Capitola Village, at a cost of 50 cents an hour but with a two hour maximum visit. There are two motels near the entrance of the pier and several additional establishments nearby in Capitola Village.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking and restrooms are available. The surface of the pier is wooden planks and the height of railings are approximately 38 inches. Not posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

From Highway 1 take the Bay Avenue exit west until it hits Capitola Avenue where you turn right; stay on this to Cliff Drive, turn right and park wherever you can find a spot.

Management

City of Capitola.

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