

Pier Fishing in California

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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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