

Pier Fishing in California

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Cayucos Pier

Don't believe everything you read (except on this site). I once read that the fishing on this pier was poor and so I avoided it for years. I would drive right by the town as I headed north to San Simeon or south to Morro Bay. Boy, was I wrong! Surprisingly, it took a trip on a boat to teach me the fallacy of my belief. In late July of 1988, I had stopped at Morro Bay for a little twilight fishing on the party boat "Mallard." I experienced some excellent fishing on the boat, but what intrigued me the most was the story of the deckhand who claimed anglers with know-how were catching dozens of large halibut daily off of the Cayucos Pier.

The next morning I was out on the pier! The deckhand was right, but that was only part of the story. Anglers fishing near the surf were catching large surfperch, both barred and calico, in quantities large enough to fill buckets. Halfway out on the pier, the fishermen were catching small bocaccio two to three at a time – as well as walleye and silver surfperch. At the far end, anglers were catching shinerperch (and some anchovies) and then using these as live bait for halibut. Laying on the pier were several halibut – each of near gunny sack length. Evidently the halibut were spawning around the pier and anglers with the proper technique and gear were having the kind of action more common out on the boats. I was lucky enough to catch a few of each of these; unfortunately, I could only stay a brief time. I do not know how many more days the halibut continued to spawn in the shallow waters around the pier. I do know the deckhand had said the halibut had been biting for over a week. By the way, the deckhand managed to avoid working on the boat that next morning – he was out on the end of the pier just for the halibut.

Environment

The pier is located near the north end of Estero Bay, and the shoreline cuts due west to the right of the pier. There is a creek just to the north of the pier and the shoreline on both sides is fairly rocky but mixed with sand. The bottom around the pier is mostly sand but, again, there are some rocks near by. Finally, during much of the year, there can be a good growth of kelp near the pier.

Although the pier is 953-feet-long, this is primarily a shallow-water pier with most of the species common to such environments. The inshore area is dominated by the larger surfperch—barred surfperch and calico surfperch. Joining that duo are an occasional starry flounder and a few skate. Some years, generally during the summer to fall months, anglers will also see concentrations of queenfish, a fish more common to the south. They may also encounter two more southern species, thornback rays and shovelnose guitarfish. These will be found just past the surf line out to the midpier area. The midpier area generally sees the largest concentrations of the smaller perch: walleye, silver, spotfin and, of course, shinerperch. The end spots will yield all of these, but also more pelagics such as Pacific and jack mackerel, Pacific sardine, bonito and barracuda – the last two only in some years and then normally in the fall. Best action for halibut, and smaller flatfish such as soles and sanddabs, seems to be at the end of the pier. White croaker are abundant most of the year and good concentrations of jacksmelt add spice when they appear. Schools of young bocaccio appear during some years and when they do, anglers will flock to the pier to catch bucket loads of the small fish. Sharks and bat rays will be caught at the end, usually at night. Of interest is that this is the only pier where, to the best of my knowledge, a sizable number of swell shark have been caught— isn't that swell.

Fishing Tips

Fishing here can be very good or very bad. The best advice is to call ahead if in doubt. Best bait for the nearshore species is live sand crabs, fresh mussels, pile worms or small pieces of shrimp. Farther out, small strips of anchovy seem to work best although pile worms fished near the top can yield jacksmelt, and pieces of anchovy or squid can yield white croaker and, at times, a few queenfish. The smallish Pacific butterfish also visit the pier some years. Best bait for these seems to be small pieces of mussel fished on size 6-8 hooks a few feet under the surface of the water.

Flatfish such as flounder, sanddabs, sole and small halibut will usually strike a small strip of anchovy fished near the bottom – especially if cast out and slowly retrieved. The larger halibut seem to prefer live bait, which you will have to catch yourself.

Most pilings here have a good growth of mussels and fishing under the pier, near the pilings, using mussels for bait, will occasionally yield a blackperch, striped seaperch or rubberlip seaperch. Less frequently caught are pileperch and rainbow seaperch. If schools of bocaccio are present, snag lines or lucky Joe/Lucky Lura type outfits will yield excellent results. Fish mid-pier, drop your line to the bottom, and then start a slow retrieve. Usually you will have fish on your line by mid-depth.

Like many piers along this stretch of coast, Cayucos sees an active shark fishery at night. Most anglers use heavy gear, and the most common bait is a freshly caught small fish (perch, white croaker, small rockfish) which is either cut in part diagonally for bait or given several diagonal cuts in the skin to allow blood to attract the sharks. A fairly common technique is to chum with cans of generic cat food (which are cheaper than the publicized brands). Holes are punched in the cans and then the cans are lowered into the water (20 feet from the surface of the pier) using a mesh bag on the end of a rope. Most commonly caught “sharks” are brown smoothhound sharks, leopard sharks, bat rays, big skates and shovelnose guitarfish. One night, in April of 1991, I witnessed a bat ray of just over a 100 pounds being landed on the pier. Unfortunately, the angler butchered the fish pretty well before releasing it back to the water. He had good intentions but did not know how to handle the fish.

Fairly rare, but interesting, was a “run” of soupfin sharks which invaded the pier’s waters for over a week near the start of 1997. Most of the fish that were caught were small but one was a 65-pounder which measured nearly five and a half-feet in length. That may have been a record soupfin for the pier but the action wasn’t over. March saw a good run of shovelnose sharks (guitarfish) which are far more common in the late fall, warm-water months, and then in April, a 30-pound angel shark was caught, one of the largest of that species ever caught at the pier. It kind of makes you wonder what might be caught this summer—especially if El Nino conditions develop as some are predicting.

Special Fishing Tips

At times, when the bocaccio are present, you will also catch small illegal-sized lingcod. Please handle them with care and return them to the water unharmed. The same can be said about undersized halibut; let them grow to become legal-size fish.

Special Recommendations

Cayucos Beach, adjacent to the pier, is the northernmost beach in California with grunion runs. If you’re staying in the area during the appropriate times (nighttime high tides which occur during the spring and summer, and which follow the first three to four nights after the full and the dark of the moon), go down to the beach and see if you can catch some of the elusive smelt with your hands. And no, they really are not the ocean equivalent of snipe, they’re just little sex crazed fish.

Another thing you might do is look for Snowflake, a harbor seal that seems to have adopted the pier (or at least the water around the pier) as his residence. At times he can be a nuisance (for example, when he steals a fish from an angler’s line). But that is fairly rare and most of the local anglers look forward to Snowflake

sticking his speckled head up above the water. If you see him, throw him a fish or two.

History Note

The name Cayucos apparently derives from the Spanish word cayuco which means a fishing canoe. It was a Spanish rendering of the Eskimo word kayak and apparently referred to the bidarkas of the Aleuts who were employed in hunting sea otter along the California coast. The town was laid out and named in 1875.

That same year saw the construction of a 940-foot-long pier by Captain James Cass, a pier which quickly became a regular stop for ships of the Pacific Steamship Company. The current pier replaced that original pier and was built on the same site.

Facts

Hours

Open 24 hours a day year round.

Facilities

Benches, lights, and fish cleaning stations are found on the pier. Adequate free parking is found near the foot of the pier along with restrooms and showers. Near the entrance to the pier is the Tidepool, an excellent source for bait, tackle, and refreshments. Be sure to stop in and say hi to Glenda, she provides the monthly fish report for the pier.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking but non-handicapped restrooms. The pier surface is wood planking with a rail height of 39 inches. Not posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

Take Highway 1 to either Ocean Boulevard, which is the main street and will take you past the pier, or take the Cayucos Drive exit which will take you straight to the pier.

Management

San Luis Obispo County.

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