

Pier Fishing in California

- [home](#)
- [resources](#)
- [message board](#)
- [links](#)
- [events](#)
- [buy the book](#)

[Resources](#) :: [California Fishing Piers](#)

Pismo Beach Pier

This pier, together with the other piers along this stretch of coast, provides both good fishing and a relief from the summer heat for those who come over from the hot San Joaquin Valley. This has been the case since the 1800s. In 1881, a wharf was built on this site and then, in 1895, a dance pavilion was built near the foot of the pier. During the summer a "Tent City" would spring up as tourists flocked to the beach and the hotels became over crowded. The result, both then and now, is that Pismo Beach and other central coast piers are often crowded June through August, and are fairly quiet the rest of the year—a fact which local anglers don't seem to mind.

Pismo Beach is the most heavily fished (an estimated million and a half people visit the pier per year) and second most productive of these Central Coast piers. However, fishing along this stretch of the coast can be unpredictable. Schooling species make up much of the summer catch and if the schools move in, steady action can be enjoyed by the swarm of tourists. If the schools don't move in, few fish may be caught. An example are the small bocaccio which, at times, will invade the shallow waters around the piers. When present, people flock to the piers to catch these "snapper" by the bucketful (although the limit is 15). Some years the bocaccio never show up at all and people will only average a fish or two per trip since they must rely on more resident species for their catch.

Environment

The current pier was built in 1924 but suffered major damage in the storms of 1983. Restoration and repair work was done in the late 1980s and today the pier is like new. It is 1,370 feet long and has several cantilevered fishing decks. It is built over one of the finest sand beaches in the state. Although there was a time when this beach was the best place in the state to dig for Pismo clams, the numbers have decreased dramatically (especially the take of large clams). Like the clams, the number of fish have also decreased. Nevertheless, fishing can still be good.

The top fish at Pismo is barred surfperch, the same fish that is caught south of Point Conception. Most of the other southern species, fish such as spotfin croaker, yellowfin croaker, and corbina, will rarely, if ever, be caught this far north. Instead, the angler fishing the surf area will usually catch barred surfperch or calico surfperch. Instead of stingrays and guitarfish, the angler is more likely to catch a skate. There are, of course, other species. Around the shallow-end pilings there can be good fishing for blackperch and occasionally rubberlip seaperch.

Further out, mid-pier to the end, one will catch barred as well as silver and walleye surfperch. Here, anglers will also catch kingfish (white croaker) but unlike more southern waters, there will be few, if any, queenfish. The far end of the pier seems best for flatfish, although I caught a nice butter sole practically in the surf one day. Most-often-caught flatfish are starry flounder but sanddabs, sand sole, and halibut are generally caught every year.

Pelagic species are most often jacksmelt, Pacific mackerel and jack mackerel, but some years will also see a

few barracuda, generally in September or October. Late spring to early summer seems the best time for halibut but mid-summer to fall are the best times to possibly hook a salmon or a couple of the more southerly species, thornback rays and guitarfish. As mentioned, some years will see schools of small bocaccio and these are usually found mid-to-late summer.

Fishing Tips

Follow the tide. Two hours before and after high tide, fish the surf area for barred and calico surfperch. Use sand crabs for bait if you can get some, if not, use seaworms, fresh mussels or clams. Use a high/low leader, size 4-6 hooks, and a sinker just heavy enough to hold your line behind the first set of breakers from the beach. For the largest perch, copy the regulars. More and more regulars use plastic grubs and they're most productive right in the surf area or in the holes by the pilings. Although these perch can be caught year-round, the best times seem to be late January through March.

If perch are not your quarry, fish out toward the end. In the winter and spring, fish on the bottom for starry flounder. From the spring to the fall, fish on the bottom for sole and an occasional halibut. Sand sole will hit a high/low leader baited with a strip on anchovy, bloodworm, sand crab or ghost shrimp. For the larger flatfish, fish on the bottom using a live bait leader rigged with a whole anchovy, small live white croaker, or small live smelt. The larger plastic grubs and lures like Scroungers will also attract a few halibut.

Perch are also found at the middle and end of the pier but here more commonly caught will be silver surfperch and walleye surfperch. Smaller hooks fished right down around the pilings often work best although the walleyes tend to school mid-depth. Walleye love a small piece of anchovy while the silvers will also attack a small piece of clam, mussel, bloodworm or squid, as well as anchovy.

Jacksmelt are one of the most common fish at the pier and Pacific mackerel, jack mackerel and Pacific sardines will be caught some years. Most of these will be also caught out toward the end of the pier and most are caught on the multi-hook Lucky Lura-type riggings. I've had my best success by casting and reelin' although at times a rig like these fished under a bobber or float works the best.

If the schools of small bocaccio are present, the best bet seems to be to use a Lucky Joe or Lucky Lura outfit baited with small pieces of squid. Fish the mid-pier area; drop the leader to the bottom, then reel up a foot or so until you feel the bocaccio begin to bite. It should take only a few minutes to catch your 15-fish limit. Unfortunately the '90s have seen a dramatic decrease in the catch of these fish.

Shark fishing at night is a time honored tradition here. As long as the weather and tidal conditions are right, the pier will be visited by the shark "regulars" and often there will be quite a few. The most common sharks are sand sharks (gray or brown smoothhounds) and leopard sharks but most anglers are seeking the larger thresher sharks and bat rays. Anglers who want a little more solitude will move up to the Avila or Port San Luis piers.

History Note

As mentioned, the first local wharf was built here in 1881. It was built by a group of San Francisco businessmen led by the Merherin brothers (from nearby Arroyo Grande). Their wharf was 1,600-foot long, twenty-seven feet above the low water mark, and was primarily used as the shipping point for south county agriculture. The original cost was only \$14,613 (compared to the more than one million dollars spent to restore the pier in the 1980s). Ten years later, in 1891, the town officially came into existence. The town's character was changed forever when the Southern Pacific Railroad built a line from San Luis Obispo to Ellwood in Santa Barbara County. The railroad brought hordes of visitors to the beach and Pismo became a tourist destination. By 1895, hotels were flourishing and the "Tent City" with its \$8.00 a week rates was built to handle the excess of tourists. Located where today's Boardwalk Plaza Mall sits, the "Tent City" would last until the late 1920s.

Although today's Pismo Beach Pier is the first pier encountered by anglers heading north through central California, it wasn't always the case. Back in the 1800s, before railroads and then highways became the movers for both people and commerce, several piers existed along this stretch of the central coast. In 1876,

the Lompoc Wharf was built at Point Purisma, about 13 miles north of Lompoc. Archives report that in June of that same year "the fiercest storm ever known in that vicinity visited Lompoc." The Lompoc Record said that "waves ran twenty feet above the wharf." On December 1 and 2, 1876, new reports record the "highest tides ever known" and the distressing news that "the Lompoc Wharf was badly damaged." Again, in December of 1879, comes word that "the Lompoc Wharf was damaged by a severe storm." Inevitably, the wharf was destroyed by storms.

A similar fate would fall another wharf built for the Lompoc colony, the Sudden Wharf, which was built at Point Arguello in 1881. It was located midway between Point Conception and Point Purisma.

Two other shipping sites have been mentioned, a Chute Landing, and the Point Sal Wharf. Building dates are unknown for either but it was reported in November of 1878 that "a large portion of the Point Sal Wharf had been destroyed." However, it was still listed as a shipping point in 1883.

Facts

Hours

Open 24 hours a day.

Facilities

Restrooms and free parking is available at the foot of the pier. The signs indicate a 4-hour limit from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and no parking from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. Fish-cleaning stations, benches, lights, bait (primarily frozen) and tackle are available on the pier. Some food is also available at the pier bait and tackle shop.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking and restrooms. The surface is wood planking and the railing is 42 inches high. Posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

From the north, take Hwy. 101 to the Five Cities Dr. exit; follow Dolliver into the middle of town, then turn west on Pomeroy and follow it to the pier and parking lot. From the south, take the Pismo Beach Exit (Price St.), follow it to Pomeroy; turn west and follow it to the pier.

Management

City of Pismo Beach.