

Pier Fishing in California

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San Simeon Pier

Nestled in the small cove protected by San Simeon Point, and somewhat out of sight of the cars passing nearby on Highway 1, this pier is located in the William R. Hearst Memorial State Beach. The beach park is a popular spot to stop and relax and contains picnic tables, barbecue pits, a eucalyptus forest and the small beach. There is also a bait and tackle shop and sportfishing boats operate from the end of the pier (some years). Of course the thing which brings most people to San Simeon is the nearby Hearst Castle, the most visited state park in California and a place everyone should visit at least once (or even more often since four separate tours are available).

Environment

The pier itself is small, being 850-foot-long (some sources say 797) but only 12 feet wide. The deck sits 22 feet above the fairly shallow water and the bottom here is mainly sand although there are quite a few rocks south of the pier. Just to the north of the pier is a small creek which flows into the ocean and which can attract a few steelhead in the fall. There is often a heavy growth of kelp around the pilings during summer and fall months and pilings generally have a heavy growth of mussels. To the north sits San Simeon Point; it forms and helps protect the cove. The point deflects many of the waves and one result is a generally mild surf on the beach adjacent to the pier. But not always! The pier, which was built in 1957, was repaired in 1969, 1982 and 1983, all as a result of damage from winter waves. The pier sits in a beautiful setting and has the look of an excellent fishing pier.

Action, however, can vary. According to studies done in the '60s by the California Fish & Game Department, the pier had one of the lowest catch-per-trip averages of any pier in this region. This was due primarily to lower than normal catches of several of the schooling species; in particular, the small surfperch, jacksmelt and bocaccio. The census did show that San Simeon had several resident species and also showed that San Simeon does see the schooling species. Rare however were the vast concentrations of fish that periodically showed up at Cayucos, Avila and Pismo Beach. But, these old statistics should be viewed with caution. My personal records reflect a somewhat different story than the department's statistics. Although my first few trips to the pier were only fair, trips during the '80s and '90s tended to be above average. This has been especially true while fishing the surf area for the larger surfperch. Whereas I have seen a decrease in the number of barred surfperch and calico surfperch at Pismo Beach and Cayucos, I have seen an increase in my catch of these fish at this pier. Perhaps this is an anomaly, but perhaps it simply reflects the fact that this pier receives far less fishing pressure than Pismo Beach or Cayucos. Generally, less pressure on a population of fish means better fishing.

Additional insight comes from George Valenzuela, former owner of San Simeon Landing. George is a knowledgeable fisherman and a person who wrote a fishing column called "Fishing Tales" for several publications. One article he wrote concerned white croaker, a fish much maligned in southern California. In the article he described a couple which had caught several hundred white croaker from the end of the San Simeon Pier and how they planned to trade them for vegetables. He went on to suggest that locally caught white croaker were fine to eat and perhaps tastier than the white croaker in southern California (since local waters are often 15 to 20 degrees cooler). Although it is only one illustration, it shows that large concentrations of

fish do visit the pier and that often large catches can be made from the pier. I'm not sure which statistics would be more valid, mine or the Department of Fish and Game, but mine are certainly much more current. I also know that most anglers will enjoy a visit to this pier.

Fishing Tips

Although a few species will be caught year-round (primarily barred surfperch, calico surfperch and white croaker), peak fishing normally occurs during the late spring to fall months when the residents are joined by immigrant species that move into the area for a few weeks, or even for several months.

Inshore, fish just outside the surf area for barred surfperch and calico surfperch. Best bait for both is live sand crabs (sand fleas), but bloodworms, ghost shrimp, fresh mussel, and sometimes clams, are also excellent. But that isn't always true. I got one interesting report in January of '99 from the local Pier Fishing in California reporter, Greg Hickman. He reported that while calicos were falling to the usual mixture of sand crabs and mussels, the barred were hitting better on anchovies and cut mackerel – so go figure.

During the past few years more and more anglers are also using the fish-skin multi-hook bait riggings. A final trick is to use plastic grubs, especially the root beer or motor oil colored lures. Attach the grubs directly to a hook on the end of your line with a small weight a couple of feet up from the lure and results can be deadly. Walleye and silver surfperch, as well as a few white seaperch, hit in this same area but also are caught out to the mid-pier area. They will hit the multi-hook rigs but are commonly caught on size 6-8 hooks baited with anchovy or squid. Quite often I've had good success on flatfish near the inshore cleaning station so I wasn't too surprised when I got a report that in August of 1998 quite a few English sole (*Parophrys vetulus*) were being landed in this area, most of them 15-16 inches long. Together with the English sole were a few starry flounder, a fish that is known to breed with the English sole; their offspring is appropriately called the hybrid sole (*Inopsetta ischyra*). White croaker (tom cod) are typically caught year-round on almost any area of the pier but mid-pier to the end is optimum and small pieces of anchovy or squid will yield the most fish.

Another fish caught year-round, typically out toward the end, is spiny dogfish (here called pinback sharks); most of these are landed by anglers using squid. Summer and fall are the prime time for the pelagics: Pacific mackerel, jack mackerel, jacksmelt, and perhaps even a stray bonito or barracuda during warm water years. The first three can be caught on multi-hook bait riggings but if the riggings don't work, bait up a couple of size 4 or 6 hooks with small pieces of squid or salted anchovy; toss them out and reel in, slowly pausing at mid-depth when the line is near the pier. The fish will often follow the bait and hit just before you pull it out of the water. Best bet for a bonito would be an old-time bonito splasher; best bet for a barracuda would be a spoon. All of these pelagic species will be found in the deeper waters of the pier.

Some years will see runs of the smallish-sized red snapper (juvenile bocaccio). Generally this is from spring to late summer but some years the run may last only a week or two, some years it lasts for a couple of months, and some years you don't even see the fish. Most bocaccio are caught on artificial bait rigs fished near the bottom or at mid-depth range. Remember to not exceed the limit which is currently three fish – or basically one drop with a bait rig. Flatfish are also common, primarily starry flounder in the winter, and sand soles and California halibut during the summer. Flounder and soles will hit on ghost shrimp, bloodworms or a piece of anchovy fished on the bottom; the halibut prefer live bait like a shiner, small smelt or walleye surfperch fished on a sliding leader. Still, some locals swear by frozen anchovies (using the rear half of the fish) and a 36-pound halibut was reported in 1998. Each year will also see a few halibut hitting the plastic twin tails being used by more and more anglers. If you catch a small flatfish, it may be a sole but more likely will be a small Pacific sanddab or a very small speckled sanddab; both like to inhabit the depression areas between the pilings. However, you never know what will show up as seen in April of '99 when several Rex sole (*Glyptocephalus zachirus*) were caught from the area near the cleaning station. What the normally deep-water (60-2,100 feet deep) flatfish were doing in the shallow water is anyone's guess. Similarly, several Pacific halibut have been reported from the pier, although none reached the gargantuan size of their far northern relatives.

A final fish caught in fairly high numbers are the rock-dwelling striped seaperch that move into pier waters in the fall. These large perch like bloodworms (or fresh mussel) and the best spots are down around the mussel covered pilings, inshore to the middle of the pier. In the same area and caught with the same bait are large rubberlip seaperch and buttermouth perch (blackperch); they are most common from early spring to the start

of the summer. Fish caught in smaller numbers include a number of rockfish (sometimes called rock bass or sand bass) – kelp rockfish, grass rockfish and gopher rockfish. Into this mix will be added a few cabezon and lingcod. Shark species include the aforementioned dogfish together with brown smoothhounds, leopard sharks, and a few threshers. Occasionally even a blue shark will show up in the bay. Much more common are bat rays and big skates and both reach a pretty good size (one angler in August of 1998 fought a long fight with a bat ray estimated at 100 pounds but his nylon rope broke while bringing the fish up onto the pier).

Some years will also see some good catches of thornback rays. Salmon can also be caught. In the past, most of the salmon were silvers (coho) and most were caught on jigs or other lures in the late summer or fall, although an 18-inch king salmon was landed in January of '99. While most of the salmon seem to be in the 6-12 pound category, several larger kings (20+ pounds) have also been reported. Regulars watch for birds diving into the waters near the pier. The birds mean there is bait in the water and the salmon follow the schools of bait into the shallow waters. Fall to winter may also see a few steelhead landed, primarily on the north side by the creek. Worms and spoons such as Kastmasters or Krocodiles are generally the best lures for the steelhead. A 30-pound striped bass was landed by a surf fisherman fishing adjacent to the pier in 1998; an unusual catch for the area.

A final note is to remember is to move around the pier. One August trip saw me fishing out toward the end of the pier. Few of the anglers were catching any fish and as for myself, all I had to show for an hour's fishing was one small walleye surfperch. I finally decided to give the surf area a try (and no one was fishing in that area). During the next 45 minutes, fishing just outside the surf, and using mussels for bait, I was able to catch a large calico surfperch, five beautiful barred surfperch, and several walleye and silver surfperch. Since then I always walk around the pier upon arrival; if no one seems to be catching fish, I first try the surf area. Remember, don't just sit in one spot if you're not catching fish. Move to different areas of the pier, try different levels in the water, and try different baits and lures. Some type of fish are almost always present; your job is to find them and catch them.

Author's note

An interesting sight during a visit to this pier in July of 1994 was fly fishing lessons being given in the waters adjacent to the pier. Upwards of twenty anglers were stretched along the beach south of the pier together with an instructor who was showing them how to cast for barred surfperch. They only caught a few fish but all seemed to be having a great time in the mild surf common to the area. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find out what artificial flies they were using. However, it reminded me of an angler who used to use a fly rod to fish for sturgeon at Joseph's Pier in Rodeo, in San Pablo Bay. I never saw him hook a fish in the shallow waters by the pier. Nevertheless, he had landed several sturgeon while using fly rods and fishing from boats in the bay (and, I must add, I saw pictures of the equipment and the fish). Since sturgeon often jumped close to the pier, it would not have been unreasonable to expect him to land a fish at the pier.

History Note

The name San Simeon honors Saint Simon and was first recorded as the name of a rancho of Mission San Miguel in 1819. In 1852 a whaling village was established out on San Simeon Point and a wharf was built up next to the wall of the rocks. Unfortunately, that wharf was unusable during rough seas. Later, when the whaling had pretty much died out, the village was moved down to the present site and, in 1864, a wharf was built. When that wharf was destroyed by storms, Senator George Hearst (who had bought the site) decided to build a new wharf. He did so in 1878, and built a wharf which extended out 1,000 feet into the Pacific to an area where the depth of water was 20 feet at low tide. The wharf was 20 feet wide for most of its length but widened to 50 feet at the end and rails were laid out to the wharf to enable freight to be hauled up to the new warehouse on the shore. In 1957 the current pier was constructed as a pleasure pier by San Luis Obispo County and then, in 1969 after storm damage, the county and state funded repairs and an extension of 300 feet. It is currently managed by the state.

Facts

Hours

Open 24 hours a day although the pay station at the entrance to the park is only open dawn to dusk.

Facilities

There are fish cleaning stations and benches on the pier. Just up the hill from the pier are restrooms and Virg's Landing, a well equipped bait and tackle shop which has snacks, bait, rental rods and reels and a large selection of artificial lures. The landing, 805-927-4676 (or 1-800-rockcod) is also where you can buy your tickets for the sportfishing fleet, a fleet which operates during the spring to fall months, weather permitting. The landing is typically open 5 a.m. - 5 p.m. during the summer, 6 a.m. - 4 p.m. during the winter. Entry to the park costs \$4 (seniors \$3) but many people park outside the park entrance and simply walk in. Lodging is found approximately three miles away.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking is available as are restrooms. The pier planking is wood and the railing is approximately 36" high. Handicapped BBQ facilities are also available. Not posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

Highway 1 to the entrance.

Management

California Department of Parks and Recreation.

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