

# Fishing the Texas Surf

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by Tony Fedler



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# Fishing the Texas Surf

by Tony Fedler

A Guide to Surf, Wade and Pier Fishing  
On the Texas Coast, Including Techniques,  
Tackle, Baits and Common Surf Fish

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Variety and success are symbolic of sport fishing along the temperate Texas coast, where a vast complex of bays, salt marshes and beaches provide outstanding habitats for marine life. Over the past ten years, the high quality and value of saltwater sport fishing in Texas have received increased recognition, and its popularity has contributed to growth and development along the coast. Today, Texas is among the leading states for saltwater angling opportunities; each year nearly eight million fish, with a total weight over 7.7 million pounds, are harvested by saltwater anglers.

Saltwater fishing along the Texas coast takes several forms. Bays, channels and cuts can be fished by boat; bayshores can be wade-fished; and numerous jetties and specially-constructed fishing piers add another dimension to bay and open Gulf fishing. The open Gulf can be trolled, anchor- or drift-fished, or fished from the shoreline.

Surf fishing along 300 miles of Texas beaches is popular with residents and tourists for several reasons: access to beaches is readily available; boats or special gear are not required; and the angler has considerable mobility to move up and down the beach as he pleases. Learning to fish the surf requires very little time and money, and nearly any rod, from a 6-foot "popping" to a 13-foot "frailer", can be used.

This booklet is designed to provide coastal residents and tourists with basic information on the growing sport of surf fishing. Most anglers develop their own particular methods of fishing the surf over a period of time. However, with a basic understanding of the surf, shoreline fish, basic tackle requirements, and a little patience, any surf fisherman can be successful.

## WHAT IS IT?

Surf fishing occurs in shallow water areas, from 1 to 15 feet deep, which front the open Gulf. The influence of Gulf swells, wave action, and longshore and "rip" currents can add to the interesting nature of the sport.

Surf fishing usually brings to mind the 13-foot frailing rod secured in a sand spike while the fisherman naps in the shade of a beach umbrella. While this vision is sometimes true — surf fishing traditionally is done from a fixed location along the beach — the surf angler often comes equipped with a second rod rigged for casting lures, to provide additional opportunities to catch fish. Although the angler can move along the beach between casts, he generally has to wait for feeding fish moving up and down the shoreline to come to him.

Another form of surf fishing which provides more mobility for the angler is wade fishing. Using a smaller rod, 6 to 9 feet long, the angler wades into the surf to inshore sand bars and moves up and down these bars casting natural or artificial baits into the "guts" or channels where fish generally are located.

## WHERE IS IT?

More than 300 miles of Texas' 600 miles of coastline consist of surf-covered beaches. Nearly all of the surf is located on the barrier islands lining the Texas coast between Sabine Pass in the north and Port Isabel in the south.

The Texas Open Beaches Act has made most Gulf front beaches accessible to the fisherman, however, most of the property behind the beaches is privately owned. Crossing this land without permission may constitute trespassing. The state maintains many public roadways and beach access points for anglers to use; although access to some stretches of Texas beach is limited to boats and four-wheel drive vehicles, the solitary fisherman usually can find an isolated stretch of surf to wet his line.

## WHAT DO YOU FISH FOR?

Of the nearly 500 resident and migratory species of fish that inhabit the coastal waters of the state, well over 20 species are actively pursued by sport fishermen. Many of these saltwater sport fish can be caught in the surf along Texas beaches. Over 100 different species of fish have been caught along the near-shore and inshore areas of the coast.

Three ecological groupings of sport fish include:

1. *Inshore species:* fishes which are both resident and migratory and are found close to shore, along the beaches and in the coastal bays. These include speckled and gulf trout, redfish, flounder, Spanish mackerel, black drum, croaker, sheepshead, whiting, bluefish, gafftopsail catfish, pompano, tarpon, pigfish, pinfish, sharks and rays.

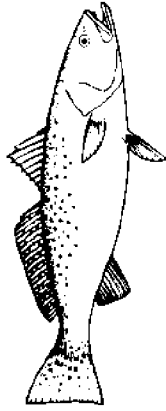
2. *Offshore bottom species:* fishes which are found around reefs, rough bottom areas, wrecks and oil rigs, such as red snapper, spadefish, porgies, grunts, warsaw grouper and jewfish.

3. *Offshore migratory species:* fishes which seldom are found inshore except when young. These characteristically are active swimmers and spend much of their time in mid-water or near the surface (pelagic). Included are king and Spanish mackerel, dorado (dolphin), bonito, amberjack, wahoo, barracuda, tuna, cobia, white and blue marlin, and sailfish.

The inshore group of fishes is the most important to surf fishermen because all commonly are found in the surf either seasonally or throughout the year. The species most commonly caught in the surf include speckled and gulf trout, flounder, croaker, drum, whiting, pigfish, shark, ray and catfish.

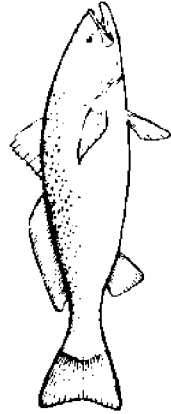
The chart on the following pages provides a brief summary of the habits, seasonal abundance, fishing methods and baits of commonly-caught surf fish.

# Common Surf Fish of the Texas Coast



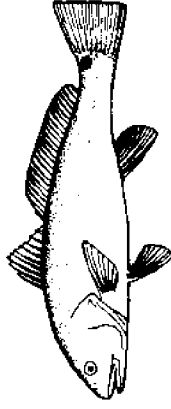
**SPOTTED SEA TROUT**, *Cynoscion nebulosus*, also known as\* speckled trout, trout, winter trout. **Size:** State tackle record 13 pounds, 2 ounces; over 6 pounds is unusual, average 1 to 2 pounds. **Habits:** Occur in salt and brackish water, particularly in the shallow water of bays and estuaries, the Gulf intracoastal waterway and along ocean beaches. Although favoring sandy areas, especially around grassy areas, they occur over any type of bottom in water warmer than 54 degrees F. **Season:** All year. Best fishing May through July and late September through November. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, jigging and casting from shore. Anglers should check state regulations on size and bag limits. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, mullet, soft or shedder crabs, worms, squid, clams and cut fish. Artificial baits include plastic worms, weighted bucktails, jigs, plugs and spoons.

**GULF SEA TROUT**, *Cynoscion arenarius*, a.k.a. trout, sand trout, white trout. Distinguished from spotted sea trout by having dark blotches, often arranged in oblique rows, on its back, but no round dark spots on the second dorsal fin and tail. **Size:** State tackle record 6 pounds, 4 ounces. Average 1/2 to 1 pound. **Habits:** Occur throughout the water column in salt and brackish water. Although found over any type of bottom, they favor sandy areas. **Season:** All year. Best fishing May through July and September through November. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, casting, chumming, and jigging from shore. Most are caught within a few feet of the bottom. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, mullet, soft or shedder crabs, worms, squid, clams and cut fish. Artificial baits include weighted bucktails, jigs, plugs, spoons and spinners.

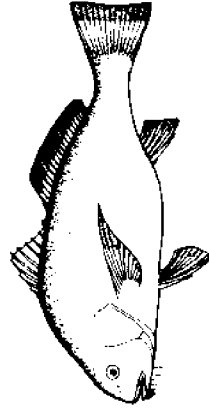


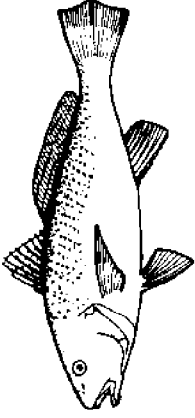
\*"Also known as" henceforth will be designated "a.k.a.".

**REDFISH**, *Sciaenops ocellata*, a.k.a. red drum, channel bass, red bass. Small fish are called rat reds, and large ones are called bull reds. **Size:** State tackle record 51½ pounds. Small fish average 2 to 4 pounds and large fish 15 to 20 pounds. **Habits:** Occur in brackish and salt water on mud and sand bottom, in grassy flats, along cuts and in the surf. **Season:** All year. Best fishing February through May and September through December. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, jigging and casting from shore. Anglers should check state regulations for size and bag limits. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, mullet, crabs, clams, cut fish and live fish. Artificial baits include spoons, plugs, weighted bucktails, jigs and stripbaits.

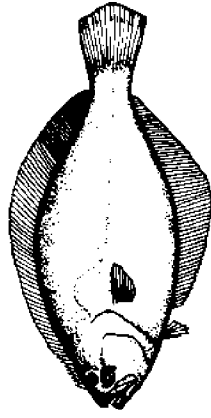


**DRUM**, *Pogonias cromis*, a.k.a. black drum. Young ones, called puppy drum, have four to six broad, black bars on their sides which disappear with age. **Size:** State tackle record 78 pounds. Small fish average 1 to 3 pounds, and large fish average 20 to 30 pounds. **Habits:** These inshore bottom feeders occur on any type of bottom in salt and brackish water, but especially on clam and oyster beds. They also are found around breakwaters, jetties, pilings, bridge abutments and piers. **Season:** All year. Best fishing February through April and October through December. A distinct surf run occurs along the Texas coast in late April through June. A lesser run occurs in November and December. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, jigging and casting from shore. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, clams, soft or shedder crabs, squid and cut fish. Artificial baits include spoons, jigs and weighted bucktails.





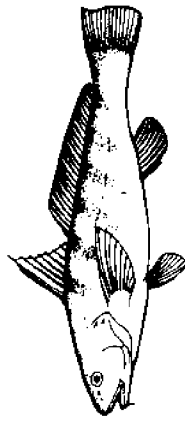
**CROAKER**, *Micropogon undulatus*, a.k.a. Atlantic croaker, golden croaker. **Size:** State record 5 pounds, 2 ounces. Average  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  pound. **Habits:** These bottom feeders occur on mud, sand and shell bottoms, around rock jetties, and in the surf. In the fall, adult fish move from bays to deep Gulf waters. A reverse migration occurs in the spring resulting in tremendous runs in the ship channels, passes and cuts that connect the bay systems with the Gulf. When hooked, the croaker frequently makes a distinct croaking sound. **Season:** All year. Best fishing May through July and October and November. **Fishing Methods:** Most are caught from the tide line to depths of 30 feet by bottom fishing, chumming and jigging from shore. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, soft or shedder crabs, clams, worms and cut fish. Artificial baits include small jigs and weighted bucktails.



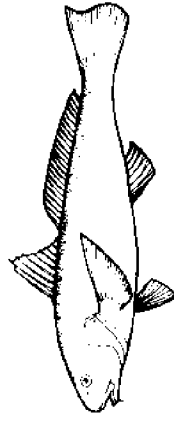
**FLOUNDER**, *Paralichthys lethostigma*, a.k.a. southern flounder. **Size:** State tackle record 11 pounds, 2 ounces. Average 1 to 2 pounds. **Habits:** These bottom feeders live on mud, sand and sand-shell bottoms in salt and brackish water. During warm months, many occur near the shore in shallow bays and estuaries, and in the surf; during cold months, they move into deeper water. **Season:** All year. Best fishing June through November. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing from shore. Night spearing, called gigging or flounderling, is commonly done while wading. Anglers should check state regulations for size and bag limits. **Baits:** Natural baits include small, live pinfish and pigfish, shrimp, mullet, cut mullet, clams and squid. Artificial baits include small bucktails, jigs and spinners.



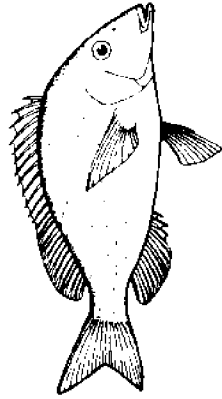
**WHITING**, *Menticirrhus americanus*, a.k.a. southern kingfish, king whiting. **Size:** State tackle record 2 pounds, 12 ounces. Average  $\frac{1}{3}$  to 1 pound. **Habits:** These bottom feeders aggregate on any type of bottom, but adults favor sand or sand-shell along the beaches and around the mouths of bays or inlets. Most occur in salt and brackish water from the tide line to depths of 40 feet. **Season:** All year. Best fishing December through May. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, chumming and jigging from shore. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, worms, cut fish, squid, clams and small crabs. Artificial baits include small jigs and weighted bucktails.

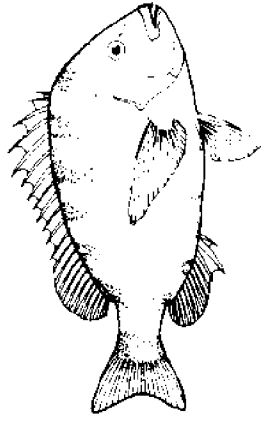


**BEACH WHITING**, *Menticirrhus littoralis*, a.k.a. gulf kingfish, silver whiting, king whiting. Distinguished from whiting by the absence of dark markings on its silvery body and its pale gill cavity. In contrast, whiting have dusky bars on back and sides and a dark gill cavity. **Size:** Same as whiting. **Habits:** Beach whiting prefer saltier water; although some occur within estuaries and bays, most remain along sandy beaches of the open ocean and near the outside mouths of bays. **Season, Fishing Methods and Baits** are the same as for whiting.

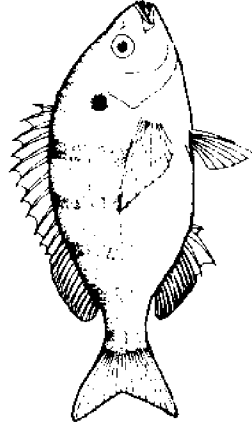


**PIGGY**, *Orthopristis chrysoptera*, a.k.a. pigfish. **Size:** To 2 pounds. **Average**  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  pound. **Habits:** Occur in salt and brackish water, on sand and mud bottoms around wrecks, piers, jetties, and along ocean beaches. Pigfish usually feed within a few feet of the bottom. Although pigfish are plentiful, they are not highly sought because of their small size. They often are used as live or dead bait for other species. **Season:** All year. Best fishing April through October. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing and jigging from shore, beach or boat. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, crabs, squid, worms, clams and cut fish. Artificial baits include small weighted bucktails and jigs.





**SHEEPSHEAD**, *Archosargus probatocephalus*. **Size:** State tackle record 11 pounds, 2 ounces. Average 1 to 3 pounds. **Habits:** Aggregate on sand, shell, gravel or rock bottom and around bridge abutments, jetties, breakwaters and shell beaches. They feed on or near the bottom. **Season:** All year. Best fishing March through May and mid-August through October. **Fishing Methods:** Many are caught bottom fishing, and chumming and fishing shell beach areas. **Baits:** Natural baits include crab, clams, oysters, shrimp, sand bugs and cut fish. Artificial baits include small jigs and weighted bucktails.



**PINFISH**, *Lagodon rhomboides*, a.k.a. pin perch, saltwater bream. **Size:** To 1 pound. Average  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  pound. **Habits:** Occur in salt and brackish water. Small fish remain year-round in shallow estuaries, especially in areas with sea grass. Voracious feeders and well-noted for their bait-stealing activities, they feed on or near the bottom. Pinfish often are used as live or dead bait for other fishes. **Season:** All year. Best fishing April through October. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing from shore, beach or boat. **Baits:** Small pieces of fish, worms, clams and shrimp.

**TARPON**, *Megalops atlanticus*, a.k.a. silver king. **Size:** State tackle record 210 pounds. Average 30 to 80 pounds. **Habits:** Pelagic and migratory. Occur over any bottom type in salt and brackish water, usually in estuaries, inlets and bays or within three miles of ocean beaches. **Season:** April through November. Best fishing in June and October. **Fishing Methods:** Chumming and casting from shoreline or piers. Most are caught in water 72 degrees to 84 degrees F. **Baits:** Natural baits include live mullet, pinfish, croaker, kingfish, shrimp, crabs, squid and cut bait. Artificial baits include spoons, plugs, weighted bucktails and bucktail flies.



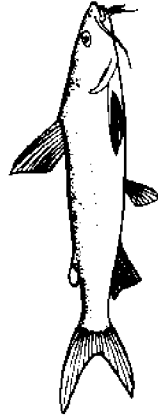
**LADYFISH**, *Elops saurus*, a.k.a. skipjack, ten-pounder. **Size:** State tackle record 3 pounds, 6¼ ounces. Average ¾ to 1½ pounds. **Habits:** These schooling fish occur throughout the water column over all bottom types. They often congregate along edges of deep holes, passes or channels. They also are found along the beaches. **Season:** April through October. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, chumming from shore, casting and jigging. Most are caught within a mile or two of ocean beaches, inlets and estuaries. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, small crabs and cut bait. Artificial baits include weighted bucktails, jigs, plugs, spoons and streamer flies.



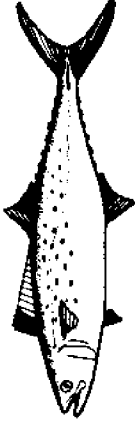
**GAFFTOP**, *Bagre marinus*, a.k.a. gafftopsail catfish, sail cat. **Size:** State record 9 pounds. Average ¾ to 1½ pounds. **Habits:** These inshore fish occur over any type of bottom in salt and brackish water and in the surf. Although primarily bottom feeders, they sometimes pursue prey to the surface. They often strike artificial lures. **Season:** All year. Best fishing April through October. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, chumming, jigging, and casting from the beach or shore. **Baits:** Natural baits include mullet, squid, live fish, shrimp and cut bait. Artificial baits include spoons, plugs and weighted bucktails.



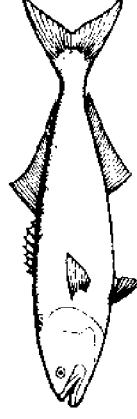
**SEA CATFISH**, *Arius felis*, a.k.a. sea cat, cat, hardhead. **Size:** To 3 pounds. Average ⅓ to ⅔ pound. **Habits:** These shallow water shore fish aggregate on any type of bottom. They generally are more active at night. **Season:** All year. Best fishing April through November. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing from shore or beach. Most are caught incidentally while fishing for other sport fish. They are considered a "trash fish" on the Texas coast. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, crab, cut fish and squid. These fish as a rule do not take artificial baits.



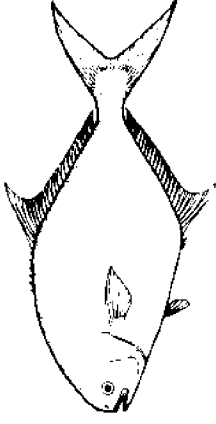
**SPANISH MACKEREL**, *Scomberomus maculatus*, a.k.a. mackerel. Distinguished from king mackerel (found offshore only) by the absence of scales on pectoral fins and the lateral line sloping downward gradually under the second dorsal fin. King mackerel have scaled pectoral fins and a lateral line that dips downward abruptly under the second dorsal fin. **Size:** State tackle record 6 pounds, 13 ounces. Average  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. **Habits:** Pelagic, schooling and migratory. Occur throughout the water column to depths of 80 feet in water warmer than 67 degrees F. Spanish mackerel will pursue bait fish through inlets into bays and estuaries. **Season:** March through October. Best fishing April through June and September and October. **Fishing Methods:** Casting, bottom fishing, and jigging from shore or fishing piers. **Baits:** Natural baits include spoons, stripbaits, weighted bucktails, plugs and jigs.



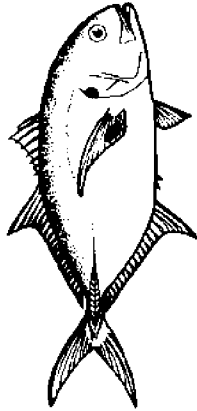
**BLUEFISH**, *Pomatomus saltatrix*, a.k.a. blues, snapper blues. **Size:** State tackle record 7 pounds, 6 ounces. Average  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. **Habits:** Pelagic, schooling and migratory. Bluefish occur throughout the water column in temperatures warmer than 55 degrees F. They often congregate around inlets, shoals, artificial reefs, fishing piers and jetties, and often travel in dense schools. Their sharp teeth require the use of wire leader. **Season:** May through October. **Fishing Methods:** Casting, bottom fishing, and jigging from shore or pier. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, mullet, cut and live fish. Artificial baits include spoons, weighted bucktails, jigs and plugs.



**POMPANO**, *Trachinotus carolinus*. **Size:** State tackle record 6 pounds, 1 ounce. Average  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1½ pounds. **Habits:** These schooling fish are caught along Gulf beaches, in estuaries and inlets. Pompano feed on sand and mud bottom in water warmer than 65 degrees F. **Season:** March through October. Best fishing in April and October. **Fishing Methods:** Bottom fishing, casting, chumming and jigging from shore or beach and in passes. **Baits:** Natural baits include shrimp, cut fish, clams and mole crabs. Artificial baits include small weighted bucktails, jigs and spoons.



**JACK CREVALLE**, *Caranx hippos*, a.k.a. jackfish, jack, common jack, crevalle jack. **Size:** State tackle record 49½ pounds. Average 1 to 3 pounds; 8 to 15 pounds offshore. **Habits:** Pelagic, schooling and migratory. These rapid swimmers occur in salt and brackish waters and forage along the surf, fishing piers and jetties. **Season:** All year. Best fishing April through September. **Fishing Methods:** Casting, jigging, chumming and bottom fishing from beach or shore. **Baits:** Natural baits include live or cut fish, and shrimp. Artificial baits include spoons, plugs, jigs and weighted bucktails. Artificial baits with some yellow, red, black or white on them work best.



**SHARKS** and **RAYS** also are caught with some frequency in the Texas surf. Several state tackle-record sharks have been caught by surf fishermen. Blacktip, bull, sand, hammerhead and lemon sharks are caught and are becoming increasingly important as a sport species. Many make good tablefare.

## HOW DO YOU FIND THEM?

Knowing where to fish along the beach and why the fishing is good in those locations is the key to success. Fish are not randomly-distributed in the surf along the beach, and there are certain areas of the surf that hold fish better than others. Fish also are not found with the same frequency throughout the year, as indicated in the "season" portion of the individual fish summaries. There are, however, several clues an angler can use to locate his potential catch.

Feeding birds often flock over feeding fish. Spanish mackerel, redfish, jackfish and bluefish often school up and chase bait fish to the surface where seabirds feed on them. Casting bait or lure into this area should quickly tell what kind of fish are feeding. "Reading" and understanding the surf and bottom below also provide additional clues to where the fish lie.

Surf changes with winds, tides, turbidity and brightness of the sun, however, breaking surf and changes in water color tell much about the bottom below. The sandy bottoms found along Texas barrier islands usually are made up of a series of three channels or "guts" separated by sand bars. By wading into the surf, an angler easily can locate these features. The first gut is generally two feet deep in light surf, followed by the first sand bar, which usually is narrow and covered by about one foot of water. The second gut, deeper and more pronounced than the first, usually is waist- to chest-deep and sometimes deeper. The second sand bar will be about one foot higher than the preceding trough and will be marked by surf breaking over it. The third trough follows and brings water at least six feet deep; there is an absence of breaking waves. The third, seaward sand bar slopes gradually out to sea and most often is too deep to wade fish.

Fish often feed in these guts and channels. They usually hold to the edges of the bars and occasionally are caught on top of the bars. The troughs can be identified from the beach by darker colored water; water will be lighter over the sand bars.

Troughs that run parallel to the beach are not unending. There are numerous breaks and channels which can be identified by the lack of breaking waves, and the water will be noticeably darker than that on each side. Fish use these perpendicular cuts or channels to move from trough to trough to feed.

Changes in the beachline such as points and coves, or changes in the bottom type from sand to shell or mud, also can indicate where variations in the surf bottom occur. Any of these places generally hold fish.

Redfish, drum, speckled trout, golden croaker, whiting, gafftop-sail catfish, pompano, and occasionally bluefish and Spanish mackerel are found in and around these troughs and channels.

## HOW DO YOU CATCH THEM?

To catch a fish, an angler either must "feed em" or "fool em". Either natural baits such as shrimp, minnows, worms and other marine life, or artificial baits such as lures, plugs, jigs, spinners and plastic worms are used to entice a strike. Since the fishing rig is built based on the type of bait to be used, a look at different surf fishing baits can aid the angler in selecting the best tackle.

### Natural Baits

Shrimp is the most popular saltwater bait among surf fishermen along the Texas coast. Fished live, dead or frozen, shrimp is a good natural bait which can be used to catch most surf fish. Two types of shrimp are found along the coast; the larger white shrimp are abundant in the bays as are brown shrimp, or "brownies", however, the latter normally do not remain in the bays long enough to reach full size. Since nearly all species of surf fish feed on shrimp, the angler should be prepared to put up with bait-stealers and trash fish. Using alternate types of bait can alleviate the problem to some degree.

Dead shrimp, either fresh or frozen, are very easy to use: they are run or threaded onto the hook, with or without the shell. Dead shrimp are peeled by simply removing the husk or shell from around the body. Some fish along the beach, pompano for example, are particularly fond of "peeled" shrimp. Whether large or small, dead shrimp will catch their share of fish, especially when fished on or near the bottom.

When fishing with dead shrimp, it is necessary to avoid "cracking the whip" when casting as this bait generally is soft and can tear off the hook easily. Bait-stealing fish and turbulent surf also can separate shrimp and hook easily, making it necessary to check the line periodically.

Live shrimp are used to catch redfish, trout, catfish, pompano, pigfish, pinfish, rays, whiting, gulf trout and other types of fish often found in the surf. Speckled trout show a definite preference for live shrimp. This bait may be used in the surf with either a fishfinder or bottom rig.

The technique for hooking a live shrimp is important to keep it alive and on the hook, and one of two methods generally is used, depending on the condition of the shrimp. When its head is firm and hard, it can be hooked behind the eyes and under the horn which runs nearly the entire length of its head. The horn is thick, tough, and holds a hook well. Care must be taken to avoid running the hook through the soft, dark spot on the shrimp's head; this is the brain, and impalement will cause the shrimp to die quickly. Attaching the hook as close as possible to the end of the head is best.

When the shrimp's head is very soft, it should be hooked on the top side of the tail, through the first or second joint. Hooking on the underside of the body will cause the shrimp to turn upside down. A

small, light hook should be used so the shrimp can flip and swim naturally.

Fishermen may encounter a problem in keeping shrimp alive. They must be kept in a container while transporting, which means that some type of pump is needed to keep oxygen in the water, and in warm weather, the water must be kept cool for it to take up oxygen. A battery-powered pump that circulates and oxygenates the water will solve the first problem; adding small chunks of ice to the water in warm weather will keep it cool. Shrimp can live in water which is very low in salinity, therefore, with periodic changing of the water and removal of dead shrimp, live shrimp should last all day. Care should be taken not to crowd the shrimp in a bait-bucket since overcrowding quickly will result in oxygen depletion. In addition, shrimp tend to be cannibalistic.

Mullet, mudfish and perch are the next most commonly-used baits and may be used either alive or dead. Live fingerling mullet, about two to three inches long, are excellent baits for speckled trout, and flounder are particularly fond of mudfish. Live fish are especially productive when hardhead catfish and piggy perch move into a fishing area, and consistently will catch more speckled trout and flounder than will shrimp. Trash fish and bait-stealers, such as the blue crab, will not bother the small live baits as they will shrimp.

Small fish, particularly the pigfish, which makes a loud grunting noise that attracts the fish, are great for speckled trout. Pinfish, which have a spiny dorsal fin, also are good to use. Larger pinfish should have the fin clipped to make handling easier and to improve their quality as a bait. Pinfish and piggies can be hooked easily just behind the head and above the backbone in the "collar". Dead fish can be hooked through the lips or eyes.

Mullet can be hooked similar to pigfish if they are fairly large. Smaller mullet need to be hooked behind the body cavity, preferably above the backbone, to keep them alive.

Large mullet can be used for cut or chunk bait and are excellent for catching redfish, black drum, flounder and pompano. Mullet are rich in fat and very oily, which make them good for scent-feeders. Cut bait generally is used with a bottom or fishfinder rig. In the summer, blue crabs can raise havoc with bottom-fished cut baits, although this doesn't seem to be a problem in the winter.

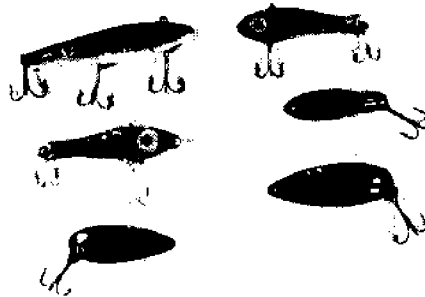
There is a wide assortment of other, less frequently-used baits that can produce excellent results. Crabs such as the blue, mole and fiddler often provide spectacular fishing for speckled trout, redfish, sheepshead and black drum. The fiddler crab found in the sand dunes and salt grass marshes provide tasty bait for sheepshead. Blue crabs, especially in the soft-shelled stage, are a favorite of redfish. The large claws should be broken off and hooked through the shell.

Any small fish, such as chubs, shiners and menhaden, make good bait but generally are not found in local bait shops. When buying natural baits for surf fishing, anglers should buy the freshest bait available.

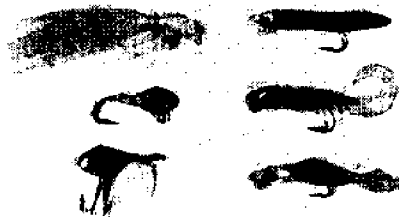


## Artificial Baits

The multitude of spoons, plugs, jigs, plastic worms and bucktails on the market can make choosing an effective artificial fish-catcher difficult for the angler. To complicate matters, there are nearly as many size and color combinations to choose from. Any lure hanging on the wall of a tackle shop will catch fish, however, some of these lures are reported by fishermen as the best surf fish-catchers on the Texas coast. These include Kastmaster, Johnson Sprite, Bingo, Hump, Mirr-O-Lure, Speck-Rig, plastic jig-worms, nylon jigs and bucktails.



Popular brands of commercial, artificial baits include (top to bottom, left to right): Rebel, Bingo, Johnson Sprite, Hump, Kastmaster and Johnson Sprite.



Artificial baits which are favorites with Texas surf fishermen include (top to bottom, left to right): bucktail jig, weighted jig, spinner, and a variety of plastic worms.

Along the Texas coast, the use of several lure colors — red, white, yellow, amber, black, green, and combinations of these — seem to be the most popular. However, water color, season, bottom conditions and fish species affect the day-to-day productivity of any color or color combination.

The *Mirr-O-Lure* probably is the most popular of the plug type lures. The gold- or silver-sided lures with green, black or red tops commonly are used, as are white- or yellow-sided ones with the same top colors.

The *Bingo* and *Hump* are similarly designed plugs. Longstanding favorites have a white body with red or black heads. Other popular choices are the silver-plated, amber with red head, pink-scaled, fluorescent red, and red with yellow spot models. Other popular plug type lures include the *Rebel* and *Bingo Shorty Shrimp*.

Two types of spoons, the *Kastmaster* and *Johnson Sprite*, by far are the most widely-used spoons for surf fishing. Silver, bronze and gold styles are the best producers, with copper models running close behind. Each type of spoon is available in a variety of sizes and weights. Both plugs and spoons need to be balanced with the rod, reel and line in use for maximum casting performance. Plugs and spoons both should be worked slowly or bounced along the bottom, although the retrieve should be fast enough to keep the lure from continually running along the bottom.

“*Speck-Rigs*”, “*Worm Puzzlers*” and other similar jig-worms, feather jigs and nylon jigs come in many shapes and sizes. Popular colors are white, red, yellow, and combinations of these three. Because fish strike different colors almost daily, a good assortment is advisable. A stock of pink, purple, orange and clear jig-worms also would be handy to include in the tackle box.

Jigs are worked along the bottom by raising and lowering the rod tip, coupled with a very slow or occasionally fast retrieve. Jigs, spoons and plugs can be used under a float using the same jig fishing technique when surf conditions are fairly calm, or when fishing from piers, jetties or groins.

Visibility of the artificial bait in the water is probably the only limitation to its use. Clear water provides the best results, but if the water is muddy, larger lures are needed. Vibrating lures can overcome some of the visibility problems.

All artificial baits mentioned here can be used for surf, pier and jetty fishing. Information on the best lures for a particular area usually can be obtained at local tackle shops.

## Terminal Tackle

Once the prey and the appropriate bait have been selected, the next consideration is the type of terminal tackle to be used. Terminal tackle is the term applied to the combinations of hooks, leaders, swivels and weights which are attached to the fishing line.

Terminal tackle for surf fishing generally consists of one of three types of riggings for use with natural baits. A standard bottom rig includes a weight at the terminal end with one or more hooks attached to "droppers" from the main leader with a barrel swivel joining leader and line. Sometimes a snap-swivel is tied to the end of the line to facilitate attachment of pre-constructed bottom rigs.

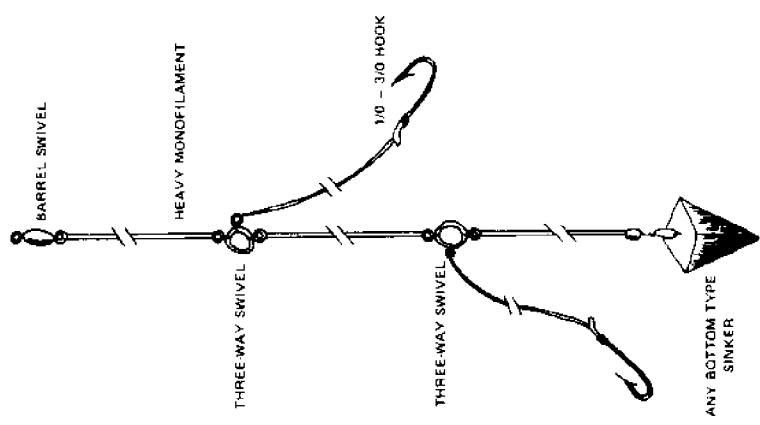
The first drop can either be a dropper loop knot or a three-way swivel located approximately six inches below the top swivel. A hook is then tied directly to the end of the dropper loop or attached by a length of leader to the swivel. The next drop (or drops) will vary in distance from the first drop depending on the length of the dropper loop or leader used; however, each drop should be made just below the hook on the drop just above it. This will keep the bait from tangling.

A pyramid, wedge or spider weight is attached to the terminal end of the bottom rig, with or without a snap-swivel. The size of the weight and the distance between the lowest drop and the weight depends on how near to the bottom the weight is to be fished, the strength of the shoreline currents, the type of bait, and the bulkiness of the weight. Use of the three-way swivel is optional, but it does aid in keeping the line from twisting and becoming tangled. Bottom-dwelling species such as croaker, speckled trout, redfish, black drum, pompano, flounder, whiting, catfish, rays and certain sharks commonly are caught with this rigging.

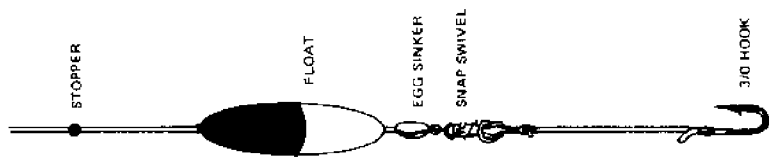
The second type of rigging an angler can use is the fishfinder rig. This consists of a sliding weight or barrel sinker, commonly known as the "fishfinder", which is attached to the line with a plastic bead used as a stop for the sliding weight. It also includes a swivel, approximately 18 to 24 inches of leader material, and a hook. A snap link is slipped over the end of the fishing line followed by a plastic bead; the line is then tied to a swivel. Roughly 18 to 24 inches of 50-pound leader is secured to the swivel with a single or triple hook attached to the end. The fishfinder consists of a pyramid- or wedge-shaped weight snapped onto a snap-swivel, with the swivel end attached to a split ring. The split ring is attached to the snap link on the line. The fishfinder rig commonly is used for redfish, speckled trout, jackfish, black drum, pompano, tarpon and shark.

The third terminal rig is the float rig, which consists of a stopper, float, egg sinker, swivel, leader material and a single or triple hook. In constructing this rig, a float or cork is slipped over the line followed by a plastic bead and an egg sinker. A swivel is secured to the end of the line, and 30 to 36 inches of 20-pound leader material attached to the swivel. A 3/0 single hook or triple hook generally is used. A small stopper is placed above the float; this can consist of a small split shot weight, rubber band or any other material that will attach securely to the line. This keeps the float from running up the line and regulates the depth the bait will be fished.

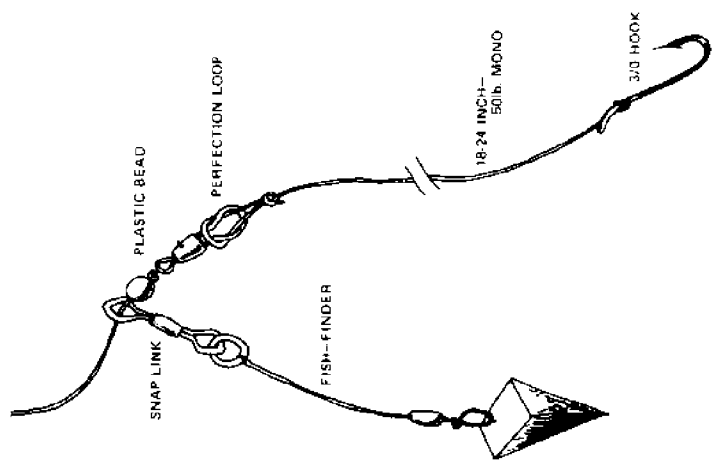
Local tackle shops have bottom and fishfinder type rigs ready-



Two-Drop Bottom Rig Leader



Float Rig



Fishfinder Rig

made. These are convenient to use, and the fisherman usually is assured that all knots are tied correctly.

Artificial baits may be tied directly to the fishing line or to a snap-swivel which has been tied to the end of the line, however, some plugs and lures are designed to be used without a swivel. The angler can check for specific instructions on the package when purchased.

## Hooks

Prescribing the correct hook for a particular fishing rig largely depends on the line and leader strength, bait type and size, and surf conditions. The most important aspect of any hook is its sharpness. A whetstone and a little "elbow grease" applied to the tip of the hook will result in fewer missed strikes.

In general, the stronger the leader and line, the larger the hook can be. The leader and line must be of sufficient size to imbed the barb of the hook into the tissue of the fish's mouth. Using light-weight leader or line with a large hook often results in a hook being thrown by the fish or being snapped off when the angler attempts to set it.

The hook should be hidden by the bait so it is not totally exposed for the fish to see. Light-weight hooks should be used for live shrimp and minnows so they will swim naturally in the water.

Surf conditions should be considered when choosing an appropriate hook size. Clear water often requires a smaller hook because of increased visibility. As the surf becomes muddier, larger hooks may be used. The hooks mentioned in the description of terminal rigs are relative sizes. The angler needs to make the decision of hook size based on tackle, bait, surf and bottom conditions.

## Weights

Several varieties of weights and sinkers, each designed for a specific purpose, are used for surf fishing. Pyramid and wedge weights are designed to dig into the sand, mud or gravel and hold the bottom or fishfinder rigs against tides, currents or wind drag on the line. Both weights snag easily on rocks, oyster shells and other debris.

The smooth, bell-shaped Dipsey or pear weight has a large bottom end that tapers to a smaller, rounded peak. A metal eye is attached inside the weight and is allowed to turn freely, allowing the weight to roll and drift with the current or tide. It is designed for use on gravel, rock or shell bottoms because it does not snag easily.

A surf sinker is a weight which has an eye molded into the lead. It is similar to the Dipsey in that it has a wide, heavy bottom and a smaller top. It will snag less than the pyramid and wedge but will twist the line as it rolls on the bottom unless a swivel is used.

The egg sinker, with the hole through the middle, is designed for use beneath a float, with lures, and sometimes is used with the fish-

finder. When used with a fishfinder, a fish can pick up the bait without feeling the drag of the weight.

The spider weight, or sand anchor, is a specially-designed weight used to anchor bottom rigs while surf fishing. It consists of one to four ounces of lead with five or six copper rods formed into it. The copper rods are flexible and are folded back against the long eye of the weight for storage; when in use, rods may be flared out to form a small grappling hook or sand anchor.

### Lines, Rods and Reels

The overall balance of the fishing rig needs to be considered when selecting lines, rods and reels. Line size is dependent on the type of bait being cast, wind and surf conditions, and size of fish being sought. When casting heavy baits, such as six- to eight-inch mullet, a heavy line and leader are needed to cast the bait properly without snapping it off. When the surf is running high or if a stiff wind is blowing, heavy weights are needed to hold the bait on the bottom in the desired location; again, heavy line is required to cast effectively. As bait and weight size diminish, lighter line may be used to further casting distance.

Surf rods should be balanced with the reel and should be chosen for their ability to handle bottom-bait fishing rigs, artificial lures and fish. The rod should bend without excessive stiffness or play. Rods between 8 and 12 feet long are best, with the rod butt 18 to 36 inches long depending on the overall rod length. Big rods should be capable of casting a one-quarter- to four-ounce weight and chunk of bait or heavy lure as far as 40 to 60 yards.

Two types of reels are popular in surf fishing. A large capacity star drag, revolving spool saltwater reel with or without a level wind may be used. The reel should be filled with approximately 250 yards of 25- to 50-pound monofilament or braided dacron line, depending on bait, weight, wind and water conditions. The second reel type is the open-face spinning reel, which should have smooth, adjustable drags and carry approximately 250 yards of 15- to 30-pound line.

While surf fishing often brings to mind the big rigs used to catch such fish as the redfish, jackfish, shark and tarpon, smaller outfits are suitable. A six- to eight-foot, medium-action casting or popping rod, that has a matching medium-weight casting or spinning reel filled with a 15- to 25-pound line, provides great surf fishing sport.

### Tackle Maintenance

Saltwater is a very corrosive agent; it can oxidize and rust any metal containing iron within a few hours. Aluminum can become pitted, and other substances can become fouled if the rods, reels and line are not washed with fresh water after use, even if they are made specifically for salt water use. After washing, a light-weight lubricant should be used on all moving parts of reels and reel seats to prevent corrosion. A little preventive maintenance after each day's use can insure a long, problem-free life for all gear.

## WADE AND PIER FISHING

Wade and pier fishing along the Gulf beaches are actually variations of surf fishing. Wade fishing differs in that the wader is usually waist- or chest-deep in water and has greater mobility. Wading along the shore can aid in finding the fish; once they are located, the wader can travel with the fish up and down the beach. This method of fishing is particularly effective in casting and retrieving artificial baits.

Pier fishing on the Texas coast is probably the most popular method of fishing the beachfront waters. Its popularity is due to its accessibility to fishing at night and in all weather conditions; its accessibility for the handicapped, aged and young; and its relatively low cost. Piers and groins along the beach also allow the angler to reach deeper waters where larger fish are found.

Knowing where to fish along the pier is especially important. Most piers in Texas are long and wide, and different areas of the pier produce different types of fish. The fish that feed mainly in the second or third troughs out from the shoreline will not be caught on the seaward end of most piers. Because migratory surface feeders, such as bluefish and Spanish mackerel, generally swim around piers rather than through the pilings, the ends of piers are the best fishing spots for these species. During the spring and fall runs, large redfish also skirt the piers, while the small "rat reds" swim back and forth underneath.

## FROM SURF TO PLATE

A frequently overlooked aspect of fishing is the care of the fish after it has been caught. This begins when the fish is beached or netted, and continues until the fish is cooked and sitting in front of the fisherman on the dinner table.

Care should be taken in handling the fish when it is beached or netted. Many marine fish are equipped with sharp teeth, spiny fins or strong jaws which can cause serious injury to the fisherman. Gafftop and hardhead catfish have sharp spines on dorsal and pectoral fins which are capable of penetrating one's hand to the bone. Sheepshead have strong jaws used for crushing oyster and crab shell; a large sheepshead undoubtedly could sever a finger. Spanish and king mackerel and bluefish all have razor-sharp teeth capable of inflicting injury. A good set of pliers when removing hooks from the fish will eliminate most of the danger. Fish "grabbers" to hold gafftops or other spiny fish are recommended.

Preserving the freshness of a fish after it is caught is important and relatively simple if a few necessary items are included on the fishing trip. A knife, ice chest and plenty of crushed ice are needed; skinning and scaling tools also can be useful. A fish should be gutted,

gilled and bled as soon as possible after being caught. It should be washed with clean, fresh or saltwater to remove as much blood, sand and slime as possible and placed in the ice chest. If ice is not available the fish should be wrapped in clean, damp paper or cloth and placed in a well-ventilated, shady area.

When transporting fish, the body cavity should be packed with ice and the whole fish surrounded with ice, to prevent decomposition or chemical changes in the meat.

A fish can be prepared for refrigeration in several ways: fins and scales can be removed; the fish can be skinned if it is to remain whole; or it can be filleted if boneless meat is desired. A fresh fish should remain in good condition for as long as ten days in a refrigerator, provided it was properly handled and iced after being caught.

If a fish is to be frozen, three methods may be used for best results. The fish can be wrapped tightly in plastic wrap, aluminum foil or freezer paper; or it can be "glazed" by first freezing it on a tray, then dipping it in ice water. The thin ice layer that is created by this procedure will protect the fish from oxidation and freezer burn.

Plastic or wax containers such as milk cartons also can be used for freezing a fish. After the fish has been placed in a labeled, dated container and frozen completely, enough cold water is added to cover it, and the carton returned to the freezer.



# Notes