

Surf Fishing Basics: Family fun at the beach

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Canaveral National Seashore

Surf fishing is accessible to everyone, and it's a fun activity for the beach, making it an attractive diversion for families and the casual fisher.

Best of all, it's free, after a modest investment in gear, if you don't already have it.

You do need a license. The good news is that the license is free for Florida residents. You can pick one up at any bait shop, or order it online from the [Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission](#).

The beauty of surf fishing is that you can bring along whatever fishing gear you have on hand, which is likely to be a light or medium spinning outfit. Add a pyramid sinker (or two), a hook with a leader and a bucket to cart home your catch. First-timers will be satisfied with a little frozen shrimp. Real basic, but it provides a day of fun.

If you go more than once or twice, you may want to pull together a bit more gear. You can, but don't have to spend a lot of money.

Gearing up

When you get to the beach, you'll want to steer clear of swimmers, so you may have to walk a short distance. Walking back to the car for a second load of gear is an option, but I'd rather not. I carry two 5-gallon buckets, one for my tackle (reels, sinkers, hooks, leaders, etc.) and the other contains a smaller bucket with my bait and a small cooler for drinks.



Strap a beach chair to your back, attach rod holder(s) with Velcro, and carry your rod(s) in with the buckets.

The Bucket – A basic 5-gallon bucket is ideal. You can buy a perforated lid from any bait shop that contains your bait and attach a portable aerator. Bucket inserts, available at home improvement stores, make fine compartments for your tackle.

Bait Bucket and Aerator – A small 2-gallon bait bucket that fits nicely inside the 5-gallon bucket. Attach a portable aerator for live shrimp to either bucket. Both are available at big-box sports outfitters and most bait shops for under \$20. If you use frozen bait, you don't need either.

Rod Holders – Rod holders keep your rod and reels out of the sand. You can buy them, but it's easy to make them yourself. Just take a 3-foot piece of PVC pipe, use a hacksaw to cut a point at one end for driving into the sand, and you're ready to go. I pack a rubber mallet to pound it into the sand.



Rods and Reels

A basic medium spinning outfit will suffice, but you might want to consider this:

The Rod – Most agree that a sturdy rod about 10 feet is the best choice for casting in the surf beyond the break line. I carry an 11-foot Harnell, the granddaddy of surf rods, and an inexpensive 9-foot White Rhino, which is inexpensive and suitable for most conditions. In fact, most times I'll leave the Harnell at home and the basic medium spinning outfit. A long butt is best for a stronger grip when you cast.

The Reel – The "pros" use a wide, free-wheeling baitcaster, but unless you know how to cast with one, leave it on the shelf. Backlash is a nightmare. Choose instead a decent medium-weight spinning reel that can handle a few hundred yards of 25-lb to 30-lb. line. I usually carry three spinning reels, wrapped in clean rags and carry them out in my tackle bucket to keep the sand out.



Tools – Bait knife, pliers, gloves and nail clippers. The pliers are necessary for removing hooks from the mouth of your fish, without hurting the fish, and nail clippers are indispensable. I rarely use a bait knife because I fish most often with live bait. The gloves are useful for holding your catch and protecting your hands from sharp teeth and fins. Special casting gloves without fingertips can be purchased, as can mesh fishing gloves. At the very least, you should bring along a pair of garden gloves that haven't been exposed to pesticides.

Tackle

The Line – Monofilament line is the choice of most surf anglers these days, but old-school fishers used braided lines. Today's braided lines are far superior – they are thinner and stronger. One of the three reels I bring to the beach has 150 yards of 30-lb. braided line with a monofilament backing of another 200 yards. This gives me room to run. The other two reels have monofilament, 15-lb. and 25-lb. test.

Sinkers – Pyramid sinkers creep into the sand and hold your bait near the bottom. They come in various sizes, and it's a good idea to bring a selection of weights for varying surf conditions. Some have wire anchors, although they can be troublesome. Egg sinkers and bucktail jigs work, too. A little bounce on the bottom stirs up the sand, attracting fish. But they require constant attention in currents.

Hooks – Many swear by circle hooks because they set quickly, but the standard J-hook works for me. You'll need to pay closer attention to the J-hook, but that's fishing, right?

Basic Rigs – The basic rig for most saltwater fishing is called the Fishfinder, or sliding rig. Slip the tag end

of your line through the eye of your sinker, then attach a swivel big enough to stop the slide. On the other end of the swivel, attach a 30-lb. leader with your hook. Add bait and go fish.

Special rigs – The possibilities here are endless, but the one I use most is a pompano rig. Don't bother making one, just buy a ready rig at your bait shop. They are available everywhere. The pompano rig has two or three leaders with small circle hooks. Clip a pyramid sinker to the swivel at the bottom of the rig. Simple to use and effective in the surf, especially for pompano.

Lures and Jigs – Other than jigs, lures are not very effective in the surf. Add a shrimp to a medium or heavy jig, then bounce it on the bottom a few times to attract fish. They require constant attention but are often productive. The jig of choice for surf fishing is the feathered bucktail jig tipped with a small piece of shrimp. This is also an effective lure for inshore waters, such as the Indian River Lagoon.

Nets – A hand net is not required gear, but it may help. As you reel your fish to shore, fish bounce in the surf and get thrown off your hook. A net gives you an edge.

Bait

Sand fleas – Premium bait for pompano, a delicious white-flesh fish and prime game in Florida's coastal waters. Also known as a mole crab, you can harvest these mini-crabs along the surf line. As the surf rolls back, watch for tiny disruptions in the outward flow, showing as a V. Those are antennae. Scoop up the sand around the crab and dig him out. Many surf fishers use a special basket with a handle that rakes and sifts the sand in one scoop. Some beaches are more productive than others, at different times, so don't go empty-handed. At the very least, you should have a bag of frozen shrimp or sand fleas, available at tackle shops near beaches.

Shrimp – Live is best, of course, but frozen works in a pinch, just not as well. With live shrimp, you need a bucket and an aerator to keep them alive for a day of fishing. The aerators run on batteries and attach to your bucket. Add seawater, drop the tube with an aerator head into the water, continually adding oxygen. Without an aerator, the shrimp won't last long. You can buy an aerator for under \$15

Squid – Readily available frozen. Cut the body into thin strips and use one at a time on each hook or jig. I don't have much luck with squid, but many others do, so it's worth considering, especially if no other bait is available.

A note about bait shops...

Patronize a bait shop near the beach you want to fish. These guys know what's biting and what kind of bait you should use. Of course, their advice is not infallible, but they know better than anybody except the guy who fishes that beach every day. The bait shop clerks will also be happy to advise you on your tackle for fishing locally and the rigs you'll need for best results.

You can find the bait shops you need on Google, and there is a really cool app for iPhones and iPads that locates bait shops all over the country, or within the range you identify, including a radius around where you currently are. The app is called Bait Shops by Derek Trauger and Associates.

Where, when and how to fish the surf

Most beaches in Florida allow surf fishing, unless they draw large crowds of swimmers. In some cases, no fishing at all is allowed. In others, restrictions limit the hours for fishing, usually from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. But many more beaches allow fishing all day, even 24 hours a day. Beaches with restrictions will post the rules as you enter the beach. You don't want to be near swimmers anyway because they mess up the fishing.

You should wear water shoes or beach sandals to protect your feet from rocks, coral or shells below the surf. You'll also want bring a hat and good sunscreen.

Start early or late – Fish are rummaging for food as the light starts to come up, before dawn, so you want to be there to feed them. But don't despair if you arrive late. Stories abound of anglers who report better fishing as the day wears on. Another popular time to fish is at dusk, when the water begins to cool and fish come off the bottom, again on the hunt for food. Overnight fishing, on beaches that allow it, can be the most productive.







Check reef structure and tidal flow – If there are reefs or sandbars near shore, as there are on Hutchinson Island and at Canaveral National Seashore, keep an eye on the ebb and flow of currents. Fish are often trapped in the trough between the beach and the reef, but they flow out through gaps. You can see the outward flow through these breaks on the surface, and it's often very productive to position yourself nearby.

When you cast, don't be afraid to get wet. Fishing the troughs near beach may not require a long cast, but if you don't have such structure, you'll need to cast as far as possible. That's where a longer rod is a big plus. Wade out into the surf as far as comfortable and take your time casting. A steady, progressively faster cast with a release at 1 o'clock will give you the most distance. It takes practice.

Catch and release – Decide ahead of time whether you plan to release your catch. My rule is that if I'm not going to eat it, the fish goes back, with the exception of small baitfish I plan to use, so I try to be ready. When you land the fish, pick it up carefully but firmly and remove the hook. Wet your hands first so that you don't remove the slime that protects the fish. Once the hook is removed, carry it into the surf and gently release it in the water. Throwing the fish into the ocean is for amateurs. Watch out for barbs, teeth and sharp fins. If the fish doesn't move, give it a nudge so the water will flow through its gills. Gloves designed to protect the fish are a good choice.

Like everything else, everybody has a different way of doing things, so I encourage your comments, questions, tips, techniques and tricks for surf fishing. **Please use the comment form below.**

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