

Beachcombing for Kings & Halibut

by Tim Marble

From May to November this angler spends a couple of days a week fishing for California halibut in their shallow water haunts along the Norcal coast. But when the salmon show up in nearshore waters, attention is focused on them. From mid summer to fall the kings move from offshore in tight to the beaches in search of schools of baitfish to gorge on as they stage, preparing for their final trip under the Golden Gate and into the Sacramento system. These great fish, many of which will exceed 30 pounds, can be found just outside the shorebreak and are easily accessed with troll or mooching gear. They are spectacular fighters in shallow water with light mooching gear. Light 8-8 1/2 foot mooching sticks work well for both trolling and mooching and a favorite troll setup is a traybait herring rigged on a modified rotary salmon killer. Other troll offerings include hootchies behind dodgers, straight Krocodiles, and 4.5 Apexes. For shallow water trolling where depths will range from 15 to 30 feet, 12 to 20 ounce drift balls suspended from a slider sleeve on a 12 inch dropper are utilized. For the most part, bottom bouncing will be the rule. Optimum troll speed runs from 1.8 to 2.5 MPH. Downriggers are not practical for this type of fishing.

Mooching terminal gear consists of 6 to 8 foot leaders tied up from 17 to 20 pound mono and using barbless circle hooks as required. The light wire ones work well, especially if live bait is available.

The key to finding schools of feeding salmon is to locate "bait balls". Telltale signs in addition to using the finder, is to watch for feeding and diving birds such as Brown Pelicans, Cormorants, and Murres. Sometimes in glassy or near-glassy conditions, breezing schools of baitfish breaking water can be spotted, and that is a good sign that predators may be nearby. Using field glasses to scan up and down the beaches you are targeting can often give you a couple of indicators that schooled fish may be in the area.

The elimination of inshore trawling practices in recent years, coupled with a reduction in the sport limit on California Halibut from 5 to 3, has helped to restore healthy populations. There was also an abundance of sub-legal fish in 2001 (under 22 inches) which is a good sign for future seasons.

Although the most common way to take halibut is wind or tidal-induced drifting with live bait, they will readily take trolled offerings and are taken incidentally while salmon trolling. They can be found just like the kings, in tight to the surfline, and especially over long, sandy stretches.

"Beachcombing" can be a risky and dangerous activity, especially with a swell running. Extreme caution needs to be taken to avoid getting caught up in a breaking swell or rogue wave. Proper planning and knowing the limitation of your experience and your vessel are important considerations. The open ocean is unforgiving. As with all outdoor activities, good judgment and common sense are needed to enjoy the experience.

TIGHT LINES FOR 2002!!! -TM