

Tackle Tips and Techniques for Shallow Water Halibut

By Capt. David Bacon

Halibuteers eagerly await this season when California Halibut are in the shallows feeding hungrily and can be targeted via a variety of techniques. Whether you fish SoCal, CenCal or NorCal, this is the halibut season and it is a good one. Our purpose here, is to help you catch some of these delicious fish.

There are three basic techniques common to halibut fishing in California; drifting, bounce-balling, and surf fishing. Variations are possible on each of these three basic techniques, and it is prudent to work at these fish with every twist and trick we can dream up.

Drift fishing is the most common way to fish for “flatties”. It is relatively simple. Just motor or paddle out over a flat sand or mud bottom and make repeated drifts over various depths until you get bit. Then concentrate on that depth and location because halibut tend to congregate. Sometimes they will be feeding in the waves breaking near the beach, and sometimes they will be out at 100 feet. One good bet though, is that at this time of year they frequently come into very shallow water.

Live bait works wonders on halibut, so pick up some live sardines and anchovies from the bait receiver in most of our harbors. It helps to have some fancier baits, so have someone working a bait gangion and try to add a few small mackerel or smelt to the bait tank. It is awfully difficult for a big halibut to ignore a lively six-inch mackerel. Live squid is also a treat for our halibut, so when there is some available at the bait receiver, spend the extra cash and get some candy bait. An impressively effective live-bait rig is a sliding rat-trap (a treble hook in the tail and a sliding hook in the head of a baitfish). There are two advantages to using this rig. One is that the fish can pick up the bait without feeling the sliding weight. The other is that, because of the second hook near the tail of the baitfish, the hookup-to-bite ratio is improved over a single-hook rig.

Productive anglers have more than one technique working simultaneously, so when drifting, they cast spoons such as a Luhr Jensen Krocodile or a Hopkins in chrome or white finishes. Let the spoon flutter down to near the bottom and slowly pump it back to the boat, frequently allowing it sink back down in order to keep it where the fish can see it. Artificial grubs (a favorite is the 6-inch Gulp! Grub) and swimbaits also attract halibut. White tails are proven producers, when rigged on a leadhead sized to allow you to pump it slowly along the bottom. When fishing baits, spoons, or swimbaits, I prefer a 7 foot medium action rod, such as a Fenwick or Penn, with a smooth sturdy and dependable mid-size reel, such as the Penn International 975 model.

Bounce-balling is a very effective slow-troll method that resembles work. Make no mistake - there is no lazy or easy way to bounce-ball effectively. The rig begins with a three-way swivel. Your main line from the rod is tied to one of the three rings on the swivel. From a second ring, run a 24 inch light leader to a heavy weight (from 1 to 2 pounds, depending upon the velocity of the current and the speed of the boat). From the third ring, run a 3 foot heavy leader to a dodger or flasher blade. From the dodger or flasher, run a 30-inch medium leader to a hoochy or rat trap rig with a live bait, dead bait or artificial (sardine, anchovy, whole squid, mackerel, hoochie or Gulp! Grub).

Move the boat along, under power and in gear at a speed through water, just enough to give the dodger or flasher some action. That will usually be 1.5 to 3 knots, depending upon current direction and speed relative to trolling direction. Bounce the weight on the bottom every twenty seconds or so, by lowering the tip of the rod. Nearby halibut can feel the bump and see the cloud of sand or mud kicked up by the bouncing weight. That is when they strike.

At times, surf fisherfolk stand as good a chance of catching a halibut as does a boater. This is the best time of year to keep a casting rod and fanny pack of Gulp! grubs, plastics & leadheads and Lucky Craft lures tucked safely away in your car. When you have a couple of hours to spare, take a walk along the beach and cast repeatedly into the surf, retrieving at a slow-to-medium speed. Common color choices for the lures are white, root bear, or motor oil. Best spots are sandy areas adjacent to structure such as piers, rocks, or breakwaters. Stream mouths with flowing water are also places which really seem to attract the flat fish. This casual type of fishing doesn't take near the planning and preparation that a boat trip requires. All you need is a couple of hours, preferably around high tide, but a high tide is not mandatory. The best part is that every time you get into your vehicle and see your rod waiting, you feel like you've got your priorities straight.