

Ten beach fishing tips

Jamie Robley | January 2016 » Feature Articles / New South Wales /

The coming months normally provide first-rate beach fishing right along the NSW coastline. Quite a few species are on offer as well, including bream, whiting, tailor, salmon and mulloway. Unlike mid to late winter, coastal water temperature remains very comfortable too, so feet don't end up frozen, even when autumn starts kicking in.

As with all forms of angling, a number of different factors are involved to bring success on the sand. There aren't just one or two key points or any sort of closely guarded secrets. Rather, success comes from a combination of tackle, technique, common sense and good luck that adds up to fun times and perhaps a tasty seafood dinner at the end of the day.

GEARING UP

One of the most proficient beach anglers I've ever seen used only an old plastic Coke bottle, with 100m of line wrapped around it to cast small baits into the North Coast surf, for bream, whiting and flathead. While I'm certainly not about to recommend a Coke bottle as your main weapon at the beach, it simply shows that expensive or sophisticated tackle isn't a major requirement.

However, it is definitely beneficial to use a lightweight, balanced outfit of reasonable quality. A good starting point for rod length is 3m or 10ft, with an extra half metre performing better in some cases. In more sheltered stretches, where the surf is only small, much shorter rods can also be fun and practical to use.

Simple, decent quality threadline reels, spooled up with mono rather than braid, are easy to use and get the job done without problems. Of course, Alvey sidecast reels are practical and durable for the beach, although probably not as easy to use as threadlines or 'eggbeaters' for kids or less experienced anglers. Either way, try to buy the best the budget allows and avoid dropping them in the sand, if possible.

If a reel does end up taking a swim in the surf or gets covered in sand, give it a hose with freshwater at the very first opportunity and brush off the sand with a toothbrush or small cleaning brush. If it feels clogged or very rough to wind, then it probably needs a full service. If not, then perhaps a light spray with Inox or WD40, then a few drops of oil around the working parts will be enough to get it back in order and ready to fish again. Remember to wipe off any oil or residue around the reel, as this attracts more sand and grime.

As for lines, the simplicity and stretch of nylon mono can be preferable to the more modern braids or PE line for surf fishing, and a must if a sidecast reel is used. However, braids can make for better casting distance and greater bite sensitivity. When you use braid, it's important to also use a nylon leader, to avoid bust-offs or fish shaking the hooks free. Of course, this means there are more knots to tie and things start to become a bit more complicated.

Other items like a small plastic bucket with a lid, a carry bag, compact tackle box, knife, pliers and a rag or cloth to wipe your smelly hands or the rod are also essential. Bear in mind, the lighter the kit is the easier and more enjoyable the beach fishing experience will be.

PLANNING

Well before heading to the nearest beach, it makes sense to check weather, sea and tide forecasts, even up to a week or more in advance, particularly if a long trip is in mind. Strong wind or rough seas could mean things are going to be problematic and perhaps not even worth trying. Reasonably good, stable weather is generally your best bet.

Other aspects of planning may involve securing some good quality bait, arranging plans with other anglers or perhaps doing some further research into a certain species or location.

TIME AND TIDE

Most fish bite best as the tide is rising at the beach. Sometimes the bottom of the tide may be a good time to start, while at other times it may be better to concentrate more an hour either side of the top of the tide. Each beach and species is a little different, so it may take some experimentation to work out what's best. If in doubt, the few hours leading up towards high tide are generally productive for most fish at most beaches.

If the tidal phase can be timed to coincide close to sunrise or sunset, the fishing will be even better. Like most fish in any sort of salt or freshwater environment, the low light periods that last an hour or so are when many fish are actively seeking food. Some fish, like mulloway and tailor, bite really well through the night as well, but it's still important to time outings with the tides.

SPECIES SPECIFIC

Every species of fish has slightly different habits and feeding preferences than others do. Some may respond really well to a certain type of bait, while others may ignore it in favour of something completely different. Some have much bigger or smaller mouths than others and on it goes.

Therefore, it's a good idea to choose which species of fish you would prefer to catch or consider what's most likely to swim along your local beaches. Most NSW beaches have the same species available, however there are some differences from north to south.

During autumn, winter and spring large numbers of salmon migrate up the coast and they can appear in huge schools from the south coast up to the central coast. Past Newcastle though, salmon may not be quite as thick and once we get north of Port Macquarie they tend to only be occasional visitors during winter and early spring.

On the far north coast tarwhine and dart are a lot more common than the south coast. Yes, both species do turn up way down south, but they're not as consistent or in the same numbers as beaches north of Coffs Harbour.

Tailor also tend to be a bit more prolific on the north coast, but overall they are much like bream, whiting and mulloway in that they're common right along the length of the coast. Pick a species then choose baits, lures and strategies accordingly. Keep in mind what is most likely to work on the fish you are targeting, rather than simply turning up and hoping for whatever may come along.

BEST BAIT

A very broad range of baits will entice fish at the beach. There are however, a handful of baits that consistently produce results. These baits are pipis, beach worms, prawns, pink nippers, pilchards, squid and strips or fillets of fresh mullet and tailor.

While most of these baits are commercially available (pilchards are a classic example), sometimes it's best if they can be secured fresh or caught just prior to use. Fresh or freshly frozen calamari squid that you've caught yourself is vastly superior to any squid purchased from a shop. On the other hand, good quality beach worms that have been properly preserved can last in cold storage for months and they work almost, if not as good as freshly caught worms.

IN A SPIN

Lure casting is another alternative that can be very effective at times. While it is possible to tempt almost any fish with some sort of lure, the most reliable targets along our beaches are tailor and salmon.

Soft plastics, hardbodies and others will work, but the truth is that metal lures remain the best overall. Chromed metals such as SureCatch Knights cast like a bullet, and the flashy chrome is often irresistible to tailor or salmon.

READING A BEACH

Reading a beach to establish the best spots to try isn't too hard at all. The basics of it are that darker or more settled looking water indicates deeper water – a hole or gutter. An area where waves are constantly crashing and lots of white foam is washing in towards the beach indicates that shallow sandbanks are just under the water.

Around low tide it's normally best to cast baits or lures into the deeper water, as this is where most fish will be concentrated. As the tide comes in and more water covers the shallow sand banks fish like to move up over these spots, looking for food. So a cast placed amongst the foamy whitewash or close to the edge of a deeper gutter or hole is a good idea.

IN CLOSE

There's certainly no need to cast out as far as possible either. In fact, many fish like to swim right in close, just behind the shore dump. This is a particularly good area for whiting, but even larger fish like sharks and mulloway may move right in close under the cover of darkness.

HOLD THAT ROD

It's very common to see a popular fishing spot where anglers cast out and then place the rod in a PVC rod holder. Such rod holders are a good invention and quite convenient, especially when rigging up or re-baiting. However, if you want to hook more fish the best thing to do is always hold the rod. This way you're ready to respond by striking or winding at exactly the right moment and there's also less chance the rod will be pulled over with the reel landing in the sand.

TAKE IT EASY

Another handy tip to finish off with is to take things easy when fighting a fish in the surf. Not only are many fish here quite solid, stubborn battlers, we also have to fight the power of the surf as well. So trying to get fish onto the sand as quickly as possible isn't always a good strategy. Take your time and allow fish to run if they or the waves are pulling with a lot of force. A relaxed, careful approach, without trying to bully the fish, works a lot better.

Images



There is a lot of beach fishing fun to be enjoyed at this time of year and in the months ahead. Although a relatively simple form of fishing, it's best to be a little specific about things in order to bring results.



A 3m rod, 4000 size threadline reel, bucket and carry bag. This is everything you need to catch pretty much anything from most beaches along the NSW coastline.



Take plenty of time to land fish at the beach. Remember the force of the waves exerts a lot of pressure, so it's not hard to snap lines or pull hooks.



Those low light periods around sunrise or sunset are when most species of fish are actively looking for food.



This solid salmon took a whole pilchard bait pinned to a set of ganged hooks. Pillies are one of the very best beach baits that appeal to many other species besides salmon.



Mullet are the grand prize of beach fishing. Generally, you'll need first class baits like calamari squid, beach worms or freshly caught mullet or tailor to be in with a good chance of catching one. You're most likely to catch one after sunset.



Tailor is one of the most common beach species and can be caught all year along the entire length of the NSW coastline. They bite best just after sunset or just before sunrise.



Using top quality natural bait is generally the best approach for beach fishing, however metal lures certainly have their place in the tackle box.