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These Outer Banks surf fishing tips about tackle, baits to use, times to fish, and scouting locations will help you zero in on drum, stripers, blues, and more An abundance of surf fishing opportunities makes the Outer Banks of North Carolina a top East Coast angling attraction. This is especially so in the fall, when large red drum, striped bass, and bluefish headline a long list of possible catches. Any compilation of Outer Banks fishing tips must be prefaced with a reminder to make sure you're up-to-date on fishing regulations for different species, as things can change during the season, plus access permits and your fishing license. That said, here are eight top Outer Banks fishing tips to help with your efforts. If you're new to OBX, as this area is known and/or an inexperienced beach angler, hiring a local surf fishing guide will get you off to a great start for where to go and how to go about it. At the very least, visit a local tackle shop not only for supplies and bait, but also for information about what's happening currently. Remember that storms change beach conditions, and this summer, Hurricane Dorian had a big effect on the North Carolina coast. Get as much local information as you can. Perhaps the most important of all Outer Banks surf fishing tips is this: When possible, try to do your fishing when the right tide and current coincide with low light conditions, meaning at dawn and dusk. This is prime fishing time. The fall staple of Outer Banks surf fishing species is red drum. These fish, which run large, are overwhelmingly caught on bait rather than lures. Crabs, mullet, and spot are the favorites. There is no substitute for the freshest possible bait. Buy your bait locally, as it will probably be what fish along the Outer Banks are feeding on, and acquired recently and locally. Take care to keep it in top condition. Use only single-hook surf rigs for bigger fish, like blues, stripers, and red drum. A two-hook rig can be used if your target is smaller species. Make sure you don't use too small a hook with your bait. Smallest hooks are often made of thin wire and can straighten under severe pressure, plus their barbs may not completely penetrate a fish's mouth, meaning they won't hold. A lot of pressure is exerted in the surf while landing big fish, and the hook is vitally important. Visit beaches you plan to fish at low tide to observe sloughs, holes, bars, and other features. This is especially helpful after a storm, as beach and surf conditions change frequently. How to | Tips and Tricks | Saltwater | Surf When it comes to surf fishing, its hard to beat the coastline of North Carolina. Well known for hundreds of miles of beaches where record-breaking catches are landed on a regular basis, the North Carolina shoreline is arguably one of the top destinations for surf fishermen in the U.S. So if you are new to the N.C. coastline, or just want to brush up on your surf fishing insight, take a closer look at everything you need to know about casting from the coast, and get ready for plenty of opportunities to reel in the catch of a lifetime. Permits state has specific rules and regulations in place to help manage natural resources, and North Carolina is no different. One of the ways these conservation efforts are funded is through saltwater fishing licenses, which help to support fisheries management programs, like hatcheries, habitat research, and fish stocking. As such, all anglers who fish along the North Carolina beaches, sounds, and any body of saltwater on the coast or barely inland will need to have a Coastal Recreational Fishing License, (also known as a saltwater fishing license.) Heres what you need to know about obtaining a saltwater fishing license in North Carolina: Licenses are sold via the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, and can be purchased online at . In addition, licenses can be purchased at the majority of local bait and tackle stores throughout the N.C. coastline, as well as at major sporting goods stores. A license is required for all anglers over the age of 16. A license is generally NOT required for fishing off a public fishing pier The coastal recreational fishing license allows anglers to fish in all coastal waters, but not in inland, fresh waters. A separate license the Unified Fishing License will allow anglers to fish in all waters across the state. A fishing license is not required for clamming or harvesting oysters, as the license is only required for finfish species. There are multiple types of coastal recreational fishing licenses available, which vary in price by timeframe, as well as the license holders state of origin. (I.e., North Carolina residents pay less for a saltwater fishing license.) Once you have your coastal recreational fishing license in hand, its time to start thinking about gear. Anglers will find tons of options when it comes to equipment for casting into the surf, from custom designed rods and reels at local tackle shops, to name brand varieties that are designed for multiple areas along the coastline. We were not provided with free or discounted products to review. These recommendations were not influenced by manufacturers. We did, however, heavily consider customer reviews at retail websites when deciding which products to feature. We like these products, but we took care to make sure other customers agree. Some of the product links include affiliate codes. If a purchase is made, OuterBanks.com is paid a commission for the referral. See our full surf fishing gear guide including rods, reels, line, rigs, carts, waders and more. Surf Fishing Rod and Reel Combos Rods can be purchased separately, or as a rod and reel combo. Though the length can vary by beach and surf conditions, local anglers traditionally recommend using an 8 to 16 light to medium surf type rod, which can adapt to most conditions and most species. Keep in mind that the rod you choose has a lot to do with your physical size some rods are heavy, and can tire out an angler quickly after multiple casts. \*Prices are updated several times a day, but subject to change at any moment Surf Fishing Line Your line will literally make or break your ability to reel in a catch. Look for 20-25 test line for the best results in all conditions, and go for Nylon Monofilament, Fluorocarbon, or Braided Line varieties in terms of materials. Monofilament nylon is a great choice for new anglers, as it is fairly cheap, knots well, and has an inherent stretch, which is a great attribute for surf fishermen who are developing their skills. \*Prices are updated several times a day, but subject to change at any moment Rigs for Surf Fishing Like all gear designed for surf fishing, when it comes to rigs and rig set-ups, there are a lot of options, which generally depend on the fish you are targeting, the season, and other conditions and factors that change depending on where along the North Carolina coastline you land. In fact, there is likely a unique and distinct type of rig available for every species of fish, and every type of body of saltwater. Rod holders Sand spike and other varieties of rod holders will hold your rod in place when you need a break, or just want to enjoy a little downtime relaxing on the beach. This piece of equipment comes in a variety of different materials such as PVC or aluminum as well as different lengths, and different price ranges. Rod holders that are made of PVC or ABS plastic are traditionally the least expensive, but if youre in rough ocean conditions and do a lot of surf fishing, upgrading to a more durable metal rod holder may be your best roset. Pyramid weights A pyramid weight is often the preferred weight for surf fishermen, as it can stand up to currents and hold at the bottom. A roughly 2 oz. to 4 oz. pyramid weight should hold strong in most ocean conditions, when used in conjunction with a surf rod. If its a rough day, or you are fishing on a beach with large breakers close to the shore, up the weight a bit to hold strong in the surf. Cart A cart will make a surf fishermen's life infinitely easier when heading to and from the beach. Built to be pulled across the sand with ease, and large enough to hold all the essential equipment and the some, a beach cart is a great way to pack and tote along the equipment youll need for a full day on the sand. Look for carts that can hold a lot of weight you may be bringing back plenty of big catches, after all as well as carts that have larger than normal, sturdy wheels. Larger wheels will essentially transform a standard cart into a 4WD mode of transportation that can easily haul your supplies across soft sand. Waders If you want a longer cast, and you prefer to fish in colder or cooler weather, waders will be your best friend. Waders are effectively worn like overalls, protecting the lower 3/4th of your body from water inundation when you wade out to the surf to cast. Dont skip on quality when it comes to waders! Inexpensive varieties can leak, which can turn a great fishing day into a bad one fairly quickly. Bait and Lures One of the hardest decisions for surf fishermen is what type of bait, or artificial lure, to use for the best results. Many local tackle shops can direct new anglers in the right direction when it comes to whats biting, and what bait or lures to use, but heres a closer look at some of the most popular varieties for fishing along coastal North Carolina. Bait Shrimp Virtually all saltwater species are attracted to shrimp, which is why its found in just about every bait and tackle store up and down the North Carolina coastline. Fresh shrimp is generally preferred over frozen if you can find it, and its recommended that you remove the head, cut the shrimp into 3-4 bite-sized pieces if desired, and hook the shrimp through the dorsal back so that it stays securely on the hook. Sand Fleas Sand fleas are a great (and effective) on-the-spot option when surf fishermen are out of bait, or out of money. In the summer months, sand fleas can often be obtained by digging through the sand close to the ocean wash. Able to attract a wide array of species, sand fleas can also be purchased at bait and tackle stores when they arent plentiful along the shoreline. Mullet Cut mullet is another catch-all bait that can attract a wide array of species. Discard the head and kneel tail, and cut small chunks for use in your fishing rig. Small bait mullet can be caught for free in large southerly winds, saltwater can be caught for free in southerly winds, and other calm salty waters with a bucket or cast net. Menhaden Menhaden is a cut-bait fish that is popular with bluefish, sea trout, and striped bass, some of the most prevalent species along the North Carolina coastline. Most bait shops will have menhaden available, which can be easily cut and hooked. Squid Squid is a frequent option at North Carolina bait shops, as it works well with saltwater species of all varieties, and of sizes. Use whole smaller squids for targeting the big fish, or cut up squid into smaller pieces. Clams and Oysters Though tricky to hook, clams and oysters can attract a wide array of species. Just be sure and stock up its easy for this bait to slide off a hook in rougher ocean conditions. Bloodworms or ragworms Bloodworms are also available in most all North Carolina bait and tackle stores, as they work well in all conditions, for all types of fish. (Theyre also nicely inexpensive!) Best of all, bloodworms can be used for surf fishing, as well as targeting inland streams, canals, and sound waters throughout the coastline. Lures When it comes to lures, there are plenty of options, and what an angler uses is all dependent on where they are headed, and what they are targeting. Bait and tackle store will provide the best recommendations for lures to use for specific species, weather conditions, and seasons, but there are a few popular varieties to try that can work in most any coastal fishing environment. Here are some of the most popular types of lures for saltwater fishing. Other Gear Youll Need for Surf Fishing In addition to all of the above essentials, there are some other tools youll need to bring along to ensure you have everything you need for a full day (or night) of surf fishing along the North Carolina coastline. Available at bait and tackle stores, sporting goods stores, and even traditional beach shops or grocery stores, look for these items that will make it easier to spend long hours on the beach. \*Prices are updated several times a day, but subject to change at any moment Natural Conditions Surf fishing in North Carolina is naturally affected by the weather. Different species can be abundant or non-existent depending on so many natural factors, such as the season, the weather, the tides, and the inherent shape of the shoreline itself. If you want to know what to target, and how successful youll be when you start casting, then you need to know the fundamentals of the North Carolina beach when it comes to surf fishing. Heres a little insight on the basic elements that impact surf fishing from Duck to Oak Island and Holden Beach, and how you can use these varying factors to your advantage. Seasonal Conditions Surf fishing species that frequent the North Carolina coastline are seasonal, which means that they are always on the move as they migrate up and down the coastline. The always popular red and black drum are notorious for this movement and seasonal appearances, as they can be found in droves when the conditions are just right, and they en route along the East Coast. A good rule of thumb when it comes to seasonal and migrating species is that they tend to head north for the summer, and tend to head south for the winter. This is why the late spring, early summer, and fall are arguably the best times for surf fishing in North Carolina. During these times of year, anglers have the best chances of reeling in migratory catches, as well as local species that are at their most abundant close to shore when the water temperatures are warm. Weather Ideal weather conditions for surf fishing can be tricky to pinpoint because there are all sorts of different factors to consider. An onshore breeze can provide an increase in larger fish swimming closer to shore, but conditions that are too windy can affect the clarity of the water, and can make surf fishing difficult. Needless to say, rain can also hinder the water quality, and can make a day of surf fishing a soggy experience. On the whole, aim for sunny days with a light onshore breeze. A low pressure is considered preferable to a high pressure during a spring tide, and if the weather conditions arent conducive for fishing, (like extremely windy days, or where theres an offshore hurricane in the area), and the conditions have been poor for more than a day, its best to wait a day or two before heading out to the beach again. It typically takes at least a day for fish to acclimate after a bout of severe weather, and to return to the waters close to shore after the bad weather has subsided. Tides and Time of Day Tides have a major influence on surf fishing all along the North Carolina coastline, and a general rule of thumb is that high tide is better than low tide, simply because its easier to reach deeper waters with every cast. Try to aim for high tide, or up to two hours before or after a high tide. Slack tide or the time period right in between low and high tide is generally not as productive for surf fishing. As for time of day, early morning and dusk are typically when a number of varying species feed. So head out to the beach before 9 a.m. or about an hour or so before sunset. Not only will you miss the sunbathers and other beach crowds, but youll also have the best chance of taking advantage of the nocturnal feeding habits of a wide array of saltwater fish. Reading the ocean waters Experienced surf fishermen can generally tell if a beach is good for fishing with just a few casts, or even a quick look. Considering that the North Carolina shoreline varies greatly with every mile, there are a few things to look for when it comes to determining if your stretch of sand will be a solid fishing spot. Sloughs A slough is a deep trough of ocean water which is located close to shore and which runs parallel to the beach. A slough can be a haven for all varieties of saltwater fish, so casting into this trough can yield great results. Look for waves that are breaking offshore, and then dissipating before they get closer to the beach. (I.e., an outlying sandbar that grows deeper close to the shoreline.) This will be a sign that theres a slough present, and its a good beach for fishing. Sand and depths As a rule of thumb, the deeper the water is close to shore, the better your luck will be at surf fishing. Look for beaches with steep slopes and soft, coarse sand, which indicate that the adjacent ocean shoreline has a steep and deep slope as well. Also, look for waves that are breaking close to shore or hardly any waves at all to determine if the ocean waters are nice and deep next to the shoreline. Wild waters If you spot a collection of birds or other wildlife congregating in one location on the open waters, chances are that theyre feeding on a passing school of fish. As such, this is always a good indicator that the fishing conditions are currently exceptional. Jetties, piers, and bridges At multiple points along the coastline, jetties, bridges and piers can be popular fishing spots, simply because the presence of underwater structures attract so many different varieties of fish. In addition, a bridge - (like the Little Bridge in Manteo or the Bonner Bridge just south of Oregon Inlet) - can allow anglers to cast into deeper waters, well away from the shoreline. Inlets Inlets are notoriously productive fishing grounds as the deep and steady currents allow multiple species of fish ample opportunities to access varying fishing grounds in the ocean or sound. Head to the edge of a sound or oceanfront beach on the edge of an inlet for surf fishing at its arguable best. Avoiding dangers When the weather conditions arent right, surf fishing can actually be a potentially dangerous sport. To mitigate the odds of injury, stick to the following tips that will ensure you remain safe on every trip to a North Carolina beach. Never fish alone, and if thats not possible, always let someone know where youre going. Use mile markers and landmarks to indicate where youll land along the beach, and keep this information handy in case an emergency occurs, and you need to call for help. If youre taking a 4WD vehicle to go surf fishing, be sure and air down your tires to 20 psi at most, and never park below the high tide line. If you get stuck, and youre below the tide line, you may damage or even lose your vehicle to approaching ocean waves and saltwater. Watch out for swimmers, surfers, and other beach-goers who may be sharing the shoreline. Use caution in inlets, and at beaches known for their currents and constantly changing conditions, like the famous Cape Point on Hatteras Island. Never wade too far out into an inlet, and avoid walking on inlet sandbars when there is an incoming tide, as they tend to disappear quickly as the waters rise. Bring sunscreen! The intensity of the sun increases along the beach, as the sun is reflected off the ocean waters. As a result, sunscreen is a must all year long, despite the outdoor temperatures. There are several techniques when it comes to casting, hooking, and reeling in fish, which depend on where you land along the North Carolina coastline. How you fish from a pier will likely be different from how you fish from along the shore, and there are a myriad of considerations to keep in mind for both types of saltwater fishing. Pier fishing Pier fishing is popular in coastal North Carolina simply because it is so plentiful, and can have so many big rewards. There are multiple fishing piers located in every developed corner of the North Carolina coastline, which includes the Outer Banks, Hatteras Island, the Crystal Coast, the Cape Fear area, and the Brunswick Islands, so no matter where you land, (with the exception of isolated barrier islands like the Cape Lookout National Seashore), chances are that youll be close to a local fishing pier. A saltwater fishing license is also not required to fish from a North Carolina pier, and many piers offer on-site bait and tackle stores, convenience stores, or even full-service restaurants and bars. But the primary benefit to fishing off an oceanfront pier as opposed to a local beach is all about the location. The fishing piers on the North Carolina coastline can extend anywhere from 600 feet to 1000 feet or more into the Atlantic Ocean, which means that youre that much closer to the big catches that are found slightly offshore. In fact, in the summer months, its not that uncommon to hear reports of dolphin or even wahoo catches, which are offshore species that tend to trickle in closer to the beach when water temperatures are high enough. Techniques, tips and tricks for pier fishing Keep the following in mind on your next pier fishing trip to maximize your chances of reeling in plenty of catches. Dont cast too far One of the best things about pier fishing is that it doesnt require much effort when it comes to casting, as fish are naturally attracted to the underwater pilings and structures that are directly under the pier. Watch the birds Birds hang around oceanfront piers for good reason -theyre looking for fish, just like you. Watch the birds and see what areas of the surrounding waters they tend to target for the best chance of finding fish in the immediate area. Look for changes in the water Fish are naturally attracted to changes in the water, so look for areas where the water goes from cloudy to clear, or from dark to light. Bring polarized sunglasses Not only will they protect your eyes from the hot sun that reflects off the surrounding waters, but theyll help you spot fish that are well beneath the surface in deeper waters off the pier. Look into pass options It costs money to go pier fishing, but if you regularly fish from your local fishing pier, it may be worth it to look into seasonal or annual passes. Long-term passes for a week, month, or even a year can save you big in the long run. You dont know whats biting, ask! The folks who man the North Carolina fishing piers know their stuff. Ask for recommendations on bait, rigs, and whats biting and when, to boost your chances of success. Surfcasting Surfcasting, or beachcasting, is easily the most popular form of fishing along the North Carolina coastline, simply because it can be done on any stretch of shoreline, and in any weather. With the exception of seasonal closures for endangered bird or sea turtle nesting, all stretches of the North Carolina shoreline are open to anglers, which literally gives fishermen hundreds of miles of options when it comes to finding a spot to fish. Surfcasting involves wading out into the ocean waters or standing on the edge of the beach and casting a line as far as it can go. The casting rods used in surf fishing are generally long and can range anywhere from 10 to 16 feet, and while casting, anglers will use both their hands and their entire bodies to propel the rig as far as it can go. Its a challenging skill to master for newcomers, and there are even surfcasting competitions around North Carolina, and around the world, for casting a line the farthest distance. (Currently, the world record for casting is at 313 yards.) The benefits of surfcasting are endless. Its easy, convenient, and can be done anywhere, and as far as fishing goes, its the least expensive type of fishing youll find along the oceanfront shoreline. Perhaps best of all, its a sport that can be enjoyed by anyone regardless of age, skill, or familiarity with the beaches of North Carolina. With that being said, there are a few tips, tricks and techniques that anglers can keep in mind to make their surfcasting as fruitful as possible. Techniques, tips and tricks for surfcasting Find a solid rig Many experts attest that the best surf fishing rig set-up is the Fish Finder Rig, which is easily one of the most popular rigs for surf fishing along the North Carolina coast. Do some recon first Head to your local beaches around low tide and look for sloughs, deep waters, dips, sandbars, and structures, which will all indicate great fishing grounds when high tide rolls around in few hours. Go with live bait Though artificial bait can certainly be used for surfcasting, (and can be very successful), live bait is generally preferred for fishing from the beach into the open waters. Take the truck Anglers can cover more ground, (especially during initial recon missions), if they utilize a 4WD vehicle to explore the area's beaches. This is especially true for hard-to-reach but popular surf fishing beaches like Cape Point on Hatteras Island or Ocracoke Island and Cape Lookout National Seashore. Buy a rod holder Makes rod holders that are made out of buckets, coolers, or holes dug in the sand itself may be cost effective, but they wont hold your rod very well if you get a big bite. Invest in rod holders, or at the very least, get some cut PVC pipe if you want a do-it-yourself variety. Dont overdo the cast The fish may be closer than you think, and this is especially true in areas that have sloughs close to shore. Aim for deep waters, and not just waters that are far away from the shoreline, for the best results. Be an early bird or a night owl By arriving to the beach early or late, youll have the best chance of catching fish that feed during these times of day, while avoiding swimmers, surfers, and other folks enjoying the shoreline. Look for fishing crowds The locals know where to go, so if you see a dozen of more fishermen congregated in one spot, then chances are youve stumbled upon a good fishing hole. Just dont set up too close to people who are already fishing nothing ruffles a local fishermen's feathers more than getting their lines twisted with a new arrival. Practice close to inlets The good thing about fishing near an inlet is that you dont have to cast very far to reach potentially deep and fruitful waters. So if youre new to surf fishing and havent perfected your cast just yet, try heading to the beach close to a local North Carolina inlet for the best results. Just dont wade out very far, if at all inlet waters can be deceptively swift and are ever-changing. What youll catch when on the beaches of North Carolina One of the best things about surf fishing in North Carolina is that every season and stretch of shoreline changes. What youll catch in the winter months is often distinctly different than what youll land in the summertime, and what you might catch in a warmer region like Oak Island could be different than what youd catch along the Currituck County beaches during identical times of year. With that being said, there are a variety of popular saltwater species that can veritably pop up anywhere along the coastline, from the northern Virginia border, to the southern South Carolina state line. So when you go surf fishing, be on the lookout for these types of fish that frequent the ocean waters of the North Carolina coast, and are popular and sometimes coveted catches like Cape Point on Hatteras Island or Ocracoke Island and Cape Lookout National Seashore. Buy a rod holder Makes rod holders that are made out of buckets, coolers, or holes dug in the sand itself may be cost effective, but they wont hold your rod very well if you get a big bite. Invest in rod holders, or at the very least, get some cut PVC pipe if you want a do-it-yourself variety. Dont overdo the cast The fish may be closer than you think, and this is especially true in areas that have sloughs close to shore. Aim for deep waters, and not just waters that are far away from the shoreline, for the best results. 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