



Oregon's Ocean Sport Fisheries

Sport fishing in Oregon's ocean is a quintessential experience for generations of Oregonians. Each year sport saltwater fishing and shellfishing contribute \$200 million to the natural-resource-based economy of coastal communities. Anglers make about 150,000 saltwater fishing trips in Oregon. The Marine Resources Program (MRP) of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife manages Oregon's ocean sport fisheries, in collaboration with state, regional, federal and international partners, balancing fishing opportunity with conservation so that current and future Oregonians will be able to enjoy the ocean's bounty. Throughout the year, there are opportunities to harvest Oregon's finfish and shellfish, both from shore and out on the water. Enjoy!



An angler shows off her catch of a tiger rockfish.

Bottomfish

More people fish for bottomfish – including rockfish, lingcod, greenling, cabezon and others – than any other category of saltwater fish in Oregon. Bottomfish is a general term for fish found mostly around rocky reefs, headlands and offshore pinnacles. Fishing for them is simply a matter of finding the rocky habitat the fish favor and bouncing bait of sand shrimp, squid or herring off the bottom. Bottomfish are usually the target of an angler's first saltwater fishing experience and often it's not just the fish that get hooked.

Black rockfish are the backbone of the Oregon sport bottomfish fishery, making up approximately 75 percent of Oregon's sport

groundfish landings: nearly 370,000 fish in 2016. Bottomfishing is an important component to Oregon's charter-boat fleet offerings because it provides consistent, year-round opportunity for charter-boat customers. Anglers fishing from charter boats accounted for about 62 percent of the sport bottomfish catch in 2016.

Yelloweye rockfish are species of concern for the Oregon because they are designated as overfished by the National Marine Fisheries Service. To help reduce yelloweye rockfish impacts, beginning in 2017 anglers are required to use techniques developed and promoted by MRP staff to reverse the effects of rapid decompression as they are reeled up from deep water. They do this by returning these rockfish to the bottom using descending devices – especially in water more than 60 feet deep – which vastly increases their chance of survival.

More than 90 species of groundfish are listed as part of the federal groundfish fishery management. MRP biologists and fishery managers must take each species into consideration when planning seasons and harvests. Several of these species have federal restrictions on their harvest that limit bottomfishing in Oregon.

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Two anglers get their daily limit of halibut.

Pacific halibut

When a big halibut takes the bait, it's like hooking the bumper of a Buick. Those big ones are tough to crank off the bottom, but there are few thrills like landing a big halibut. The seasons typically run from May through October and close when harvest quotas are met.

Most halibut caught in Oregon are between 20 and 30 pounds round weight, but big ones (usually females) weighing more than 100 pounds are possible. A huge fish in Oregon would be around 150 pounds. Halibut is one of Oregon's most active sport fisheries. Anglers made more than 21,000 halibut trips in 2016 and caught about 10,700 fish.

Oregon is part of the Pacific halibut's southern range, which extends into northern California. Halibut can migrate long distances and tend to be smaller in the south. In the Aleutian Islands, the northern part of their range, halibut can grow to 7 feet and 650 pounds.

Oregon's halibut quota is set by the International Pacific Halibut Commission. Oregon's fishery managers then develop a catch-sharing plan, which allocates the quota into different regions and different fisheries. They do this by working with the public extensively to develop fishing opportunity in each of the three sub-areas: the Columbia River area to Cape Falcon, the central coast from Cape Falcon to Humbug Mountain and the southern coast from Humbug Mountain to the California border. Each sub-area has its own quota and open days. In addition, the

popular central coast sub-area has both "all-depth" and "nearshore" (inside 40 fathoms) fisheries during the season. The catch-sharing plan is then finalized and adopted by the federal and international regional fishery management bodies.

The sport halibut catch is carefully monitored by Oregon's fishery managers throughout the season to make sure the harvest does not exceed the sustainable harvest quota.

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Anglers clean the catch from a successful salmon trip.

Salmon

When salmon fishing is good, it is the biggest fishing draw on the Oregon coast. The primary species in the ocean catch are Chinook and coho with a few pink salmon, chum salmon and steelhead landed each year. The sport ocean fishery is almost exclusively done by trolling lures and bait.

Coho salmon are usually easily available near the surface and provide anglers with unpredictable antics when hooked. Seasons usually run between late-June and September. In recent years, coho seasons have taken a two-tiered approach with both a selective (hatchery fin-clipped only) season early in the summer and a non-selective (both

hatchery and wild) season in September. This season is very popular with the public. Coho is the primary salmon caught from the Coos Bay area north to waters off the Columbia River.

Coho quotas are much reduced from past seasons due both to limitations on critical coho populations and a paradigm shift in management strategy from a spawning escapement goal to an impact-rate limitation model. The spawner escapement approach relied heavily on abundance forecasts and often resulted in unsustainable impacts. The impact-rate approach is now used and provides for a rebuilding of natural coho populations along the Oregon coast. The methodology change is already showing benefits to the fishery with more opportunities.

Ocean Chinook salmon fishing tends to be more of a challenge for anglers along much of the coast with fish much deeper and harder to find. Anglers usually have the best success from Winchester Bay to Brookings. A large proportion of the Chinook caught off Oregon are fall chinook out of California's Central Valley or Klamath River fall chinook.

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Albacore are by far the most common tuna caught off Oregon.

Tuna

Each year the number of anglers pursuing albacore tuna off the Oregon coast grows. The 2012 sport albacore season saw the highest total landings ever for the Oregon fishery with 63,200 albacore landed from 16,000 angler trips – the

most tuna angler trips and the most albacore ever recorded from the fishery off Oregon.

Most years, tuna fishers must travel 30 miles or more offshore to find the albacore. Fishing for tuna represents a big commitment from the anglers who obtain and maintain vessels capable of safely going that far offshore – not to mention the cost of fuel. The fish are most commonly found in waters with surface temperatures of approximately 60 degrees with fish migrating into the waters off Oregon usually near the end of June. Best fishing is typically in July and August. The fish are usually still in range of the sport fleet through early October.

The young tuna caught off of Oregon are just starting their cross-Pacific journey and are three to five years old. Most albacore caught by Oregon anglers are between 20 to 30 pounds. They are also higher in desirable omega-3 fish oils than the large, lean, older albacore caught in the central Pacific. Also, because of their young age, the fish caught off of Oregon have a reduced mercury accumulation in their meat, compared to those caught in many other areas, according to the Oregon Albacore Commission (Oregon Department of Agriculture).

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A red tail surf perch.

Surf Perch

Schools of surf perch swim within 30 yards of Oregon's sandy beaches and are a popular target

for shore-side anglers. There are nine different species of surf perch found off the Oregon coast, but the most often-caught species is red tail surf perch. The slim, saucer-shaped fish can reach two pounds. The females bear live young about two inches long that look like miniature adults.

Although surf perch are available year-round, the most productive time to fish for them is in the spring and early summer when they school up along sandy shorelines for spawning. The best fishing often occurs on an incoming tide, especially an hour or two before high tide.

A lot remains unknown about the size of surfperch populations off the Oregon Coast. Many anglers keep enough surf perch for a dinner or two and then catch and carefully release the other surfperch to help safeguard future populations.

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Newport's crab dock is a popular spot all year.

Crab

Just as Dungeness crab holds the top slot for commercial fishers, so this species receives the most effort from sport shellfishers as well. Crabbing in Oregon is a year-round activity that almost always yields a successful trip. Like the commercial Dungeness crab fishery, the sport fishery is managed by size, sex and season. In addition to the highly sought-after Dungeness crab, red rock crab are plentiful in most bays and, while smaller, are just as tasty.

Getting started requires a minimal investment in gear. Crabbing from a dock or pier is very popular

and, at some locations, crab can be caught with gear deployed directly from the shore. However, crabbing in deeper water from a boat is usually much more productive. Some private businesses along the coast rent crabbing gear and boats so those new to crabbing can try it out without buying their own equipment.

A common misconception, promulgated perhaps by the liberal bag limits, is that red rock crabs are not native to Oregon. Red rock crabs are, in fact, a native species found in the fossil record as well as in Native American middens. They are an important component of Oregon estuaries and nearshore areas, and even function as a steward to the estuary by preying on invasive species such as green crab.



Photo: Scott Groth

A male Dungeness crab clutches a female crab prior to her molting.

The [ODFW web site](#) provides recommendations about where, when, and how to crab. Satellite photos of Oregon's major bays and estuaries show the best places to crab and are a popular feature of the shellfish web pages.

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First-time bay clam diggers show off their catch.

Bay Clams

Oregon estuaries are rich with many species of clams, although only a few of these species are commonly harvested. Gaper, butter, cockle, littleneck, and softshell are the species that are primarily targeted, due to their abundance, size, and taste. A wide variety of other bivalve species are found in Oregon estuaries, but are not commonly harvested due either to their scarcity or lack of palatability.

Each clam species has different characteristics, which are helpful to know if you plan to harvest them in Oregon's estuaries. For example, gapers live deep in the mud in eelgrass beds and digging them out requires some serious spade work. Butter clams are most often found in the larger estuarine systems, such as Coos, Tillamook, and Yaquina, because of their preference for water with higher salinity. Cockles have stout shells, so they do not bury themselves as deep as other common bay clams. In fact, you can often spot a good cockle bed just by looking for cockles on top of the sand or mud. Littlenecks are highly sought after "steamers." These clams are often confused with Manila littleneck clams, a smaller related (but non-native) clam that is farmed in mariculture operations and is available in local markets. Only Coos, Yaquina, and Tillamook bays have populations of littlenecks.



These small, but tasty, purple varnish clams came from Siletz Bay.

Two non-native species are also commonly harvest in many of Oregon's bays. Softshell clams occur in almost all of Oregon's estuaries and they can extend very high into the estuary. In Coos Bay, for example they are commonly found as far as 30 miles from the ocean inlet. This species is native to the East Coast, where they are an important commercial fishery. They have been part of Oregon's bay clams since the late 1800s.

A relative newcomer to Oregon, the purple varnish clam originated from Asia and was introduced into British Columbia and Puget Sound in the early 1990s via ships' ballast water. They have been hopscotching their way south ever since. Populations of purple varnish clams are well established in several Oregon bays and estuaries including Sand Lake, Siletz Bay, Alsea Bay, Siuslaw River estuary and Coos Bay.

The [ODFW website](#) has a lot of information on where and how to harvest Oregon's plentiful bay clams.

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Razor clams

Razor clams are found throughout Oregon's ocean beaches. However the 18-mile stretch of shoreline, known as the Clatsop beaches, which extends from the South Jetty of the Columbia River, south, to Tillamook Head accounts for over 90% of Oregon's razor clam catch and effort.



Razor clams are found on sandy ocean beaches.

Razor clams in Oregon can live up to seven years and reach a size of more than six inches. The majority of harvested razor clams in Oregon are two year olds. Razor clams have the ability to dig up to a foot a minute and are found at depths of more than four feet. They spend most of their time too deep in the sand to be disturbed by diggers or the surf.

Periodically, razor clams become contaminated with biological toxins produced by naturally occurring algal blooms. If levels become high enough, these pose a health risk and harvest closures can occur. Closure can last months or years depending upon the levels. The two main bio-toxins are Domoic Acid and Paralytic Shellfish Toxin.

Since 2004, ODFW has surveyed the population along the Clatsop beaches. Most years the population estimates are around 8 million clams – twice the size of Oregon’s human population – on that one 18-mile stretch of beach.

The sport harvest can range from highs of almost 3 million clams to lows of fewer than 100,000 clams. Harvesting razor clams can be challenging. Perfecting your digging technique can take a while, but looking at the step-by-step photos on the [ODFW web site](#) can be a good start

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Mussels are easily harvested from intertidal rocks.

Mussels

Mussels live in the intertidal and subtidal areas on Oregon’s coast. They are commonly found living in clusters connected to some solid base, such as rocks or pilings, by means of byssal threads. The byssal secretion resembles glue and hardens in the water to form hold-down threads. Mussels are relatively stationary, but can move short distances by throwing threads in the direction it wishes to go and then contracting its byssal muscles which draws the animal forward.

Oregon has two common species that are harvested. The blue or bay mussel is common to estuarine pilings and rocks. It has a smooth blue-black or olive colored shell which is about two and on half inches long. The surf mussel is found in large numbers along the rocky open coastline. This species has a black or dark brown shell with conspicuous radiating ribs. The surf mussel can reach lengths of six inches or more.

Mussels can be found on nearly every rocky part of the Oregon coast, though abundances can vary from year to year. Mussels can usually be collected from the jetties at the mouths of estuaries.

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For more information about Oregon’s Ocean Sport Fisheries, species, harvest tips, regulations and more, please see our regulations book and our website:

<http://www.dfw.state.or.us/MRP/>