



# ZONING IN ON THE PIER ZONES

How to target fish on North Carolina's coastal piers,  
from the wash to the tips

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Ocean fishing piers have been a part of the North Carolina seascape for over 90 years, since the construction of the state's first ocean pier at Kure Beach in 1923. In the 1970s through the late 1980s, as many as 35 functioning fishing piers graced over 300 miles of North Carolina's ocean coastline, from Kitty Hawk to Sunset Beach. Following the opening of our newest pier, the "new" Jennette's concrete pier in the spring of 2011 in Nags Head, we sadly have roughly just 20 fishable piers along our coast. Mother Nature and the proverbial wrecking ball have seen to that.

Remember the evil twins Bertha and Fran (1996) and their just as evil male siblings Dennis and Floyd (1999)? Since my relocation to the Bogue Banks in 1992, the number of piers in the area has gone from seven to two: Oceanana Pier and Bogue Inlet Pier.

Did you know that there are over 3 miles of ocean pier fishing space in North Carolina? Although the numbers have diminished, the popularity of fishing piers remains strong. Piers are egalitarian. They welcome the common Joe or the high-end angler, the elderly and young, the gregarious and the recluses, the skilled and the novice. Even those without a fishing license are accommodated by the blanket licenses currently held by all fishing piers.

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Why the popularity? Fishing piers offer fishing options; “vertical” options from the shoreline of the beach often out to 1,000 feet. They let you target fish that you want to catch, from panfish in the beach surf zone to king mackerel and other large game fish at the far end of the pier.

#### FIND YOUR PLACE ON THE PIER

Let’s take a walk on the pier and find some fish. Although there are no lines of demarcation, no Mason-Dixon Line, I like to conceptually divide the pier into zones for targeting specific fish species. What are those zones? Who lives there? How do you catch them? Let’s start from the beach and work our way out.

First, we need to define the pier zones. This is how I classify them: beach/swash, suds, slough (the deep), sandbar (where appropriate), post sandbar (the deeper) and king land (the deepest). There are also some specialty zones of note, like the pier support pilings, the cleaning table (a.k.a. the feeding table), reef balls or other intentional fish attracting debris, and the dreaded broken pier bits and pieces of days past.

**ZONE 0:** The swash. This is where the wave action washes up and back. There aren’t many catchable fishes here, but there is fish food: coquina clams, worms and the Sisyphian mole crabs (better known as sand fleas).

**ZONE 1:** The suds. Edibles from the swash will wash into the suds, the breaking waves of the surf zone, where many hungry bottom-feeding fish await an easy meal. These fish include sea mullet, pompano, red and black drum, and even flounder.

**ZONE 2:** The slough. Many of our beaches have a sandbar that may be 100 feet, or even 100 yards, from the beach proper. Between the

beach and the outer sandbar is an area of deeper water called the slough. The slough is feeding grounds for many fish, but most frequently it includes suds fish like sea mullet, drums and flounder. Particularly in the fall, this area can feature speckled trout, croakers and Northern puffers.

In the spring and late fall, the slough often features pigfish, skates and rays. In the fall, when we often get a traditional “mullet blow”—which is the mass emergence of finger and striped mullet from back waters on the heels of a chilly north-east wind—almost all predators will join the slough feeding fest, including Spanish mackerel and bluefish, south-going speckled trout with puppy drum and flounder. It’s a wondrous sight to see millions of mullet with hungry predators at their tails.

**ZONE 3:** The sand bar. Around the edges, and sometimes on top of the sandbar, we can occasionally see pompano and red drum. Once we pass the bar and get into Zone 3, we can target many of the panfish, including spots, sea mullet, croakers, sand perch and pigfish. In the spring and fall, we also fish for Northern puffers, which travel in large schools, put up little resistance and are some of the best-tasting fish in the sea. We also start to find better numbers of Spanish mackerel and bluefish in this zone.

Before I go any further, there is a seasonal bent to which side of the pier to fish on due to the migration pattern of various fish species. Many fish go north in the spring and south in the fall. So, in the spring, experienced pier anglers fish the south side of the pier; in the fall, they fish the north side. On piers that are on south-facing beaches, like on Bogue Banks, remember west is south and east is north. Also, fish like spot and sea mullet often come in to feed on a rising tide and move out on a receding tide; this can be even more pronounced at night. Many fish have excellent night vision and are heavy feeders at night or in low light conditions. Bluefish, Spanish and speckled trout are among the good low-light feeders.

**ZONE 4:** King land. This is where the sidewalk ends roughly 1,000 feet from where we started. Here we find a plethora of predators working the deeper water, often 15 to 20 feet deep. This is where most of the bluefish and Spanish mackerel are caught,

**Top to bottom: Coastal fishing piers serve a wide variety of anglers inexpensively and effectively. The end of the pier is for king mackerel anglers, who typically use one rod to anchor a weight to the bottom, then employ another with bait to slide down the anchor rod line. Sunrise finds many anglers on a fishing pier awaiting the bite.**

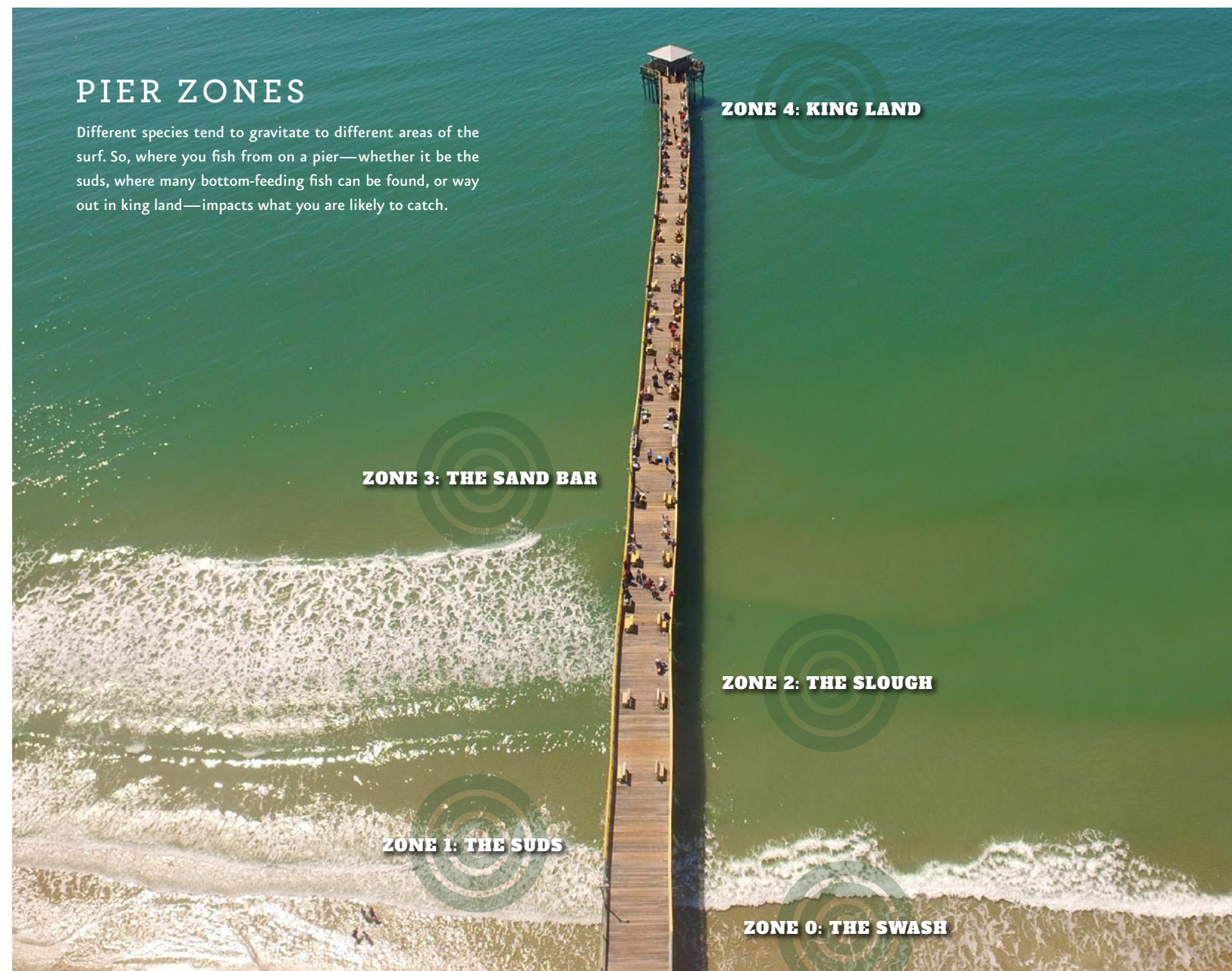
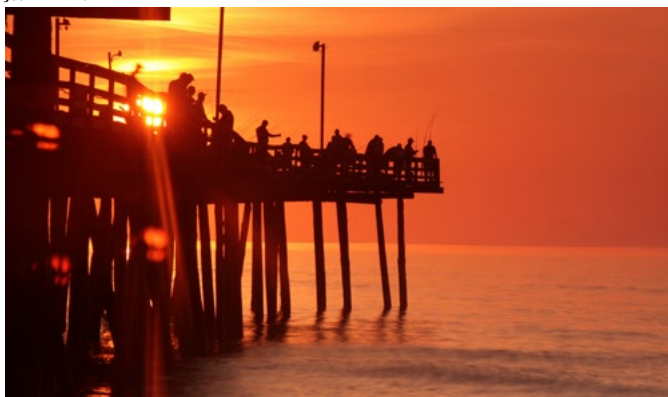
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## PIER ZONES

Different species tend to gravitate to different areas of the surf. So, where you fish from on a pier—whether it be the suds, where many bottom-feeding fish can be found, or way out in king land—impacts what you are likely to catch.

**ZONE 4: KING LAND**

**ZONE 3: THE SAND BAR**

**ZONE 2: THE SLOUGH**

**ZONE 1: THE SUDS**

**ZONE 0: THE SWASH**

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along with false albacore and sometimes gray and speckled trout. In recent years, blackfin tuna have made an appearance in Zone 4. Often, the false albacore, blues and Spanish are found in large schools blitzing the diminutive glass minnow baits around the pier, making Zone 4 a hardhat area with sharp-tooth fish being slung over the railings, and projectile lures and sharp treble hooks flying in the air.

I call Zone 4 king land because you need a king mackerel pass to fish here and because this is where big fish are targeted. Anglers with anchor rods, heavy-duty fighting tackle and light-tackle, bait-catching gear are set up to target the big fish: king

mackerel, tarpon, cobia, crevalle jacks, barracuda, red drum, mahi mahi and “Hatteras” blues on “king rigs” with live bait. Other fish caught in king land include triple tails, spadefish and ladyfish.

This end of the pier is also a great location to observe natural wonders of the sea. Bogue Inlet Pier in Emerald Isle has an observation deck rising above the pier near the end. Sea turtles, dolphins, ocean sunfish, cownose rays, manta rays and even whales are sometime visitors out at the end of piers.

**Specialty Zones:** These areas include pier pilings, submerged broken-off pilings and maybe even reef balls added as fish attractors. From spring to fall, pier pilings





DAVE ALLEN

often serve as feeding grounds of sheepshead, ranging from close to the shore but more typically in deeper water. These munchers and crunchers eat barnacles, small crabs and other stuff that cling to and live on the pilings. Don't forget the

fish cleaning table, whose scraps tossed into the ocean act like a chum bucket that attracts anything from shark to flounder.

#### GEARING UP

So now that you know what to catch and where, it's time to venture into the subject of how to catch fish on a pier—specifically the gear and baits you need to be successful. First, make sure that you have a pier cart and cooler to haul your gear, hold

your bait and hopefully keep your catch of the day cold and fresh. On the pier you see many nice, store-bought aluminum carts and many homemade models of various degrees of sophistication. A cooler with wheels will do in a pinch.

Most pier anglers do not have a pier drop-net to haul their prized fish from way down there to way up here, often 20 feet or so. It probably is not necessary to have one if you are targeting spot or sea mullet, but it is a necessity if you target flounder. I learned that the hard way. Many flounder are lost on their way up to the pier without a net because they are notorious violent head-shakers. They also have bony mouths, so effectively setting a hook can be a challenge compared to most fish. If you don't have a net, look around the pier to see who has one in case of an emergency. Most people

are very willing to help a fellow angler retrieve their special catch and respond quickly to "HELP, I NEED A NET!"

Now for the rods, reels and rigs. You see people fishing from the pier with almost everything. I recommend a 6- or 7-foot rod with a backbone stiff enough to haul up your fish and a 2500 to 4000-class reel packed with 10- to 20-pound fishing line. This covers most fishing options, except for king mackerel fishing, but that's another story for another time.

Now for baits. Although natural baits can be messy, they are the most popular option. Standard bait rigs are two-hook hi-lo rigs with No. 2 or No. 4 long shank hooks, perfect for most panfish. Colorful fireball rigs for bluefish and Carolina or slider rigs with No. 2 to No. 2/0 wide gap Kahle style hooks are the most effective for

live baiting flounder, red drum, trout and other predatory fish.

Now, repeat after me: "I will only use FRESH or live bait." By this I mean shrimp, bloodworms or fish strips that have never been frozen or allowed to ferment or bake in the sun on the pier for hours. Otherwise, you end up using the equivalent of seafood jerky, when what the fish really want is sushi.

What bait you use depends on what you're trying to catch. For panfish—such as spot, pompano, croaker or sea mullet—fresh shrimp is often the ticket (although spot sometimes won't bite anything but bits of bloodworms). A great, sometimes overlooked alternative is the sand flea or mole crab that can be gathered for free from the beach swash zone around the pier and are considered a delicacy for sheepshead, pompano, sea mullet and red and black drum. More recent substitutes for natural baits are the excellent family of Fishbites baits that imitate bloodworms, clams, shrimp and more, and are brightly colored to boot.

We already mentioned crabs and worms for live bait, but let's focus particularly on live minnows and live shrimp. These baits particularly target flounder, drum, trout, Spanish mackerel and bluefish. Live minnows include finger mullet, mud minnows, peanut pogies (juvenile menhaden) and other small shad that need to be kept alive in a live-bait bucket, either one with a battery-operated aerator that is kept up on the pier or one that is hung over the side of the pier in the water below. These baits can be rigged on a Carolina rig or floated on a cork for trout, flounder and drum, or if targeting citation-size Spanish, they are merely free-floated at the far end of the pier.

#### ARTIFICIAL ALTERNATIVES

Artificial baits are also popular on the pier, but remember, because we're up here and the water is way down there, not all artificial lures function properly on the pier. Most lures that are used require special care in handling and use the awkward upside down and backward rod and reel retrieval orientation only seen on piers. Here are some favorites:

- GOT-CHA plugs, which are specifically designed for effective pier use and will literally catch (or at least hook) almost anything that bites, from Spanish, blues and trout to cobia, tarpon and kings and

even a pompano or two. White and chartreuse bodies with Day-Glo red heads are most effective. There are also "field" modified versions with spots, stripes and reflecting tape.

- Many swimming plugs are usable, especially ones that swim with a downward motion, such as Rat-L-Traps, and anything with a lip, like the Yo-Zuris. MirrOlures can also be used but need a slow retrieval to keep them water-borne and not airborne.

- Heavy metals, like Stingsilvers, Kastmasters or Hopkins, are often used when false albacore are around tearing up schools of glass minnows.

- Soft plastic baits can be rigged on a lead jig head, usually a quarter- to half-ounce and are jigged slowly along the bottom for drum, flounder and speckled trout—especially in the fall. My recent favorites include various plastic shrimp, such as Vudu or Betts Halo Shrimp, or Halo Shad and the Z-Man Trout Trick baits.

- Of course, I can't overlook Berkley Gulp! baits, which revolutionized flavored baits. I like the white or chartreuse swimming mullets and the shrimp. The shad baits are also popular and effective.

Finally, I would like to mention the very effective use of bare-naked gold hook rigs. These rigs consist of a series of half dozen or so No. 2 or No. 4 laser sharp gold hooks strung along several feet of heavy duty 40-pound test line. They are cast and slowly retrieved or incessantly jigged vertically in an up-and-down motion attracting blues, Spanish and other predators. The ends of the rigs are usually terminated with a diamond jig. These terminal diamond jigs have been known to find flounder, trout, kings and even an occasional tarpon.

So now you know about the who and where of fishing pier zones and some of my favorite tricks. I hope this makes your next visit to one of our state's many surviving ocean fishing piers enjoyable and productive enough to bring home freshly caught dinner. Just remember to target the fish YOU want to catch and you will be more successful in the long run. ♦

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