

Coastal lakes, jetties a treasure trove for anglers

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Collin Andrew/The Register-Guard

Eliot Jenkins lands a steelhead while on a fly-fishing trip to a coast stream north of Florence.

The Florence area is a magnet for those who love to fish — rich with lakes, blessed with one of the coast's great angling rivers, and rubbing shoulders with the bountiful Pacific Ocean.

Many anglers trek to the area in search of brutish chinook salmon, acrobatic winter steelhead and even the occasional behemoth sturgeon. The secrets to catching these fish can be tougher to crack for beginners, but not to worry: Plenty of fish await for novices who just want to feel a wiggle on their line and perhaps bring home a seafood dinner.

Here are some coastal fishing tips, with help from state Department of Fish and Wildlife fish biologist Bob Buckman.

Coastal lakes

State fish hatcheries plant thousands of trout from early winter through spring in more than a dozen lakes around Florence. These lakes are open year-round.

Buckman's two favorite suggestions for anglers looking for trout are Cleawox Lake at Honeyman State Park a few miles south of Florence, and Carter Lake, about 5 miles farther south along Highway 101. Both lakes offer excellent access and reliable trout fishing, especially from April through early June.

Other lakes in the area that offer good fishing for stocked trout each spring include Elbow, Erhart, Georgia, North Georgia, Lost and Perkins lakes and Siltcoos Lagoon, all south of Florence. North of town, look for stocked trout in Alder, Buck, Dune and Munsel lakes.

Native cutthroat trout also inhabit many coastal lakes. The area's two largest lakes, Siltcoos and Tahkenitch south of Florence, have cutthroat that can grow to large size, but they aren't quite as easy to catch as the hatchery-reared rainbows.

These two lakes also have wild coho salmon, including young that resemble trout but are brighter silver. These must be released, although the two lakes have fisheries for adult coho, with the season open October through December.

Largemouth bass fishing is popular around Florence. Some of the best fishing for these predatory fish can be found in Mercer and Sutton lakes a short drive north.

To the south, Siltcoos Lake once boasted one of Oregon's very best bass fisheries, but it has declined in recent years. Tahkenitch, just south of Siltcoos, is a better bet for bass these days, Buckman said.

All of these lakes also hold populations of bluegill, yellow perch and bullhead catfish, as well as a few other panfish species. Buckman said Tahkenitch, Mercer and Sutton have been best for bluegill and perch in recent years. Some seasons Woahink Lake also has produced great perch fishing.

Bank access to some of these lakes is somewhat limited, but poking around will lead to places to fish. A small boat can come in handy to cover more water.

Siuslaw River and Lake Creek

The Siuslaw is one of the coast's best fall chinook rivers and has a strong run of winter steelhead, but it also shines for native cutthroat trout, which are easier to catch than their larger cousins. Please note, however, that the state requires anglers to use only artificial lures and flies above tidewater through the end of August, and limits harvest to two per day.

One of the best times to fish coastal streams for trout are in the couple of weeks after this season opens on the fourth Saturday of May (May 28 this year), when the main Siuslaw, Lake Creek and smaller tributaries offer excellent trout fishing.

Try it again in the late summer and early fall, starting in tidewater and the lower river, when sea-run cutthroat return. These trout spend a short time feeding in saltwater, packing on weight and taking on a silvery hue with a darker top, which is why anglers also call them "bluebacks."

Also on the Siuslaw, a small run of American shad returns each spring. The fishing usually occurs from mid-May into early June.

The Brickerville area a few miles upstream from Mapleton is a good place to start. Shad hit small lures such as jigs, darts, tiny spoons and even a shiny bare hook, and they put on a spirited fight. Their oily flesh is loaded with bones, so not everyone eats them, but they also make great crab and sturgeon bait.

Siuslaw Bay

Several species of ocean perch (redtail, striped and pile) are available in the bay, with most fishing below Highway 101 to the jetties. Spring is a good time to fish around pilings, off rocks and from both jetties using sand shrimp, clam necks and other baits.

The “rock dock” east of the south jetty is a spot to try. Perch also can be caught in the surf for careful anglers.

The jetties and other rocky areas also have greenling (some people call them sea trout), black rockfish and the occasional lingcod. But use caution due to slippery rocks and sometimes-rough seas.

The bay also produces good catches of Dungeness crab, which will grab a baited hook but are more easily caught with a crab ring or pot. Softshell clams are abundant on the tidal flats just upstream from Florence.

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ANGLING COAST LAKES

Toss a worm on a hook into most lakes around Florence and you might catch just about any of the following fish species.

Bluegill: A greenish sunfish with dark blue circle near gills. Run small, but great fighters for their size. Tasty if you can find them big enough to fillet (palm-sized). Try fishing fairly close to shore and near weeds or other structures. No limits.

Brown bullhead catfish: These whiskered fish run small and tend to inhabit (and often overpopulate) Oregon lakes, including nearly every fresh water pond and lake along the coast. Some people like to eat catfish and catch plenty on worms, cut fish or prepared baits fished on the bottom. No limits on bullhead catfish.

Coho salmon: A few coastal lakes have thriving runs of wild “silver” salmon. Adults return in the fall, and fishing for them is legal in Siltcoos and Tahkenitch lakes from October through December. Consult state fishing regulations.

Crappie: These speckled panfish aggressively strike jigs and other lures that resemble minnows. Small schools typically found around structures such as submerged trees, pilings and docks. No limits on crappie.

Largemouth bass: Popular game fish can grow to 8 pounds or more in coastal lakes. Their big mouths and superior attitudes make them vulnerable to striking lures that resemble smaller fish, crayfish, frogs, worms and other forage.

Trout: Rainbow trout are plentiful in lakes that get hatchery plantings, which occur from late winter through spring. Use prepared baits as well as worms, salmon eggs, small spinners and spoons or artificial flies.

Native cutthroat trout prefer natural baits and also strike spinners and flies; daily limit in lakes is five trout at least 8 inches long, and only one may be more than 20 inches long.

Yellow perch: Plentiful in many Oregon lakes. Easy to catch and excellent eating. Perch bite best on baits such as worms, or tip a crappie jig with a small piece of bait. Perch are a schooling fish, so where you catch one, expect more. No limits.

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