

“Halibut Hunting Techniques”

By Doug Van Mullem

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What To Look For:

- One or two eyes in the sand (small camouflage bumps sticking up 1” – 3” apart).
- Chin, mouth and/or gill line sticking above the sand.
- Tip of tail – the tail is hard to bury in sand -- no side fins to fluff the sand up.
- In surge, look for fin line to turn up, see the white underside.
- In the flat sand of calm bays get low to the sand and look for raised fish shape mounds.
- Anything unusual in the sand.
- If you see one halibut, mark that spot & circle the area several times in widening circles. Halibut hang out together. If you want a big halibut (over 25 pounds) and you see a smaller one, don't shoot, look in the area for the big female. Spawning females, often over 25 pounds, lie with several (1 – 5) smaller males, usually about 15 pounds plus.
- At the Islands, look for them in the protected bays that have boats staying there for long periods of time. Search where the anchor chain bounce up and down creating some dirty water. Dirty water is to their advantage since it is easier for them to look up through the dirt to stalk fish and harder for the fish to look down to see them in the sand. The chain also stirs up food attracting bait fish. They like the clean smooth sand too.

Other Encouraging Signs:

- Other flat fish, shovel nose sharks and rays.
- Fresh squid eggs in deeper water.
- Bait fish, grunion, & etc.
- Silver surfperch swimming in the sand near structure or eelgrass.

Choosing a Location to Hunt Halibut:

- Halibut are found almost always in the sand near the following:

- A point at the end of a sandy beach, where sand meets the rocks.
- Look in the cove and on the point.
- River mouths (watch for polluted waters).
- Sandy coves at the islands.
- Near boulders.
- Finger reefs.
- Near eelgrass.
- Under piers or by old pier pilings.
- Along the sides of underwater pipes.
- Along side of jetties especially at the tips.
- Along beaches with sand dollar beds, the halibut love to bury themselves and hunt along the edges of the beds and especially in the sand patches in the center of the beds.
- For coastal halibut, shallow water (average size 5-25 lbs).
 - Look in depth of water from surf line to 20 foot depth.
- For deeper water halibut (25 - 90 foot), usually above 25 lbs.
 - Islands: swim along base of cliffs looking for pockets of nice sand and around kelp beds and coves.
 - Coastal: swim along outside of long kelp beds, breakwalls and reefs.
 - Sandy bottoms off major points usually on protected cove side.
 - Near man made reefs especially in Santa Monica Bay.
- Look for bait fish & squid -- find their food & you'll find fish.

When to Hunt:

- Seasons: spring, summer & fall are best.
- The best time to find halibut up tight to the beach is when they are Spawning, 5 days before and up to 1 day after the full moon. Prior to the spawn they pre-spawn assemble in 55 to 80 Ft of water. The commercial guys tell me they see them move into 90 to 120 ft depths as Spring gets close, then move into pre-spawn depths as the full moon approaches. Full moon cycles are approximately every 29.5 days - FYI.
- Grunion Runs: A day before, during, or a day after grunion runs.

- Grunion runs are 2-4 days after full and no moons in spring/summer.
- Legal size halibut just don't seem to come in to shallow water during some times of the month, especially the 5 days before the new moon. Focus your halibut hunting time on the 5 days before the full moon and the grunion runs.
- Peak spawning is in late Spring (April – June). However, there is normally some spawning most every month.
- There is also a winter spawn usually in December –March. “In my opinion the very big gals do it in Jan - March.” By Bill Gould
- Water temperature, 61 degrees and up is ideal for finding them in shallow coastal regions.
- Tidal conditions, morning high tide is best, before the winds come up and stir up the shallow waters.
- The key for finding halibut at other times requires that you focus on the bait concentrations, look for bait balls, birds or fish finder, then dropping into the bait school. The halibut may be feeding off the bottom as the bait gets pushed up.

Gun & Point Selection:

- Short gun for dirty water, very heavy shaft OK since shaft speed is not needed but impact mass is nice to have.
- Medium length guns for clear water.
- Point selection:
 - Strong reinforced five prong (my favorite for coastal).
 - Butterfly tips are versatile, so you can shoot other fish too.
 - Detachable butterfly with wide prongs for trophy size halibut is best, not too much power is needed. Just enough to go through the fish and a couple of inches of sand.
 - Ice pick style slip tips are expensive and not a good selection but if you see one while hunting for other game fish, suggest you either shoot from a low angle or consider

going to half power to save the point. There are often rocks just under the sand and rocks love expensive points.

- Power depends on the point, range (water vis) and shaft weight.
 - Five prong: enough to break the back, 1 or 2 thick bands.
 - Butterfly: enough to penetrate sand for barbs to spread.
 - Not too much to break the point or shaft if there is a rock under the halibut – and there often is a rock under the sand.
 - Recommend two bands most of the time.

Hunting Techniques:

- Move slow, very slow, about the speed of drifting kelp!!!
- Divide the visibility by 2, stay that high off the bottom.
- Stay focused as far in front as possible. This takes training and requires you to bend your neck a lot. If done right, it is fatiguing.
- Scan from side to side, slowly (no fast movements).
- In real dirty water, keep the point of the gun just in front of your nose so you are ready to shoot upon recognition of the fish. You won't have much time to decide if the fish is legal size. They get much smarter when they become legal.
- Move extremely slow when pointing the gun at a fish. Don't hurry the shot or you will spook the fish and they move out super fast 90% of the time.
- Show no excitement and don't flinch when you see a fish.
- Shoot to break their back at the neck, near pectoral fin but don't hit the stomach area or you will probably lose the fish.
- Try and pin the fish to the bottom before it moves.
- Don't fight (pull hard on the line) with the fish because the skin and flesh is soft and it is easy to rip the point out. Have a float line & buoy attached to your shooting line and let the fish run versus pulling on the gun to stop the fish.
- Pick the fish up by putting your fingers in one side of gills and thumb in the other. A firm grip paralyzes the fish. If the fish clamps its gills hold the gills shut for a while then let loose. The gills should open for the fish to breathe then

grab it in the gills.

- **Halibut will bite** if given them the chance. Wear leather gloves.
- If you spook or loose a wounded halibut, they will often swim in a large circle then settle back down in a few minutes in or near the same spot they were originally in. Wounded fish don't usually swim far. Mark the spot and give it a few minutes to settle down and then come back and search the area.

Lets hope you don't have to learn all the lessons the hard way. Halibut bites and stings from rays which can look a lot like a halibut under the sand are no fun. By the way, halibut are very good biters. They will bite you every time they have a chance even when a big old spear is in their back. Wear good gloves and be careful. I have been bitten 3 times trying to pick them up, getting them on the stringer, or off the point. Scares the piss out of you, guaranteed!!!

Here is one war story from a rooky halibut diver:

Yesterday I went fishing in Malaga, and saw a suspected Halibut (now that I've tasted them, I'm keen on shooting more... Yum Yum. Even Libby (my wife) was taking 2nd helpings and she hates fish. Leery from the first time I shot at a rock-shaped halibut, I figured I'd poke it before pulling the trigger. It moved, I shot, and there was nothing on the spear. I guess they must bolt like lightning at first, huh? Anyways, I was wondering what advice you would offer to 1) not injure the shaft, but 2) get the fish in the first place. Cary (who was pretty envious of my big fish, since he's never gotten one) suggested I ram the spear into him, then fire if he moves. I guess I just have to be very sure before I fire, huh? Problem was, his head and tail area was covered by eel grass, so I really couldn't tell. It looked more like a rock than like a halibut. I warped my shaft pulling that stunt, but I think I've bent it back into place good enough.

Cheers and Good Safe Hunting,
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P.S. Ask me about my yellowtail hunting paper too.