

Processing Salmon Roe for Sturgeon Fishing

Introduction

Salmon roe is one of the best known baits for sturgeon fishing in the California Delta and Suisun Bay. On this page, I'm going to show you a few ideas for processing salmon roe for sturgeon fishing.

Salmon and steelhead anglers prefer to cure their roe with borax or commercial curing products. This will toughen up the roe so it can endure repeated casts in fast currents. Sturgeon anglers usually have their own secret cure recipes which I will somewhat reveal below.

Finding Salmon Roe

If you are lucky enough to catch a female salmon, you will most likely get some pretty good roe. Roe is made up of salmon eggs held together by skin inside of the salmon's underbelly.

When you catch a salmon, it is very important that you bleed it right after catching it. This is done by first knocking the fish out with a small club. After a few sharp whacks, cut the gills on each side of the fish. I'm not talking about the gill plates - I'm talking about the actual red feathery gill structures. This is most easily done twisting them with a pair of pliers or cutting them with a really sharp knife. This can be messy, so I normally do it to the side of the boat. All of blood in a fish flows through the gills, and by cutting them you can bleed out a fish rather quickly. Once you have the gills cut, hang the fish over the side of the boat on a stringer for about 5-10 minutes to allow the heart to pump the blood out of the fish. Once the fish is bled out, immediately put the fish on ice.

By bleeding the fish, you remove the blood from the meat and roe. Blood will cause the meat to taste bad and the roe to spoil easily. When you clean the fish, carefully slice open the belly and remove each mass of eggs. You might have to cut some connecting skin to get the roe to detach from the body. Put the roe on ice immediately.

If you get a late-season fish with loose eggs, squeeze them out and use them in roe balls. These are the most desired for sturgeon bait.

If you can't catch your own roe, many bait shops and online stores now carry it.

Curing Roe

Sturgeon anglers are very secretive about their roe cures. The cures definitely help to produce more bites for those lucky enough to know the secret formula. For the rest of us, using raw, uncured roe works pretty good. A 4:1 ratio of sugar to salt is a good starting point if you want to try a cure. Another easy cure is to soak your roe in Smelly Jelly Sturgeon Feast. Be sure to keep the roe in a bag or bowl on ice at all times, even when curing. If curing, the goal is to get the eggs to really 'milk out' when placed into water. You want to see a white cloud when they are placed into water.

Roe Balls

A common method for presenting roe to sturgeon is in the form of roe balls. A roe ball is a glob of roe surrounded by netting. This prevents small fish from picking your roe off the hook. This is much more of a problem when water temperatures are warm (above 56 degrees) and small fish are active.

To make a roe ball, you will need the following items:

- **Salmon Roe**
- **A Chef's Knife**
- **Scissors**
- **Fine Cheese Cloth** (or Netting)
- **Elastic Thread** (Atlas Mike's Miracle Thread)



1. Start by cutting pieces of fine cheese cloth into 6"x6" squares (see top of photo above). I like to use cheese cloth because it's cheap and really soft. You can use nylon netting or any other type of material that is porous. I feel more confident with cheese cloth because it's soft and less likely to be spit out by a feeding sturgeon.
2. Scrape the roe off of the skin using a large chef's knife. Be careful not to pop the eggs! You want individual loose eggs as the result. Once you have the eggs loosened, this is a good time to cure them if you are going that route.
3. Now scoop a quarter-sized piece of roe using a spoon and drop it into the middle of the cheese cloth square.
4. Draw the four corners together until you have a closed ball of roe. Now cinch up the top of the ball by wrapping some thread about fifteen times to secure it. I like to use elastic thread made for fishing like Magic Thread or Miracle Thread because it doesn't come unraveled. Normal thread will work ok.
5. Now use your scissors to cut off the remaining material above the roe ball. There you have it - a finished roe ball!

Storing Roe

Store your roe on ice at all times. If you don't use your fresh roe within a few days, you will need to freeze it. I prefer to freeze my roe in vacuum sealed bags. Roe sealed in this fashion will keep for over a year. If you don't have a vacuum sealer, freezer storage bags will also work.

Some people partially freeze their roe before vacuum sealing it to prevent the vacuum sealer from crushing the eggs. I don't have this problem with my vacuum sealer, so I seal it before freezing it.

I seal my roe into bags of ten roe balls. This makes is convenient to thaw out small packs of roe as needed. This keeps the roe fresh and prevents unneeded thawing and refreezing of unused roe.

