

Surf Fishing:

Summer's three top fish and tips on how to catch them...

By, Bill Varney, Jr.

I try to target specific fish in the surf but when it comes to fishing I'm honestly happy catching just about anything. That's why when summer rolls around I concentrate on three top surf fish: Yellowfin croaker, spotfin croaker and corbina. These fish only appear at the beach for a few short months and then head off to hide for the winter. So now that summer's here it's time to concentrate on croaker.



Yellowfin Croaker (*Umbrina roncadore*)

Not unlike other croaker (corbina, seabass, etc.) yellowfin croaker are shiny gray and silver in color and have a distinctive goatee barbell they use when searching for food in the surf. They are often white on the belly, yet they have very distinctive yellow fins on the top, bottom and tail fin. Larger fish commonly have green, blue, and brown oblique stripes. Yellowfin grows to about twenty inches. A fish this size would be about ten years old.

Yellowfin croaker can be caught from Ventura to the tip of Baja. They usually stay in water shallower than twenty-five feet (although they have been caught in more than sixty feet) and congregate in medium to large schools. Although they can be found in inches of water they are many times found beneath areas of breaking waves and in both the inside and outside surf impact zones.

Yellowfin are very aggressive feeders (due to heavy competition among large schools of fish) and can be caught all along the California and Baja coast. Their strike is surprisingly strong. Croaker spawn from May to September. Although they can be caught all year long, croakers are most active during the summer. Some of the best, and at times most wide-open bites, will be just following their spawn in late summer.

When I target yellowfin I like to use both live and artificial baits. Sand crabs, ghost shrimp, clams and mussel all work well when fished on the Carolina rig. With artificial lures I like to use anything shiny like a flat blade lure or chrome spoon in ½ to ¾th ounce sizes.



Spotfin Croaker (*Roncador stearnsii*)

The spotfin croaker has a distinct black spot at the base of the pectoral fin and can have bluish-gray or brassy stripes on their sides. As with other croaker they also have a white belly. Males during spawning season can be mostly copper or brassy in color, while females may develop a black streak on their bellies.

Spotfins are found in as little as four inches of water and as deep as sixty-feet. Most are found from Santa Barbara to the tip of Baja. Some traditionally notable areas for good spotfin fishing include Emma Woods State Beach, Huntington Beach, San Onofre and Gurrero Negro Baja California.

Local spotfin range from 12–30 inches in length. With a 27-inch fish being about fifteen years old. The state record is currently fourteen-pounds but fish to twenty-pounds have been reportedly caught from the Pacific Coast beaches of Baja.

Spotfin croaker can be found in estuaries, harbors and the open ocean. They are many times found inside back bay areas during the winter then swim into the open ocean during Spring and Summer to forage on sand crabs and other surf baits.

Sand crabs, mussel, clam, bloodworm, sidewinder crab and ghost shrimp all work well for catching spotfin. Seasonally the best bait for winter might be clams and sidewinder crabs. For the remainder of the year I would prefer sand crabs, mussel or bloodworms, all fished on the Carolina rig.

When it comes to using artificials for spotfin both Kastmasters and Krocodiles work well in ½ to 1-ounce size. Dark color two-inch grubs also seem to work well in low-light situations. It's always good to have a variety of baits to try because you never know what food the fish are keying in on.



California Corbina (*Menticirrhus undulatus*)

Pound for pound corbina are the best fighting fish in the California surf. Their color is a silver-gray with a white belly. Their body is elongated and has narrow wavy diagonal lines on its sides. This croaker also has a single fleshy projection called a barbell, on the lower jaw. The caudal fin (tail) is unusual in that the upper half has a concave trailing edge, the lower portion is convex. Their body is very dense providing stability in shallow surf.

A strong and aggressive fish, the corbina will often strike bait on the run. Some of their favorite meals include mussels, ghost shrimp and bloodworms, but their main diet consists of sand crabs. Corbina feed in shallow water by running their sensitive chin barbell across the bottom to search for sand crabs, worms and shrimp.

Corbina frequently forage in just inches of water and beachgoers are often surprised when one swims between their legs. They use the incoming tide and wave motion to search for sand crabs. In just inches of water, they prowl suspended in the inshore trough waiting for their chance to charge the beach as surf rushes ashore.

Corbina live from Santa Barbara to Cabo San Lucas. Scientists believe corbina can grow to about thirty-two inches. A twelve-inch corbina is roughly three years old. A twenty-inch fish, weighing roughly four pounds,

is about nine years old.

During winter (November through April) corbina migrate away from the beach and move into local estuaries. Fish hide here from heavy winter surf and forage on bait that thrives in the shallow warm water. Corbina will spawn from May through September, with the majority of the activity, taking place around mid June to Mid August. During this time they are everywhere in the surf.

When fishing for corbina remember they have very keen eyesight and your Carolina rig needs to be reasonably hidden. Be stealth with your presentation by using black hooks, black swivels, fluorocarbon leader and a clear bead. There is plenty of competition for bait, so when it's your bait competing with a million other baits natural presentation is the key. Corbina enjoy feeding on beds of sand crabs so go to the beach at low tide and find the beds. Take a moment to line them up with something permanent on land. Then go back at medium going to high tide and cast your bait upon them—cause that's where the fish are!

A great place to get a look at these fish is from your local pier during an incoming tide. It's not uncommon to see four or five at times, just inches away from swimmers!

With the right combination of luck and skill in no time you'll be hooked up. And who knows, maybe it will be the right kind, one of the biggest croakers of summer!