

Targeting Spotfin Croaker in the Surf

By, Bill Varney



The biggest news in the last decade for California surf fishing has been the opening of several estuaries that have become forage and breeding grounds for surf fish. Several of the most notable are the Bolsa Chica Wetlands, the Talbert Marsh and several of the lagoons and estuaries in the San Diego area. Because of these estuaries surf fish (and many offshore fish including white seabass) have a safe and productive area to spawn. Although these estuaries are not new (as many were destroyed and replaced with homes and harbors in the mid 20th century) they are now open and back to the business of enhancing our marine environment.

One of the great benefits of these newly opened estuaries has been the great number of big fish spawning within their borders and their Spring and Fall transit out of the warm water and on to the local beaches to find crabs, clams and worms.

The most noticeable fish to find it's way out of the estuary has been the spotfin croaker. As a kid growing up in the South Bay, we had very little occasion to catch spotfin. I can only remember a handful of time when my fishing buddy Fred Oakley and I would find them in the surf. Now they seem to be everywhere...with each year seeming to produce more and bigger spotfin in the surf.

We have been leading up to this over the last decade but this year seems to be especially great spotfin fishing. So with that in mind, let's take a look at who they are and how to catch these great fish in the surf.

You can't miss a spotfin croaker (*Roncador stearnsii*) with its distinct black spot at the base of the pectoral fin and bluish-gray or brassy stripes on its sides. As with other croaker they also have a white belly. Males during spawning season can be mostly copper or brassy in color with very bright yellow fins, 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, South Carlsbad and Guerrero 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 (from 1951!) 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 foods.



I've caught spotfin on almost every bait—so throw the kitchen at them. 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, ghost shrimp, mussel or bloodworms, all fished on the Carolina rig.

When it comes to using lures 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.

To find spotfin at the beach or in a harbor or estuary employ the same visual observations you use for most surf fishing. Look for off colored, foaming and churning water around jetties, rip currents and offshore structure. These fish feed at all times of day but seem

to prefer high tide periods when they can get close to shore to forage.

Spotfin, just like corbina, love to feed in very shallow water but can also be found out near the surf line. Fish both near and far from shore. Cast to both those areas to find where the fish are biting that day. Spotfin also tend to congregate in specific areas so once you find them go back the next day (and maybe for several days) and fish that same location.

The best rod and reel setup for spotfin is a light 7-9' rod (think trout/steelhead rod here) matched with a 2500 series spinning reel loaded with 6lb monofilament. Fish the Carolina Rig with a 1/4th to 3/4th ounce sliding sinker. The larger the surf the heavier your sinker and the shorter your leader—as they always feed on the bottom.

Cast your bait out and slowly retrieve toward shore. You need to be tight to your sinker at all times as once they hit your bait it's immediately time to reel down, lift your rod and begin the fight.

And one last thing, when you do hook up with a big spotfin, don't panic. Know where you are on the beach and slowly walk backwards up the sand to use what little leverage you'll have to fight the fish. Don't be surprised by a long hard fight and the cheers of the crowd that has formed behind you hoping to see you land one of the greatest fish of the surf.

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