

Barracuda Power

By: Capt. David Bacon

Barracuda are downright mean, but I love 'em! These drive-by slash-attackers hook up aggressively, and fight well on light tackle. The fight of a barracuda takes some getting used to. Anglers often think they have lost the fish partway through the battle only to discover that the fish is still there, or think that the fish has returned to the bait, when it was there all the time. These fish are so sleek and elongated that when swimming toward the boat there is almost no water resistance. That's when people think they are off the hook. As soon as they turn to the side and there is water resistance against the side of the fish, the angler's rod loads up and it is obvious the fish is still there. So when it seems like the fish is gone, just keep reeling.

Spring, summer and fall are good times of year for finding wide-ranging schools of Pacific Barracuda. Baitfish, such as anchovies and sardines, are concentrated along our coast at this time of year, and barracuda are in amongst them, feeding with wild abandon. They are here in force, and provide plenty of opportunity for Springtime and Summertime action all along our SoCal and Central Cal coast.

When scouting for barracuda, look for baitballs on the fish finder, and look for birds working baitfish on the surface. The area of activity is commonly widespread over several miles and moves fairly quickly. Chase spots of surface activity, slow the boat when nearing the action and start casting. These fish will readily eat live baits, jigs, spoons, feathers, and flies. Hungry barracuda aren't particularly choosy. Over the past couple of weeks, I have had my charter passengers into action so wild that every cast resulted in a hookup. I've had every passenger aboard the boat hooked-up simultaneously. The scene resembles a chaotic fire-drill, but fishing doesn't get much more fun than this.

Sailboaters can easily catch "scooters", as barracuda are often called, when sailing in light or moderate wind. Anytime boat speed can be maintained between 3 knots and 5 knots, trolling for barracuda can be effective. Drop back a feather lure, or a jig, such as a Slammer by Braid, when running the 4 or 5 knots needed to give these great jigs some action. When the speed is slower, drop back a spoon, such as a Krocodile by Luhr Jensen. Spoons get their action going at a much slower speed. Passengers aboard sailboats who wish to fish more actively than trolling can cast lures out to the side and slightly ahead of the boat. Retrieve the lure slowly, as the sailboat pulls ahead of the lure. When a barracuda strikes, the fight will be off the stern of the boat.

Wire leader will prevent the sharp teeth of a barracuda from biting through the line, but it is generally believed that wire line reduces the number of strikes. It is best to assume that some fish will be lost, and just maximize the sport by using light line and tackle. Twelve to fifteen pound monofilament line is best. The fun is the reward, and enough fish will be boated to feed the hungry folks. The simplest bait rig is to tie a size 2 live bait hook on the end of a line, bait up with a live anchovy or sardine, and cast well out away from the boat. These fish love shiny objects, so try the gold-plated stainless-steel hooks from Emperor Tackle. When birds are swooping on baits, add a ¼-oz sliding sinker, or pinch a split shot onto the line above the hook. That will get the baits down below the seagulls but keep it high enough in the water column for the barracuda to find.

Cuda's make a powerful first slash, but after a hookup the fish will often turn towards the boat. During the next moments, it is easy to think the fish is lost. I encourage my passengers to keep turning the handle, because if the fish is lost, continuing the retrieve will draw more strikes and if the fish is still hooked up, keeping a taught line is imperative.

A barracuda is one of the most aquadynamically shaped fish in the world. When it is being pulled straight toward the boat, there is almost no water resistance, so it feels like the fish came off the hook. When that fish sees the boat and bolts to the side, it becomes very apparent that the fish is still attached and anything but subdued. Once in the boat, keep fingers well away from the sharp teeth, or serious gashes are likely.

Casting a jig or spoon is a favored way to target barracuda on powerboats, because it is so much fun to rear back and let fly with a lure. After it splashes and sinks for a few seconds, bring it back in with a medium retrieve, just fast enough to give the lure some kicking action.

When a fish strikes, it will feel like the reel just went dead and stopped. Then the rod loads up, as the scooter turns its body sideways to the water and there is no doubt about the presence of the fish. Set the hook quickly when a strike is detected, because there won't be much time before the opportunity is lost. These fish slash-attack to mortally wound a baitfish, and then circle back around to feed. The hookset must happen during that brief furious slash-attack.

Don't get stressed out when a strike is missed. These fish usually travel in schools and another strike may just be seconds away. It is not at all uncommon to feel three or four bumps during a single retrieve, as these fish circle around and make another attack on the lure, or different fish bite the lure in rapid succession.

They taste pretty good, if cared for properly. These fish get a bad reputation regarding the quality of their meat, because on many boats they are dumped into a gunny sack and exposed to the sun. It only takes about fifteen minutes of that abuse to ruin the flavor of the delicate meat. If these fish are gilled & gutted soon after being caught, and kept in cool shaded water or on ice, and eaten when fresh, they are surprisingly tasty.