

White Seabass of the Channel Islands

By: Capt. David Bacon

The springtime white seabass bite at Santa Rosa Island was epic. Looking ahead, this summer will sizzle with more great WSB action you will not want to miss out on. The Channel Islands are now home to the undisputed best seabass bite in California. The waters surrounding our Channel Islands provide the perfect combination of habitat and low fishing pressure to breed and grow monstrous schools of wild white seabass (WSB). Techniques are often a bit different here than those employed at the more southerly isles of the SoCal Bight. Finding the right spots and using local techniques will give you your best chance at hooking up with a huge white seabass.

Channel Islands hotspots: Anacapa Island gets the lion's share of fishing pressure because it is the closest Channel Island to the harbors of Ventura County... Port Hueneme, Channel Islands Harbor, and Ventura Harbor. Even with the fishing pressure, the waters around this small island kick out a gratifying number of WSB every year. A recommended hotspot is off of the east end of the island, just outside of the closed areas in 80 to 120 feet of water. Sea conditions in this area are usually nicer than other favored spots, so this makes for a handy place to fish when conditions further west along the chain of islands is too rough for comfort. There are other productive areas on the back (south) side of the island at East Anacapa Island and between Cat Rock and Rat Rock.

Santa Cruz Island has three main areas well known for giving up fairly consistent catches of seabass. One is the Yellowbanks area near the southeast corner of the island and westward to Alberts Anchorage. Many times I've seen gangs of hungry seabass chasing schools of skittering baitfish across the surface of a calm sea in this magic area. Another good spot is Chinese Harbor on the north side. This is also a well-known halibut spot where combo catches are possible. Great schools of baitfish gather just offshore and both species of gamefish move in to feed on anchovies and sardines. The southwest corner of the island kicks out a good number of seabass in the vicinity of Gull Island. Be careful to stay out of the MPA that encompasses Gull Island. Fish just east of the closure for best results.

The waters around Santa Rosa Island can be like heaven to white seabass anglers. Fish frequently gather between East Point and Eagles Nest to feed on spawning squid. Seabass are commonly caught throughout Bechers Bay, south of the MPA, wherever large schools of baitfish or squid can be found. Another favored area at Santa Rosa Island is along the weather-exposed north shore from Rodes Reef to Talcott Shoals.

Sometimes on charters aboard the WaveWalker we encounter massive baitballs in this area. Usually the fish are right under the bait near the leading edge of the roving school. Those fish are working the bait and directing the movement and pace. I bring the boat to a stop just ahead of the moving action and get lines in the water just as the fish come near the boat. Works like a charm!

San Miguel Island is well-known to rockfish and lingcod enthusiasts, yet it can also produce great catches of white seabass. Urchin divers clued me in to the huge schools of seabass around both Santa Rosa and San Miguel islands. They report the water going dark as schools of thousands of big fish swim overhead while the divers work the bottom with their urchin harvesting rakes. The west end of San Miguel in Simonton Cove between the MPA range and Oil Point is the best seabass spot, but the schools make the rounds of the island and any cove or beach area can produce at times.

Know where the MPA's are. Use a DF&G map from their website <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/marine>, or use a commercially available product. Many newer electronics charting systems, such as those from C-Map have the closures built into their charts. It is imperative that you know the boundaries because the authorities are looking to make examples of anyone accused of fishing inside a closure. It is common to fish the edges of closures, but do not allow current, wind or a fighting fish move the boat into a closure.

Techniques to master: You never know what a seabass will eat. I've seen them caught while salmon trolling with heavy weights, flasher blades, and bait hoods or hoochies. I've seen them bite a bounce-ball rig, right on the bottom, while we're hunting for halibut. Forget about absolutes when fishing for these white and blue-hued brutes. They will eat what they want and when they want it, no matter what we think.

We can however, talk about what they usually eat, and the most consistent techniques for hooking up. White seabass will readily take either live bait or jigs. The first choice of live baits would have to be squid. A dropper loop is the first choice among rigging types. The best dropper loop is made by sliding a size 3/0 hook up the line and tying a 6-ounce torpedo sinker to the end of the line. Make a foot-long loop for the hook about three feet up the line from the weight. This way the hook is free swinging in the loop rather than knotted at the eye, so the presentation is a bit more natural - sometimes just enough to make a difference. I prefer a long loop for the hook because when a fish inhales the bait I want the whole bait, including the hook, to be sucked into its mouth. Now pin a lively squid onto the hook and send it down to the bottom. Fish with the weight just inches off the bottom, to reduce hang-ups. Hookups tend to be solid with this rig.

A sliding sinker rig is another favorite technique and a favorite of mine aboard my charterboat. Pin a 3/0 or 4/0 hook through the mantle and use a sliding sinker just heavy enough to slowly sink the bait down the water column. A half-ounce

weight is usually sufficient, unless the current is running very strong. No leader is necessary. The sinker can slide right down to the hook.

Live squid isn't always available however, and our fish seem happy to eat sardines so that is what many of them are caught on. Light line with a 3/8 oz sliding sinker and a size 1 live bait hook pinned through the nose of a lively medium-size sardine is a very effective set-up. Cast upcurrent and let the bait flutter slowly down the water column, letting it soak for a good ten minutes before reeling in and hooking up a fresh bait.

Baiting seabass with a sliding sinker rig takes a touch of patience. You may just feel a suspicious tug and shake. Just wait! When that fish pulls steady and begins to swim off, sweep the rod up high to set the hook. That's when the fish will head for tall timber. Don't let it! Make it bend the rod and work for every foot of line it takes. Your drag has to be set soft enough to keep the line from breaking, and if you are using light line, that may be a very soft drag. Lift that rod and then reel down, time and time again, to turn the fish before it finds something to wrap your line around and break off.

You will usually get about two good runs out a seabass before you notice it tiring. Then it will come near the boat without too much effort, however as it comes up near boatside it will make a few more short runs. With so little line out and so much pressure on the already weakened line, it is important to have a soft drag at this point. Have both a net and a gaff handy. Look at the fish as it comes to the surface and be ready to grab the gaff if it obviously a big fish. Otherwise net the fish in case it is just below the 28 inch minimum. If it is short, remove the hook very gently and release the fish with minimal handling in order to improve its chances of surviving.

Jig fishing for seabass is a very different technique. Select a white, pearlescent or scrambled egg colored jig, or perhaps one that best imitates the forage fish you observe in the water. Drop a jig down to the bottom, come up four to six feet, and begin gently jigging up and down. On the downstroke, hesitate a few seconds before jigging it back up a few feet by quickly raising the rod tip. They find it hard to resist attacking during the momentary hesitation.

After ten minutes or so of that jigging technique, try casting it out and let it flutter slowly down to the bottom and then bring it back with a slow retrieve. This cast and retrieve routine works especially well when using a leadhead with a plastic swimbait or twintail instead of a jig. Alternate those two techniques until you get bit or the decision is made to move the boat. Be patient about moving that boat though. These fish require great doses of patience. Monitor the fishfinder and wait them out if they are present.

There are two common boat handling techniques for hunting seabass. One is to anchor or drift in areas where there is plenty of bait and fish showing on the

fishfinder. With this technique you'll wait for the fish to come to you. They do swim around, and if you are in a high-probability area, this can be a pretty good way to catch some miscellaneous fish while waiting for the seabass to go on the chew. The other technique is to cruise and explore an area looking for huge baitballs, preferably with birds working over the bait. That is a good indication that fish are working the bait from below. Position the boat at the edge of the baitfish and cast into the school. Right below the leading edge of a moving bait school is where the best action is expected.

A white seabass is a big and beautiful fish. There's no doubt about the sense of accomplishment that boating a seabass will bring. One important reminder... take your photos of the fish right away while it is alive and wet. The bluish hue of a fresh fish, glinting in the sunlight, has to be seen to be appreciated. The color fades as the fish weakens, and it is a bland looking fish once it is dead, so again, take your photos right away.

The comeback: The white seabass comeback story is one we can be proud of, and the Channel Islands region is where the story has had the greatest positive impact on our fishing opportunities. The story is all about long-term diligent research effort, planning, and restraint.

We began with habitat. Sanitation districts had to better treat sewage. We all had to take more personal responsibility and stop dumping our garbage, pet droppings, and lawn trimmings in the ocean or in creek beds that all eventually drain to the ocean. Clean seas are productive seas.

The next step was management and restraint. The California Department of Fish and Game long ago set a minimum size limit of 28 inches for white seabass. The bag limit is set to three fish per day per angler. During the period from March 15th to June 15th, when the DF&G believes the fish's spawning activities should be carefully protected, the limit is reduced to one fish per person. Gillnets were moved to a minimum of three miles off of the mainland coast and one mile off of the island coasts in an effort to allow existing populations of both seabass and halibut to spawn and thrive in shallow areas where they are most vulnerable to the nets.

The final step was breeding, grow-out, and release of juvenile seabass. Mark Drawbridge, manager of the Hubbs Sea World Research Institute's Hubbard Hatchery in Carlsbad, worked hard to perfect the brood stock program and expand the capacity of the hatchery in Carlsbad. Jock Albright came to the project and coordinated grow-out pen facilities and volunteers up and down our coastline.

The angling public was invited to go on special trips to catch brood stock for the hatchery. Retained fish were kept in the hatchery and encouraged to breed. Baby fish were nourished and readied for the grow-out pens funded and staffed by

local volunteers. Once the young fish grew to an optimal size for survival they were carefully released into the ocean in various locations to enhance the natural population and spur greater reproduction rates.

The United anglers of Southern California deserves praise for giving their support, in those days of research and scientific application, to the hatchery and grow-out pen program that helped the successful comeback of white seabass.

Research, restrictions, restraint, and good efforts paid off in big fish and plenty of them. Now there are enough breeding white seabass out there to sustain a healthy population and withstand the pressure of targeted fishing.