

Charter Captain's Secrets for Rockfish Season

By: Capt. David Bacon

Annual rockfish seasons open sequentially throughout California and anglers are making the drive to open areas to begin the season of plentiful fillets. No one is better at scoring quality rockfish than charter captains. Rigging and fishing for rockfish appears fairly basic, however, charter captains put finesse into this and utilize the concept of insurance better than a Blackjack player in Vegas.

We are limited to two hooks when fishing rockfish, so each hook should be doubly and durably baited and then worked effectively to produce its share of rockfish. Here is how it happens aboard a charter boat.

Maximize the effectiveness of each hook so that doubles can be regularly brought up, getting you to limits quickly before conditions change or the bite shuts down. A surefire way to enhance the offering is to use scented synthetic or plastic baits and adornments. I like to fish scented softbaits in natural shapes... shrimp, worms, squid, curly-tail grubs and swimbaits.

Secure live baits on the hook by pinning on a strip of squid or durable soft baits after hooking the live bait so that the live bait stays on the hook longer. With only two baits in the water, losing a bait constitutes an unacceptable loss of fish-catching capacity during a critical bite.

Packaged scents entice fish to bite when they are slow to feed. Seasoned skippers refresh scents each time before dropping baits back down. Don't be afraid to try fresh-water favorites, such as Pig-n-Jig combos which are incredibly durable, have a scent, and undulate enticingly.

For shallow water (under 180 feet) situations, rig light with 12 to 20 pound mono/fluorocarbon line or 50lb super braid line. Cast along the reef and allow the rig to flutter to the bottom. Practice a very slow lift-reel-and-wait style of retrieve so that the lure or bait remains within inches the reef during the retrieve.

Two trusty rigs for deeper work (we are allowed to fish to 360 feet) are a double dropper loop rig and a jig/teaser combo. Go with 50 to 80 pound braided line and a 25lb mono or fluorocarbon leader.

Here is a pro skipper's secret to aid with jig selection... during cold water months go with wide body lures that flutter lazily above the rocks because fish react slower in cold water. During warmer water months use a compact narrow jig that drops more quickly through the water column and jerks erratically when actively jigged just above the rocks.

Tie on a shiny jig with a treble hook at the bottom of your rig to improve chances of hooking a monster deepwater vermillion or copper rockfish. That treble hook on the jig counts as one of two allowable hooks, thereby allowing use of a baited dropper loop about 18 inches up from the jig. Use a size 1 or 1/0 hook and pin on double durable baits. This jig and teaser combo will often produce a big fish on the jig and a smaller rockfish on the teaser hook.

The primary secret to catching better quality rockfish is to fish tight to rocks where they forage. Drop the rig to the bottom and keep it within six inches of the rocks while waiting for a strike. Here is a valuable finesse trick... when using baits, wait a moment before slamming the hook home. Feel for the tell-tail tap-tap-tap and wait for a steady pull. Then gently lift up to feel for the weight of the fish. If it is still there, set the hook hard and reel simultaneously to avoid slack line after the hookset.