

## **Leopard Shark – a Gorgeous and Tasty West Coast Predator**

By: Capt. David Bacon

“Deadly grace, camouflaged by mesmerizing beauty” is how I describe leopard sharks, except on the dining table where I simply call them “delicious”. This prized fish has gorgeous eyes and a classic shark silhouette, but it also sports eye-appealing dark shapes on its back and sides which do a credible job of camouflage allowing the shark to blend in where sunlight ripples in mottled patterns across a shallow sandy or muddy seafloor where they like to forage.

Life in the food chain is about deadly ambush and the advantage goes to those predators like leopard shark which can hide in plain sight. They are stealth... silent... sinuous... beautiful, their bio-engineering is awe inspiring. They are deadly predators -armed with small sharp teeth set in jaws like a band saw -once they bite down, they twist and thrash their heads instinctively in order to bite through whatever is in their mouth. Keep your fingers well away.

Leopard sharks delight inshore anglers from spring through autumn with good fights and good meals along the entire California coast. Whether fishing near San Francisco Bay, Santa Barbara, San Diego or anyplace along the shores of our Golden State, serious leopard hunters concentrate on shallow sandy or muddy areas, just outside of the surf zone, the mouths of harbors, rivers and estuaries and especially anywhere warmer water enters the sea... such as from power plants. Another good place to find them is at the edge of coastal kelp beds where they can find plentiful food appealing to their varied palate. Bottom sharks like these do not show up well on fish finders, so plan on scouting for them by test-fishing various spots within a likely looking area.

To understand how best to target them it helps to understand their eating habits. They may hunt singly or in small packs, but they also form nomadic schools with other bottom shark species such as the grey smoothhound or the spiny dog fish (pinback shark) and together scour the bottom in search of food. They are known to eat burrowing invertebrates such as worms but will also happily eat crustaceans, shrimp, octopus, squid and small fish. So when you begin hooking into other bottom sharks, chances are reasonably good that leopard sharks also are present.

Picking the right bait seems easy, since they have such a varied appetite, but put some science into your fishing by carefully observing what feed is naturally available in the same area and then making a bait selection accordingly. For example, when big baitballs of anchovies or sardines are roaming close inshore, pin on a live bait and fish it right at the bottom on a reverse dropper loop. And don't complain if you hook into a hungry halibut instead of a lunging leopard. With no obvious natural forage food in the area, go with squid strips or some of the other foods noted above. Stop by a bait and tackle shop before fishing and ask what is working best locally. In the San Francisco Bay area, mud

shrimp are common baits because they are natural forage for hungry leopards. In more southern waters, baitfish are the most common baits.

Kayakers, float tubers and skiff fishers typically rig up with a sliding sinker rig. Run the main line (I suggest 30 pound braided line) through a ¾ ounce sliding sinker and tie onto a small barrel swivel. Tie a 3 foot length of 20 pound fluorocarbon leader to the swivel and a size 1 hook onto the business end of the leader. Bait up, drop the rig to the bottom and drift through the habitat described above. Note that I recommended a fairly heavy leader (20-30 pounds) because the skin on most species of shark is sufficiently abrasive to rub through light line. It is best to go heavy when fishing for any shark species.

On my own charterboat, *WaveWalker*, we have been enjoying catches of leopard sharks along the mainland coast of the Santa Barbara Channel and in waters around the Channel Islands. Most of the leopards we have caught have been between 30 inches and 48 inches with a few heavier units. To be a legal catch, a leopard shark must be over 36 inches. A number of these sharks came while we were drifting for halibut because both fish tend to hunt for the same forage. They know each other well and we would like to know them both much better.

Capt. Steve Talmadge runs a charterboat, *Flash* ([www.flashfishing.net](http://www.flashfishing.net)), in the San Francisco Bay area and is known for his ability to put his passengers on leopard sharks. Many of his trips target sturgeon or striped bass, but some fisherfolk have an undeniable passion for the classic phantom-like shape of a shark and want to go target them. Capt. Talmadge is happy oblige. I asked him to describe how/when/where he fishes for leopards. Here are his helpful notes:

I do target Leopard sharks. I fish for them mostly May through November. The sharks are plentiful during late spring to almost winter. It all depends on the rain and water flows into the bay.

I like to fish leopards as a catch and release target for some fun. I do have some clients that like to target them for table fare and they are not that bad but I think other species we have are better. I often target sharks if we are having a slow day and need some action. This is a great target for kids, especially first time fishermen. You are almost always going to get into them if you know how to fish for them. I do a lot of half-day shark trips for out-of-town people. I found that a half-day is all they need for some action and fun with the sharks. They always leave the boat with smiles and fun photos. Leopards are one of the best sharks to photograph because of their design.

I like to fish for sharks during the turns of some medium size tides. You need some flow to get the scent from your bait out away from the boat. They don't seem to bite much during a fast ripping tide. Baits are not that critical as long as they put out a good scent they recognize. I like sardines, anchovies, squid and I have used live anchovies while on anchor. It is best to be anchored were you see a lot of marks on your sounder.

I fish mostly the south bay but there are some good areas in the north and San Pablo Bay also. Most of the time I am in 25 to 45 feet of water. I use light tackle for more fun. I use 7' Vic's Custom Rods that are rated 15 to 30lb test. I use 20 lb test Andi main line. I use 40lb Andi leaders with a 5/0 barbless circle hook. I like the circle hook as we release almost all of our sharks. Also the hook set will in the edge or corner of the mouth and that way they will not bite through the leader. I will tie the baits on with magic thread and I don't really care how it looks. I want the sharks to really keep biting at the bait.

I net all the sharks so as to support the whole body before releasing them. Shark fishing is a lot of fun and you don't have to spend a whole day to get your fill of action and photos. It is a great way to get first time fishermen, women and kids excited about the sport of fishing.

Here are some helpful notes, from California's *Marine Living Resources: A Status Report*, CDFG, December 2001, to help learn more about our quarry: Leopard sharks range from Mazatlan, Mexico into the northern Sea of Cortez and along the west coast to Oregon. Favoring muddy bays and sloughs, especially in northern California, it is known to move out and in with the tides to feed over shallow tidal mudflats. It also occurs along the open coast and around offshore islands off Southern California, where it frequents kelp beds, sandy bottoms near rocky reefs and the surf zone along sandy beaches.

The maximum recorded and verified total length is about six feet long. The oldest validated age (determined by reading tetracycline-labeled rings on the vertebrae) is 26 years for a 49-inch female. Size at birth is about eight to ten inches in total length. Longevity is presumed to be about thirty years.

Birth takes place generally from March through July in shallow water. Males mature at seven years, females at ten years when the sharks reach lengths between 40 and 42 inches total length.

Leopard sharks are opportunistic feeders. Invertebrates they eat include crabs, ghost shrimp, mud shrimp, clam siphons and sometimes whole clams, worms and octopuses. Fish in the diet include herring, anchovy, topsmelt, croakers, surfperches, gobies, rockfishes, midshipman, flatfishes, small sharks and rays.

Movements have been studied in central California where tagging in the San Francisco Bay shows that this stock is mostly resident, though perhaps ten percent of the population moves out of the Bay into the ocean during fall and winter, which corresponds to their slow season for local charter boats.

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SIDEBAR: I know a feller who has spent many months ashore on the Channel Islands, the lucky stiff! He tells stories about tidal lagoons which –when the tides and season are just right –are invaded by hordes of leopard sharks. He tells stories of standing in thigh-deep water watching dozens of leopard sharks swimming by his feet. Some might find such a thing to be spooky and scary and I perfectly understand. But personally I’d find it enchanting and a memorable moment of beauty... as long as I kept all my toes!

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