

Target Larger “Lingasaur”

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There is nothing subtle about a lingcod attack. Even at a few hundred feet down and with several feet of stretch in monofilament line, a lingcod can bend a rod double, muscle it's way into the rocks, bust off the line, and leave one very perplexed angler wondering what the heck just happened. This is one tough aggressive critter. A keeper lingcod is called a “lingasaur” aboard my charterboat, the WaveWalker. This is the only fish I'll nickname after a dinosaur. I doubt they have changed much since the days of the dinosaurs. These fish don't have much need to change, since they are already the “baddest fish on the reef”. They have big teeth, a powerful build, and a junkyard dog type of attitude.

Lingcod live in rocky terrain, and the rockier the terrain, the better they like it. The secret to targeting larger lings is to understand how they disperse among the rocks and then go out and fish in just the right spots to maximize chances of hooking the larger units. Rank has its privileges in the social life of a lingcod, and rank has everything to do with size and aggressive behavior. The biggest toughest lingcod stakes claim to the choicest lair down along the side of a rocky outcropping or ridge. Part way down the sides, or near the bottom of reefs is where the best little caves and grottos are to be found, and those are the lairs of choice for the dominant lingcod.

The commercial urchin divers I talk to me tell me that the really big lings live about one hundred feet apart, sometimes less, and stoically defend the territories around their lairs. Smaller lingcod are continually chased off and end up relegated to the tops of the reefs where they have less protection and have to work harder for their meals. They compete voraciously for their meals and become pretty easy to hook, but many of them are just legal or even under the new and reduced minimum size limit of 22 inches. The bag limit is two lings.

This information about their territorial traits provides valuable clues about how to target the big guys. Fish part way down the sides of rocky structure rather than trying to drop a bait or jig right on top of the high spot. The little guys are on top, but you want a lingasaur! When the direction of the drift is along structure, such as an underwater ridge, it is easy to position for a long drift at just the right position to fish for the big guys. When the drift is perpendicular to a ridge, it becomes necessary to make successive drifts across the structure in order to maximize the time when your offering is within striking range of the lairs of the biggest lings.

These brutes are attracted to action. No doubt about it. If you are fishing live baits, select a large active bait and fish it right down into the rocks where you're afraid you are going to get hung up. That bait often needs to be within a couple feet of a lingcod to induce a strike. When I'm fishing for larger lingasaur, I like to tail-hook large lively baits because

lingcod typically attack from behind. The strike isn't subtle, yet I pause for a moment before I set the hook. Once I begin setting the hook, I keep upward momentum by reeling at the same time I swing to set the hook. When an angler swings on a ling and then lowers the rod tip, that fish has a prime opportunity to stretch the line and make it to the rocks. Never give a lingcod an inch, or it will take a yard - and your bait, hook, and weight.

I've seen some pretty interesting devices come out of tackle boxes in my time. Some folks just love to experiment, and I'm always happy to see new gadgetry deployed. The very best lingcod catching device is a Lingslayer, which is a Hopkins spoon with the hook removed and the split ring attached to a heavy leadhead. Then a large plastic tail is threaded onto the leadhead. This gadget rocks and rumbles when actively jigged in front of a lingcod. It displays a perfect combination of flash and motion. The color of the plastic tail used on this rig can be important. Red is a good color because it looks like a baby rockfish. White or pearlescent imitates a squid, while brown seems to look like a young brown skinned rockfish such as a johnny bass. The Lingslayer was designed by Capt. David Bacon and available at Hook, Line & Sinker bait and tackle at 4010 Calle Real, Santa Barbara, Ca 93110, phone (805) 687-5689.

Jigs are proven lingcod attractors. From a ling's perspective there is something absolutely irresistible about a shiny jig bounced erratically in front of its nose. These are highly instinctive feeders, and frequently the jig isn't near the bottom for more than about two pumps before it gets hammered hard. Chrome jigs, such as a Crippled herring by Luhr Jensen, are popular because they provide that magic flash that lings can't resist.

It is also wise to think with a "match the hatch" mentality. When folks are bringing up small rockfish on gangions, try to select a jig that approximates the color and size, providing it is heavy enough to reach the bottom and stay close to the rocks. One of our SoCal favorites, Jax Jigs, does a fabulous job of imitating small rockfish. These jigs look like a very familiar and tasty meal to a big old lingcod. They are always worth trying.

Tie a teaser hook about 18 inches up the line from the jig for extra fun. It is common to catch a rockfish on a teaser baited with squid strips or a plastic tail. The wiggling rockfish helps attract the attention of the lingcod who will then attack either the jig, which is closer to the rocks, or the rockfish itself. When you get a ling to the surface, pay close attention to whether it is hooked or is just "hitchhiking" on a rockfish. Big lings will often hold a hooked rockfish in their mouths all the way to the surface. Net or gaff the ling quickly before it lets go of the rockfish. Sometimes two lings will come up. One will be on the jig and the other will be mouthing the rockfish. In this situation, always first gaff the lingcod which is mouthing the rockfish because it may not be hooked as well and can easily let go and slowly swim back down into the depths.

Setting the hook and fighting a lingcod is difficult to master. Many fish are lost because anglers swing too hard and too fast at the first hint of a bite. When you feel a takedown and subsequent strong downward surges, that is when it is time to set the hook and crank

hard to keep the fish from gaining the security of its lair. If that ling can make it back into his lair and flare its gills you may never get it out of the rocks.

The first ten seconds of a battle with a lingasaur is ninety percent of the story. That's the bottom line. If you can keep it out of the rocks you have a good chance of boating the brute. Once away from the rocks, the fish may come part way up somewhat docile, providing the angler keeps the rod steady and cranks the reel at a slow speed. The fish generally turns wild again part way up. The signature of a lingcod is a strong second effort after you've fought it far enough up that the ambient sunlight grows bright. They will also thrash pretty hard right on the surface, so have a net or gaff handy. Every second that fish remains at the surface without being secured, is another chance for it to get off the hook.

These fish do not have air bladders, so juveniles can be brought up from great depths and then quickly released without any special care. They are rugged durable fish, and will swim all the way back down to their rocky home with their bad attitude still very much intact. I just gotta love these fish!