

Ocean Whitefish Earn Their Spot High On the Fish Counts

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Ocean whitefish have been holding up their share of the fish counts of late, for a very good reason. People love to catch them and take them home for supper.

They earn the nickname “poor man’s yellowtail” because they have vivid-yellow fins and tail -- and while they are a lot of fun to catch -- they don’t put on a drag-washer-burning run like the well-known and powerful member of the jack family. The two species are quite unrelated. Whitefish tend to stay at home in large schools. Home to a whitefish is rocky terrain, where they share the neighborhood with groundfish.

With anatomy featuring a small body cavity, a poor man’s yellowtail doesn’t give as strong a fishfinder mark as many nearby species. They do have an air bladder however, and so will give a stronger return than a fish without a bladder, such as a lingcod or salmon. Look for a medium signal return from a school of suspended fish. Once you “paint” that sought-after scenario on your fishfinder, it’s time to rig for whitefish.

Whitefish hunt suspended in the water column over rocky terrain. When targeting whitefish, keep baits about 8 to 10 feet up off the bottom. Rockfish and lingcod tend to hold tight to the rocks, while whitefish suspend above the rocks, so fishing well up off the bottom minimizes incidental catches of rockfish and puts the baits right in the feeding range of the whitefish.

Whitefish are aggressive and competitive eaters, so bites come very quickly when fishing in the right place. They have relatively small mouths, and a small to medium size hook - from size 2 to 1/0 - works best. Small hooks make it easy for them to take the hook inside their mouth. Heavy-gauge wire hooks are better than light hooks, because their mouths are amazingly tough and fine diameter hooks bend too easily when removing the hook, costing valuable fishing time while a new hook is tied on.

Whitefish will readily bite a surprising array of baits. Gulp! baits and plastic grubs make effective hook baits. A simple squid strip is an effective bait because they cannot seem to get their fill of squid. Cut a squid strip a half-inch wide and four inches long. Pin the hook through the squid strip near one end, turn the hook around and pin it back through a second time.

Pinhead anchovies are good baits for whitefish. Larger anchovies and sardines can be chunked to make right-size baits. Plug-cut large baitfish into pieces less than an inch long, and bury the hook into the chunk. Pieces of shrimp are great baits and readily devoured. Pelagic red crabs also make good baits.

Dropper loops and reverse dropper loops are favored rigs for these fish. More specifically, I prefer reverse droppers for novice anglers, and droppers for the more experienced fisherfolk. A reverse dropper loop gives the fish an extra foot or so of line to work with, so the angler doesn't feel the fish quite as soon as with a dropper loop. Novice anglers commonly swing waaay too fast at the first hint of a bite, and they miss a fish that didn't yet have the hook far enough into its mouth to allow a hookset.

Their fighting characteristic is like a unique signature. They give a very bouncy and active fight. They don't make long runs, but instead bounce like crazy and make short stubborn runs downward, punctuated with wild headshakes. The rod tip is noticeably and wildly active during the fight, and it is easy to watch a rod tip and know it is a whitefish before it comes up to color.

Once in the boat, their erratic behavior continues, and they are difficult to handle safely. The back edge of their gill plate cover has something like a serrated edge and they are highly skilled at using it to slice a finger, when picked up by the gills. I've had them slice my thumb to the bone.

The classic lip-latch isn't a feasible way to safely hold a whitefish because their mouths are too small to get a full-size thumb into. They wiggle way too much to pick them up by grabbing the body, and watching an angler try to pick one up off the deck is often a hilarious comedy routine. The usual technique for picking one up is to use the eye sockets as fingerholds, as is commonly done when lifting a sheephead or ling cod. It is the safest place to hold them.

One nice thing about ocean whitefish...they are a delight to fillet. A sharp fillet knife seems to glide easily through the flesh, and the rib cage bones are not difficult to cut through. These fish yield a surprisingly large fillet for the size of the fish, because they have a relatively small body cavity. Happy passengers get to take home plenty of good meat, and often comment on the amount of meat the deckhand is able to get off of each fish.

Ocean whitefish are caught along the mainland, as well as around each of the islands throughout our SoCal Bight. The Channel Islands are where I've found the best concentrations of larger whitefish, up to ten pounds, and with numerous fish from 5 to 8 pounds. They are abundant and can be found schooling over many of the larger rocky reef zones around the islands. They can be caught in good numbers from water as shallow as 40 feet, and on out to depths of a couple hundred feet.