

The Santa Barbara Channel Offers an All-Season Fishery

By: Capt. David Bacon

At each season of the year the wild and spectacular Santa Barbara Channel provides quality sportfishing options. It ranks as a premier fishery on a “seasonally adjusted basis” (to borrow a term from the financial world). This article is intended to serve as a guide to help you explore and enjoy this Southern California “stand-up” style fishery all throughout the year.

Resources abound for tapping the potential of this vast fishery. Sportfishing fleets of big partyboats and private-charter services run out of the four harbors along the seventy-some miles of mainland coast between the boundaries of the Channel, Point Dume and Point Conception. Three of the harbors are in close proximity to one another along the Ventura County Coast. The fourth is a little further up the coast in beautiful Santa Barbara, which allows closer access to the wild west end of the Channel where the fish don't get much pressure. The four Channel Islands are prime fishing destinations from these ports when the weather permits. Good fishing piers are available, and two of them (at Goleta and Gaviota) have hoists for launching skiffs.

When fishing opportunities arise in your always-too-busy schedule, I invite you to come experience this fishery. The Santa Barbara Channel and Channel Islands are my beat. I own and operate *WaveWalker Charters*, a private-charter 6-pack service in the Santa Barbara Harbor. I fish these waters year-round. I write fishing articles for several publications on a regular basis, and put on seminars about fishing the Santa Barbara Channel. I know these waters well. The following is how I slice the seasons and hook-up my charter passengers with some quality fish and good times.

Winter

The staples of SoCal wintertime fishing are rockfish, lingcod, and calico bass. Rockfish and lingcod are closed January and February but open the rest of the year. Radical topography is where you'll find most of these fish, and that is what gives the Santa Barbara Channel its advantage. We have the best fish-holding structure, at every depth imaginable, along the entire SoCal coast. Along the beaches, barred surfperch are popular gamefish during the winter.

Fishing for rockfish can be divided into deepwater and shallow water fishing. Deepwater means working in more than 150 feet of water, and sometimes up to 360 feet. At these depths, great numbers of red rockfish can be found. Although most are generically referred to as red snapper, a number of species are caught, such as vermilion, copper rockfish starrys, bocaccio, and chilis.

Equipment and techniques are common to deepwater rockfishing anywhere; a large reel, perhaps with a oversize power handle, a stout rod with a roller tip, heavy line, and a multi-hook gangion. The new breed of spectra lines are perfect for this type of fishing because

they are super sensitive and have almost no stretch. This means you can feel smaller fish bite at great depths and larger fish can't stretch the line enough to get into the rocks and break you off. The gangion hooks are usually decorated with various materials to imitate natural forage. It is wise to sweeten the hooks with scented plastic tails or bait. Squid is a durable and effective bait, however shrimp, octopus, and baitfish also work well.

Shallow water rockfish include chucklehead, sheephead, and a couple of rockfish which are called basses; johnny bass and sugar bass. Ocean whitefish are also commonly caught. These are all good eating fish, and the lesser depth gives them a chance to put up a much better fight. Medium action jigsticks and Penn Jigmaster-size reels are well suited for this type of fishing. Single or double hook rigs are better here than multi-hook gangions because it doesn't take long to reel up, re-bait, and drop back down, which makes it feasible to bring up each fish as it is hooked.

The mighty lingcod is the king of winterfish. These big mean prehistoric-looking fish are aggressive, territorial, and stubborn. They have a set of large sharp teeth which perfectly match their bad attitude. These are the only fish I nickname after a dinosaur. Aboard my charterboat, the *WaveWalker*, any keeper lingcod is called a "lingasaur"! They are caught at all depths during the winter, and since they don't have an air bladder they fight hard all the way to the boat, even from deepwater seamounts. One more thing... they taste great.

Many anglers want to specifically target lingcod. The two most effective techniques are jigs and single large live baits. Jigs are simple and fun to use, and they are lethal against lingcod. You see, lingcod have a fatal attraction to chrome... they can't resist a shiny object bouncing up and down in front of their nose. Red and orange colors which match rockfish are also productive. The ultimate lingcod lure is the Lingslayer, designed by Capt. David Bacon and available at Hook, Line & Sinker (4010 Calle Real, Santa Barbara, Ca 93110, phone (805) 687-5689). The best technique is to drop it down into the rocks and then jig it actively and repetitively within a few feet of the bottom. Large live baits are also very effective on lingcod. A big shiny sardine is one of my favorite baits, however the best live bait of all for a lingcod is a sand dab which can be caught on sandy bottoms near rocky structure.

Calico bass are resident gamefish and feed throughout the year. Techniques change during the winter when these fish tend to feed a little lower in the water column. When water temps are in the mid-fifties or lower, I rig up my passengers with sliding sinkers held away from the hook by splitshot. These rigs get the bait down deeper to where the fish are feeding. Live anchovies or small sardines are always good live baits. Plastic tails on leadheads will take plenty of bass over the shallow reefs, but heavier leadheads work best during the winter, because the fish spend more of their time a little deeper. Swimbait types of plastic tails with big sparkle flakes are good choices in cold water because they impart plenty of action and provide sufficient flash to allow fish to find them in murky waters after winter rains.

Spring

We take our salmon fishing mighty seriously on the Santa Barbara Channel. That's because this is as far down the coast as salmon are caught in appreciable numbers. The season usually begins in early April. The bite frequently lasts well into June and sometimes beyond. These are the best salmon of all - kings (Chinook). Smaller fish are 12 to 15lbs, and they range up to over 30lbs. When one of these magnificent fish hits the deck, high-fives and backslaps are in order!

There are two basic methods for catching these salmon; mooching and trolling. The big open-party sportboats must mooch because they have too many people aboard to troll. Mooching entails anchoring or drifting over big baitballs and lowering a bait on light line and a small hook. The light tackle makes catching a big fish a lot of fun. I prefer trolling because I know that over the course of a season I can hook up with more fish for my passengers by covering some territory and dragging irresistible objects in front of the salmon. Downriggers and weight releases can be used with equal effectiveness. A flasher blade imitates a school of baitfish, and the bait or lure trails along behind.

Calico bass go on a rampage in mid-spring. They are quick to rise to the top of the water column and voraciously attack baits and artificials alike. It is great fun to anchor just upcurrent from a kelp bed or reef and build a wide-open bass bite by steadily chumming with live baits, chunked baits, or store-bought buckets of chum. Once the bass leave the structure and come up the chumline into open water, the fishing gets wild. I like to rig spinning outfits with a small hook and a splitshot. The splitshot isn't necessary for the fish, but gets the bait down a foot or two where the pesky seagulls can't quite reach.

I consider the Santa Barbara Channel to be California's calico capitol. Miles of fish-rich kelp forests dot the mainland coast between Point Dume and Point Conception. The Channel islands are home to the biggest populations of calicos anywhere in the SoCal bight. The north shore of Santa Rosa island and the west end of Santa Cruz island are two of my favorite calico hotspots. Here's an interesting note. The movie classic, *King Kong*, was filmed on Santa Cruz Island. In honor of that movie, any big calico caught near that island aboard my charterboat, the *WaveWalker*, is affectionately called a "kong calico".

Spring is the time to begin fishing sandy shallows for halibut. The vast Ventura Flats hold plenty of the tasty flatfish. Other good areas include Carpinteria and Summerland, Goleta, Ellwood, Gaviota and Hollister Ranch. Some of the best places at the islands are Bechers Bay and the north shore of Santa Rosa island, and both the west and north shores of San Miguel island. Drift fishing with live baits on the bottom is a popular method, however bounce-balling with a flasher blade and trailing hoochy is even more effective.

White seabass move into the shallow kelp beds during the springtime and pleasantly surprise us while we fish for calico bass. Live squid is the deadliest bait when specifically targeting white seabass, but if the candy bait is unavailable live baits such as sardines and even anchovies will work. Plastics also catch white seabass, however the most effective artificial is a white jig tipped with whole frozen squid and jigged actively in the lower third of the water column..

Summer

As water temps rise, the surface gamesters of summer ride the warm water currents up the coast and fan out along both the mainland and the islands. This is when we tie on casting iron such as jigs and spoons, and give our drag systems a good test on bonito, barracuda, and the occasional yellowtail.

Calico bass are joined, at this time of year by hordes of big grumpy sand bass scouring the nearshore clambeds and feeding around the inshore reefs. It is quite common to catch a mixed limit of calicos and sandies. The calicos will usually move up higher in the water column, while the sandies generally stay just a little lower. That isn't a hard rule however, and many individual fish seem to do their own thing with wild abandon. That's part of the fun of bass fishing. The other part is grinning ear-to-ear at how hard these fish can fight!

Halibut haunt the shallows all throughout summer and autumn. Drifting lazily and dragging a live bait along just outside of the surf zone is a deliciously decadent way to spend a summer afternoon. I've noticed that some of my passengers have trouble concentrating on fishing because of all those bikinis on the beach.

Autumn

This is my favorite time of year for fishing the Santa Barbara Channel because of the long periods of glassy flat water when a trip to the islands seems like a short comfortable run. Water temps are still up and the food chain is very active. Summer gamesters are still around, winter fish are beginning to bite well, and tuna show up well offshore.

The best albacore bite along the California coast, during some years, is outside of San Miguel Island near the Rodriguez Seamount. Whispering the word "albacore" is enough to send scores of wild-eyed anglers scurrying to sea. These are great fish, promising a valiant fight and excellent table fare.

White seabass are found throughout reef zones in 50 to 150 foot depths at this time of year. When the squid begin spawning however, seabass will congregate around the squid and feed like crazy. It is wise to keep tabs on the commercial squid fleet, by watching for the light boats and seiners, and then fish areas where they concentrate. Jig up some live squid and send it right back down to the lower third of the water column on a large hook with a sliding sinker. If the live squid won't bite, fish with whole frozen squid pinned to a white jig.

Halibut are quite active at mid-depths - say 50 to 75 feet of water. Drift fishing and bounce-balling are still the two common methods to target the flatties. Sandy or muddy areas are the best place to try, but don't shy away from reefs. Halibut like to lie in the sand right next to a reef, or in a sandy slot in the reef and ambush small fish that wander by.

Calico bass go on wild feeding binges during the Autumn, because conditions are perfect and there is plenty of food available. This is a great time to work the shallow reefs and

kelp-filled coves along the Channel Islands. These spots are loaded with big hungry bass, as well as a multitude of other fish. Between the stunning island views and the hungry fish, this is a fun way to spend a day.

Late in Autumn, lingcod once again begin moving up from deeper water to spawn and feed. Rockfish are truly available all year long on the deeper structure zones. These fish set the stage for the coming winter when our calendar of great fishing opportunities begins anew.

Year-round thoughts

You may have noticed that calico bass are discussed in each and every season. The reason is simple. As I said earlier, the Santa Barbara Channel is California's calico capitol, and we enjoy a quality year-round calico fishery. Sand bass join them for the better part of the year, helping to provide plenty of tasty bass dinners. These fish can't be caught and kept commercially, so if you are enjoying a hearty bass dinner - it was sport caught!

The Santa Barbara Channel is the most underutilized fishery in Southern California. It offers a quality year-round fishery within a short and scenic drive of the major population centers of SoCal. These are compelling reasons to book an intimate trip with a private-charter service (such as *WaveWalker Charters*) who can take you to where the fish are biting and help novices learn to fish while the more experienced anglers do their own thing. Other options include joining in the crowd aboard an open party boat, take your own boat out on this magnificent Channel, or try your hand at pier or surf fishing. Oh, and when you come for the fish, consider bringing along the non-fishing members of your family or social group. They'll find plenty of fun things to do in the quaint seaside communities, while you're out on the water battling those denizens of the deep.

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