

**Sheephead Secrets (Sssh!)**

By: Capt. David Bacon

Funny thing is, I rarely get a call from a charter group asking to specifically target sheephead, yet when we get into them, my passengers are so happy you'd think their favorite fishing fantasy was granted them. It is easy to understand. They get a good fight, they get a fish that photographs well enough to make the angler look like a fishing legend, and they get a surprisingly delicious dinner. Fishing is usually done in fairly shallow water and with light to medium tackle. What's not to like?

These fish don't make a long sustained run, like a yellowtail, but they use every ounce of muscle to bulldog back down to the rocks where they can bust you off in a hot second. You gotta keep them out of the rocks, or it's all over in the first five seconds - ain't no two ways about it. I recall one 10 year-old kid whose feet were lifted off the deck because he leveraged the rod against the rail while a huge sheephead made for the rocks. Capt. Tiffany (my deckhand) quickly reached over and put a hand on his shoulder to keep him in contact with the deck.

Many fisherfolk have confided to me that while sheephead are one of their favorite fish, they really need to add to their understanding and improve their ability to target them. Here are some surefire secret (and not-so-secret) baits, rigs and techniques for bringing in the sheep.

**Where to look:** Ideal habitat for these red and black baddies is a rugged rocky reef zone, at depths ranging from boiler rock environs on out to roughly 150 feet. Most are caught at 25 to 75 feet.

Along the mainland coast, "goats" are typically fond of the full range of structure types; natural reefs, artificial reefs (which we need a LOT more of to offset the socioeconomic damage to our industry from the plethora of new MPAs), sunken boats, oil rigs and even subtle structure like low ledges. We also catch sheephead in kelp beds while targeting calico bass and white seabass.

Many of the islands of the SoCal Bight are surrounded by perfect habitat for sheephead. Some very productive areas include the entire west end of Santa Cruz Island, rocky areas off of Santa Rosa Island such as Rodes Reef and Talcott Shoals, the rocky structure off of west side of San Miguel Island, the backside of Catalina Island, the shallow reefs off of San Clemente Island, and the west end of San Nicholas Island (which is within the Cowcod Conservation Area where structure fishing is limited to depths of up to 120 feet). These areas are perfect homes for crustaceans, meaning sheephead will be actively foraging for one of their dietary staples.

**Baits:** Speaking of dietary staples, take a good look at a sheephead and think about what it eats. When you study the hard mouth, strong pronounced teeth and powerful jaws of these reef dwellers, it is apparent that they are well suited for crunching crustaceans and yanking them off of the rocky reefs they call home. The secret to targeting these big “goats” (as sheephead are referred to), therefore, is to bring along the right baits.

Leave the anchovies, and sardines in the bait box for later use with other species. Instead, try some baits these fish can't resist, such as crushed mussels and clams, whole rock crabs, sand crabs, shrimp, and live crawdads. These are top-choice meals for a hungry sheephead. The live crawdad may be the best of them all because it looks like a baby lobster or a pelagic red crab. Shrimp is my most common sheephead bait I use on charters aboard my 6-pack boat, the WaveWalker.

Squid deserves special mention because sheephead live for those times when foraging and spawning activities bring squid to the rocky lairs where hungry goats await. So squid strips and rings are always a trusty bait.

Choose smaller offerings when using artificial baits. Good choices are Gulp! shrimp, curly-tail grubs and sand worms.

**Rigging advice:** There are a couple of ways I rig up my charter passengers to target sheephead. One, which I use in very shallow water, is a sliding sinker held two feet up the line from the hook by a small splitshot or barrel swivel. I use a size 1 VMC hook and rig so the point is buried in the bait to reduce hangups on the rocks.

In deeper water I like to rig passengers up with a reverse dropper loop, by tying the hook to the end of the line and hanging a weight from a dropper loop a couple of feet up the line. Pin a shrimp, crab, piece of mussel, or a crawdad onto the hook and drop it right down onto the reef. Sheephead feed by biting crustaceans off of the rocks or kelp stalks, so it is best to fish right on the bottom or not more than a couple feet above it.

Good choices of tackle include a medium action rod (7' and rated for roughly 20-40lb), a trustworthy reel like a Penn International 975 lever drag reel spooled with 25 pound Big Game mono or Trilene fluorocarbon. If you prefer braided line, spool up with 50lb Invisibraid.

**Presentation:** Chum the area with some busted up mussels, or chopped up miscellaneous baits. Uni-Goop (visit [www.unigoop.com](http://www.unigoop.com)) is made primarily of urchin innards, which is like caviar to sheephead and makes ideal chum material. Chumming gets the fish to feeding and competing aggressively. Now you're ready to fish.

Drift over the reef zone and drop the bait straight down. Hookups usually come fast. Spend a half-hour working the reef in shallow water before moving out to deeper water. If the sheephead just will not bite, make a run to the next major reef zone and try the same strategy again and again. Persistence often pays off when herding sheephead.

**Hookset and fighting to win:** It is always a treat to watch a rod suddenly bend deeply while a surprised angler quickly sets his or her stance. That's when I know we've got a big sheephead hooked up. That fish will become the big story – and the big meal - of the day.

Not known for being timid about eating, sheephead tend to chomp down on a bait and instinctively make a movement like tearing a crustacean from a rock. That relates to a powerful bite and sudden deep bend in the rod. Fish with the rod tip low and set the hook hard, up to the 10:00 position. Be careful not to swing the rod too high when setting the hook or you will lose the power of the rod and allow the fish to reach the safety of the rocks below. Your job is to keep it out of the rocks and you'll need all the power in the rod to make it so. Keep your rod low where you can leverage its full power.

**Handling the desperado:** These critters have extremely powerful jaws and long strong teeth, so do not pick them up with a lip-latch. Their stout and tight gill-plate covers are difficult to get fingers under, so the safest and surest way to pick up sheephead is by their eye sockets.

**Filleting surprise:** Filleting sheephead is a tough task because of the thickness of their rib cage bones. When cutting bigger units, over 10 pounds, I sometimes use a serrated edge knife to saw through the rib cage bones, and then switch to a fillet knife to finish the task. On even larger fish, up near twenty pounds, I feel like using a hacksaw to get through the rib cage. All the effort is quite worthwhile, because these fish are indeed quite tasty.

**Recipes:** Ya know... I could write a whole article on great ways to cook sheephead, but I'll be brief with a couple of time-honored favorites. Many folks like to steam sheephead fillets, because it preserves the texture of the meat and keeps the flavor. I've often heard people comment that the texture of steamed sheephead is like shellfish. Another tasty recipe is to sauté cubed sheephead filets with butter, chopped peppers and onions.

**Final thoughts:** These fish tend to forage in groups, and have what appears to be a fairly developed social order. As with most critters in the natural order... might is right. The biggest sheephead often dominate a reef and shoulder their smaller relatives out of the way, when food shows up. One fascinating thing about these fish is that they change sex as they mature. They begin as females and then turn to males when they grow to a dominating size. They are all red as females. When they change, they take on three distinct color bands. The front third of a male sheephead is black, the middle third is red, and the back third is black.