

Coastal White Seabass are Bigger

"Tanker" white seabass along the coast

Coastal White Seabass Are Bigger and Special Tactics Hook 'Em Up

By: Capt. David Bacon



Coastal white seabass outgrew their island brethren over these past few years and special tackle and tactics have been evolving to hook 'em up and to successfully battle the bigger croakers of the coast.

Large coastal WSB are now within easy range of skiffs, kayaks and even float tubes. Kayaks and tubes can launch right from the beach adjacent to the action. Can you imagine being towed around in a tube by a 65 pound white seabass? I'd be hootin' & hollerin' like a cowboy on a wild mustang!

These past years have been great squid years and as long as squid are inshore, white seabass have no reason to leave. And those gluttonous fish are growing rapidly. An average coastal white seabass this year was over 40 pounds. 50 pounders were impressive but not surprising. It wasn't until over 60 pounds that experienced seabassers got excited. Several fish over 70 pounds came in this season and more of the wild school will reach that mark this year.

We've seen bites in specific areas wax and wane but last better than two months, with the prime time being late summer right through autumn. When a bite slows it picks back up again just a few miles farther along the coast wherever squid mass up to spawn. Santa Cruz and Capitola enjoyed a fabulous bite this year, same for Morro Bay and off the Coke Plant near the Five Cities. The Ellwood to Gaviota area hosted an incredibly consistent bite right through winter. South Ventura County, near Malibu,

Orange County and La Jolla Kelp were additional hotspots and are expected to produce like mad again this year.

Hook, Line and Sinker fishing center in Santa Barbara was right in the zone this season and supplied much of the terminal tackle as well as rods, reels and line used to go up against the monster croakers. Store Manager, Capt. Tiffany Vague said, "The setup of choice is a 7 foot, 20 – 50 pound graphite or composite rod by Cousins Tackle, a Penn Torque or Shimano Trinidad reel (available in-store at Hook, Line & Sinker), 50 pound braided line with a 40 pound fluorocarbon topshot tied on with a reverse Albright knot that flows well through the eyes of the rod, even under pressure from a big fish."

Terminal tackle refinement brought some changes. Aboard my 6-pak boat, WaveWalker my passengers caught more white seabass this past season with dink hooks than with anything else. Hook, Line & Sinker assembles dink hooks with lead and large Owner Aki Twist hooks. "The beauty of dink hooks is that they hold a live or fresh-frozen squid right at mid-column where the seabass are foraging in the current," said Capt. Vague.

Bobber stopper rigs are another effective terminal rigging type that has gained more practitioners. This is particularly effective when anchored on the line just outside of an MPA and a current is flowing inside the MPA. A soft, fine bobber-stopper is tied to the line about 20 feet up from the end. Then the line goes through a large sliding bobber and a large hook is tied to the end and a live or fresh-frozen squid is pinned on. Just toss the rig over the gunn'l and begin paying out line a little faster than the bobber floats away on the current. The line slides through the bobber until the stopper is reach, which keeps the bait about 20 feet below the bobber.

Live-lining live squid is very effective and when the current is strong or when birds are exceptionally hungry and swoop immediately on baits, anglers add varying sizes of sliding sinker from 1/8 ounce up to one ounce. Or better yet, use a dink hook in this scenario The goal is to keep the bait in mid column.

Dropper loops are commonly used because it is always wise to keep a bait near the bottom. Whether fishing the coast or the islands, this is always a productive rig, though at times, too many bat rays are hooked with this rig and tangle other lines before they are brought in and released.

Finding WSB: For private boat anglers, finding the "gray ghost" of fish becomes a personal matter. You can chase the open party and charter fleet or you can go looking on your own.

Sometimes we go way too far for quality WSB fishing. I've seen plenty of the croakers caught inside our harbors and frequently in the vicinity of the live bait receiver. It is always worth casting a bait as soon as the first scoop of bait is hefted aboard. I also recommend spending a little time drifting, nearby but out of the traffic scheme, near the bait receiver. White seabass, halibut, sand bass and spotted bay bass are common catches here.

Another spot to try before leaving the harbor is along the edge of dredged channels near the harbor entrance. White seabass cruise along these structure anomalies as they move in and out of the calm, food-filled waters of the harbor. Float tube anglers, kayakers and skiff anglers enjoy good success fishing these protected waters, often out-fishing anglers in big boats who make long runs to fish the islands.

Once you do make a run along the coast to target our jumbo coastal WSB, picking the right spot to fish is the heart of the matter. Reading sign on the water requires just as much knowledge, experience, and plain old savvy as reading sign in mountain wilderness when tracking or hunting game. Occasionally, picking the right spot is as easy as finding huge meter marks of squid or forage fish and with big fish meter marks spread across the fishfinder screen. WSB give a great meter mark resembling a large salami.

Gulls and pelicans working over a large area picking up surface bait is a good sign, but other critters like cormorants, sea lions, and sharks also signal an area where the entire food chain is present and active. Long, well-defined current breaks are easy to identify when conditions are relatively calm, and these are among my favorite spots to fish.

Once anchored up and fishing, pay close attention to the depth where you are seeing the majority of natural bait. Often when the bite seems to slow, a study of the fish finder shows that the bait has moved up or down the water column. Change the depth you are fishing, to match the depth the bait has moved to and you may kick that bite back into high gear while other boats are giving up, pulling anchor and leaving.

When to fish hard: A great white seabass bite is often triggered by change. Sometimes the change will be a high or low tide. Sometimes a current changes direction or picks up velocity. Sometimes the change is related to sunlight penetration when cloud cover moves overhead or suddenly clears. The change may be caused by natural bait concentrations showing up.

Water flow is very important to the feeding habits of white seabass. Full moon and new moon cycles are considered productive times to fish for seabass because those are the times when the strongest tidal movements occur. So if only a part of a day is going to be dedicated to seabass fishing, keep an eye on the currents.

There are probably just as many WSB caught during daylight hours as there are during the night or at gray light, however they are very well-suited to foraging during low light conditions for two reasons. One is that their vision is known to be more sensitive to low-light levels making them better at seeing their prey with only moonlight or gray light to aid them at dawn or dusk. The other reason is that croakers have lateral lines that extend onto their caudal fin which helps them detect prey when they cannot yet see it. Both adaptabilities allow them to successfully hunt spawning squid and schooled forage fish.

Best baits: One important myth to debunk is that the candy bait (live squid) is necessary for a successful trip. White seabass certainly do enjoy feeding during a squid spawn, yet they more frequently dine on 'dines or anchovies. The best bet is to head out armed with every kind of bait you can buy or catch. Bring along some fresh-frozen squid whenever possible.

Several study reports dating back to the late 50's and mid 60's show that the main items in their diet were northern anchovy, market squid (candy bait), and Pacific sardine which are more commonly eaten and even pelagic red crabs. Larger individuals had fed extensively on Pacific mackerel.

Some of our best white seabass bites are associated with squid spawns, so be prepared to catch squid with squid gangions and then use the live stuff for bait. On my charterboat, WaveWalker we keep live squid we catch in the bait tank, put it in baggies at the end of the trip and freeze it for use on the next trip when we may not be able to catch live squid. Fresh-frozen inky squid works very well.