

Fish slopes and walls for lingcod and rockfish

Target Bigger Fish on Slopes and Walls – Where Few Dare to Fish

By: Capt. David Bacon



Groundfish are the steak and potatoes of our coastal and island fisheries... standard fare. Sure, we go nuts over white seabass bites, we flip for high halibut counts, we salivate over brief and violent flurries of yellowtail action and we just cannot resist an albacore run, yet over the course of a year our private boaters and party boaters alike concentrate on rockfish and lingcod more than all those other fish all put together. Tackle and techniques can be fairly plain and simple, such as baiting up a bare-hook double-dropper loop rig and making long drifts over hard bottom areas. Skippers and private boaters willing to put some brain muscle into it can find ways to target surprisingly bigger fish which do not get fished very much because of where they feed... along steep slopes and vertical walls where it is tough to reach them with tempting offerings, unless you know the tricks to fishing these unique big-fish hotspots. That is what this article is all about.

The more rugged the terrain the better the fish, when it comes to groundfish such as lingcod, vermilion, copper rockfish, bocaccio and myriad other rockfish species. Capt. Tiffany Vague, who runs the 6-pak charterboat, WaveWalker with (and often without) me, put it very well. She said, "Fish that live around radical structure including steep slopes and vertical walls do not see many baited hooks or jigs because it is so difficult to present baits to them." When a skilled professional crew or private boater and the fisherfolk aboard do everything just right, the results are fantastic!

Fishing those small spots takes precision and teamwork. The skill of the helmsman is the most important ingredient. Most private boaters will not effectively fish such places because the most skilled helmsman in the group usually is not willing to put down his/her fishing rod and stay at the helm while others catch great fish. I can hardly fault a person who wants to catch fish, but that is why those spots get little pressure.

Sportboat captains can and do work these spots however, if it is a large boat, only one part of that boat may be over the magic dropoff. At many spots along our 50-fathom curve (we are currently limited to less than fifty fathoms maximum fishing depth) half a boat length can mean the difference between fishing legally and illegally because a slope drops off so quickly. Six-pak boats are perhaps best suited for working these spots because of their size and because these skipper will stay at the helm and keep the boat over the spot. It works well, as long as the anglers aboard do their job right.

Catching fish along slopes and walls is all about timing. Here is a common scenario... the skipper has his or her eyes glued to the fishfinder while exploring a reef zone. Suddenly the engines drop RPM and the boat turns. The skipper hollers to bait up and be ready, then does some fancy maneuvering, and finally yells, "Okay, drop 'em"!

This is a fleeting opportunity and you gotta be quick! The boat is over a stack of large fish suspended along a slope or wall, but will very quickly drift off. The skipper has set up the drift perfectly. Now it is up to the anglers to get their baits down there quickly. If they delay even ten seconds before dropping, and they will likely miss the fish entirely. A skipper looks very sad (Well, some look angry!) after working hard to create the perfect drift, only to give commands to be ready and to drop and then turn to find anglers still baiting up, or unwrapping their lines from the ends of their rods, or pulling out bird-nest tangles from their reels, or otherwise missing out on a great, albeit brief, opportunity to catch jackpot-size fish.

When anglers are on top of their fishing game, always prepared, and get baits down fast, then a good number of those fish below will end up on their way to becoming the prime ingredient in somebody's favorite fish recipe. Here's the way to be prepared and get those fish... The first key is to prepare your terminal rigging (which is popular fancy wording for "leader") before you are going to need it. When fishing this type of structure, it is common to use dropper loops, double dropper loops, reverse dropper loops and heavier-than-usual weights (typically an 8, 10 or 12 ounce torpedo sinker) or heavy jigs so that the baits get down there quickly. Tie them up or perhaps ask a deckhand or more experienced fisherfolk how to tie these up. There are some good cards, or booklets on knot tying available at most tackle shops, and they are very handy resources to have in your tackle box or pocket.

Pay close attention to what the boat is doing. When the skipper begins maneuvering, bait up your hooks, and hold your weight in one hand and your rod in the other hand, thereby minimizing the chance of line wrapping around the rod tip and the dangers of flailing weights and hooks. When the skipper says to drop them, you want to be already at the rail and ready to promptly comply. Not only should you begin to drop the baits down as soon as the skipper says to, but you should be sure to allow it to drop as quickly as possible.

Even after all preparations, if the bait is lowered too slowly, the stack of fish will surely be missed. Drop the baits fast, with your thumb just barely feathering the spool so that it can pay out line at top speed, yet will stop when the weight hits the bottom. Now click the reel into gear and quickly get that weight up about one foot from the bottom so it doesn't hang up in the rocks. At this point, you are probably about two seconds away from getting bit, because you have done everything right and your baits are surrounded by large hungry fish. Once the blessed moment occurs and you feel a bite, set the hook and begin reeling simultaneously so that the fish never gets an inch of slack. Slack line loses fish! Keep that line taught at all times!

When fisherfolk are taking an active role in the fish catching process, the results are surprisingly good. It really adds to the fun of the fishing experience when everyone aboard puts their minds into the sport and tries to do the right thing at the right time. I call this precision fishing, and during my charters, I commend my passengers when they are focused and taking advantage of all the opportunities I painstakingly create for them. While everyone aboard tends to smile a lot when the fish are coming aboard, there is no more genuine happy smile than the one on the skipper's face!

Tackle selection is as unique as the location because of the requirements to get an offering down quickly and make an appealing presentation in a very short amount of time before drifting away from the slope or wall. Here are some things that work for us on the WaveWalker.

Lingslayer is king of the lures for this application because it drops quickly and has incredible action. This rig rumbles and rocks! When actively jigged up and down along a slope or wall, the combination of reflected light, articulated movement, rumbling vibration, clicking metal-to-metal, plus the wriggling attraction of the custom-made plastic twintail is more than a lingcod or monster rockfish can resist. When an angler is fishing this rig down tight to rocky structure, it is nearly a given that the biggest meanest "lingosaur" (my term for big ling cod) will come up on his or her rod. When you get out on a rockfish trip, quietly drop this rig down and jig it very actively within two feet of the rocks, and hang on tight ... something awesome is about to happen! Don Radon, maker of Radon Boats, loves using the

Lingslayer and considers it his secret weapon. Lingslayers (with custom-made twintail) are only available at Hook, Line & Sinker fishing center in Santa Barbara, but can be ordered from the store by phone (805) 687-5689, or through this website.

Diamond jigs work well along slopes and walls because they are compact and drop quickly, plus they reflect light well. A couple of my favorites are Assault Diamond Jigs and KT Lures. KT Lures are made by a firefighter and serve as his artistic outlet. They are fabulous jigs.

An effective jig modification is to add a single hook and small plastic grub, such as a Gulp! crab, sand crab or pogy, to the eye of a small to medium size rockfish jig. This rig imitates a small fish which is trying to capture and eat a crustacean from the rocks below. Big fish eagerly await opportunities to pounce on a smaller fish while it is busy trying to nab its own meal. Sometimes a small rockfish will get stuck on the added hook while trying to steal the grub. Just keep working the rig and wait for the monster lingasaur of your dreams to inhale the whole shebang.

It is always worth experimenting with added attractants such as hoochies slipped over the front of a jig or hung from the hooks. Plastic hoochies hung from the jig's hooks flutter enticingly as the jig is pumped. Metallic or mylar strips can sure dazzle a fish into striking.

Having the right rod & reel and line makes all the difference in the world. My dream outfit is a 7 foot Cousins rod rated 20 to 50 pounds, a Penn Torque reel braided with 50 pound Spiderwire braided line for sensitivity, no-stretch and abrasion resistance in the rocky terrain below. With this rig, I'm perfectly armed for this deep sea battle.