

# Work Shallow Reef Zones for Cabezon, Sheephead, Sculpin and Bass



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Ever noticed that you see way more boats fishing shallow inshore structure spots than far-off fabled fishing destinations that require two-day's pay for fuel to get to? Fact is a majority of private boat fisherfolk opt to fish locally and frugally by taking yachts, skiffs and kayaks to inshore wrecks, reefs, kelp spots and boiler rocks. Of the open-party sportboat crowd, the half-day boats get big numbers of people anxious to try some bread & butter fishing.

While big fish do come along, common favorites of the fishery are cabezon, sheephead, sculpin and bass. These fish all know each other well, because they spend their lives sharing habitat and resources. Maximize your fishing time by targeting these scrappy fishy neighbors. Here are some straight-shooting tackle & technique tips.

Small boats have a tactical advantage over large open-party sportboats. Small boats can fish small spots which tend to produce big fish. Local small spots are ones we frequently blast right past on our way to commonly overcrowded and overfished

popular destinations. Focus your fishing efforts on local spots, get in more actual fishing time and spend less time making long runs chasing rumors.

**Cabazon:** I cannot recall ever being chartered specifically to target cabazon, yet I do not recall many folks discarding a keeper cabazon unless we were strictly catch & release fishing. They taste great.

Not many “cabbies” are caught from big open-party sportboats because they don’t usually fish in the favored spots, very tight to shoreline structure or very shallow reefs. Private boaters enjoy better catches. Kayakers rule the rocky inshore environment and can put themselves right on top of a cabazon honey hole jus yards from the rocks.

Cabazon diet consists primarily of crustaceans, but they have a very strong affinity for anchovies and other small baitfish. Cabazon are lie-in-wait predators capable of blending in well with rocky habitat due to their mottled coloration. Large pectoral fins and powerful tail allow them to blast off the bottom to inhale a passing meal.

Rigging and technique ranges from simple to complex. Tie up a dropper loop, reverse dropper loop, or sliding sinker rig, pin on your bait of choice and drop it down. This is a great application for drop-shotting with a Gulp! jerk shad. Remember that the baits should be fished within inches of the reef, because these fish hold tight to the rocks. Anglers working plastics - very slowly over shallow rocky terrain - also stand a chance of having their offering pounced on by a large cabby. For added appeal, add a strip of squid or a piece of shrimp to the leadhead hook.

Once a cabby takes a bait, the game is on. When a pickup is detected, wait a moment before setting the hook, to give the fish time to take the bait all the way into its mouth. Then set the hook and reel simultaneously so there is not so much as an inch of slack line after the hookset.

**Sheepshead:** A sheepshead considered large among experienced anglers weighs upwards from ten pounds, can exceed twenty pounds and is danged-near strong enough to yank an unwary person right off a boat. The trick is to keep them out of the rocks, or it's all over in a matter of seconds. That trick is the tough part.

The way to target big “goats” is to bring along their favorite foods. That means leaving the anchovies and sardines in the bait tank for later use with other species. Instead, bring along some of the following sheephead munchies; crushed mussels and clams, whole rock crabs, pelagic red crabs, sand crabs, and shrimp. Another favorite goat food is squid strips, so bring a few pounds of squid along to use both as chum and bait.

The ideal habitat for these red and black bruisers is a rugged rocky reef zone, at depths ranging from the surf zone on out to 140 feet and occasionally even deeper.

With the right bait and the best location, the rest is simple. One successful strategy is to drift or anchor over rocky structure, and chum the area with some busted up mussels, or chopped up bait of most any kind. That often gets the fish to feeding and competing aggressively. Uni-Goop is made primarily of urchin innards, which is like caviar to sheephead and makes great chum material.

There are a couple of ways to rig up to target sheephead. One, which works well in very shallow water, is a sliding sinker held about two feet up the line from the hook by a small splitshot or barrel swivel. The hook should be large enough to pin through a bait and still protrude slightly past the barb. Drift over the reef zone and drop the bait straight down. Spend a half-hour working the reef in shallow water before moving out to deeper water. When sheephead just are not biting, run to the next reef zone and try the same strategy again.

**Sculpin:** These critters ain't pretty. These critters ain't graceful. These critters ain't huge, and they ain't gonna provide a tackle-testing fight. But they are plentiful, give a decent accounting of themselves on light tackle, and they do taste much better than they look.

Light tackle includes spinning gear or light conventional rigs. Appropriate line size is 8 to 15 pounds. Anything lighter will suffer from abrasion against the structure these fish hold tight to, and anything heavier will cause a loss of sensitivity and scare off line-shy fish when the water is very clear.

Anchor over rocky reefs in water from just behind the surf zone, on out to 120 feet. A chumline does help to concentrate the fish and put them in a feeding mode. Chunks of anchovy, sardine, and squid all make good chum. Take the dead baits out of the bait tank and cut them into chum chunks about an inch long. Cut whole squid into rings about half an inch wide.

Rigging and technique can range anywhere from simple to complex. It is pretty simple to tie up a dropper loop, reverse dropper loop, or use a sliding sinker rig with a live anchovy. Remember that the baits should be fished within inches of the reef, because these fish rest right on or under the edges of the rocks.

Perhaps the most effective sculpin rig of them all is the “knocker rig”. This specialty rig is created by putting the line through a sliding sinker, tying onto a leadhead and attaching a plastic grub or swimbait to the leadhead. The selection of the amount of weight is based upon the need to get the rig down to the rocks, and yet maintain as much sensitivity as conditions will allow. Pin a strip of squid onto the hook of the leadhead and the rig is ready to rumble.

Cast out the knocker rig and let it sink down to the structure below at just the spot where the chum intersects the structure. Twitch the rod tip and bounce it slightly to bump the rig slowly along the bottom. As the rig is bumped along the bottom, the sliding sinker repeatedly knocks against the leadhead. That is why we call this a knocker rig. It drives sculpin nuts, and they pounce on these faster than any other offering.

**Sand bass:** Over clam beds, sand bass will often school tightly and use their own collective mass as a place to hide, while others are actively foraging over the clam beds looking for meals. When a school of fish is encountered, drift or anchor over the school and drop baits down quickly.

When sand bass aggregate in our bays during the summer, similar strategies work. Good baits are sardines, anchovies and squid. The most effective lure ever is a brownish Gulp! Grub or twin-tailed plastic tail on a leadhead with a strip of squid pinned to the hook. It’s deadly on sand bass!

When fishing structure spots such as reefs and wrecks, remember that the fish orient to the structure very tightly. Studying the fish finder won't do as much good when fishing the reefs as it does when working the flats, so fish good structure and trust that the fish will be there.

Rig up with a sliding sinker rig and a live medium-to-large sardine. Dropper loop rigs are just as productive. Just remember to fish tight to structure.

**Calico bass:** Go light! Many highly skilled calico specialists use 8 or 9 foot light-to-medium action rods (Cousins Tackle makes the best rods) and super casting reels spooled with 12 to 15 pound fluorocarbon line or 20 pound braided line for abrasion resistance.

Hunting calico bass is a complex topic because they are found in widely differing habitats. Each habitat requires different strategies and techniques to coax calicos out of their secure hiding places and onto a hook.

**Boiler rocks:** Make hundreds of casts to pockets between rocks and along drop-offs. Rig a swimbait/leadhead combo and cast so it hits the water within a couple feet of the structure, then reel it slowly away from the rocks. Bass will chase it down and pounce on it within several feet of the rocks, or settle back down and wait to see what the next swell brings to them.

Near boiler rocks are sheer cliff faces plunging into the sea, offering vertical walls where calico bass suspend, waiting to ambush schools of baitfish, or crustaceans. From a distance of roughly two boat lengths off the wall, repeatedly cast to within two feet of the wall. Allow your lure to sink straight down along the wall before retrieving it slowly back toward the boat.

**Kelp beds:** Carefully maneuver to the up-current edge of a kelp bed and anchor up so that the prevailing current flows directly from the boat towards the kelp. Once at anchor, begin a slow steady chum stream of live baits, chunked baitfish and squid pieces. Follow that with livelined hook baits.

Calicos leave the edge of the kelp and move up the chumline into open water between the kelp and the boat. Wide-open action begins and fishing becomes a matter of productivity. Use plastic swimbaits such as [Big Hammer](#), but also try surface irons such as [Tady Lures](#), and of course live baits.

Shallow reefs: Shallow reefs and rocks near shore - often adjacent to kelp stands - offer protection to surprisingly large bass. Anchor just upcurrent and chum the reef, like a kelp bed. Cast swimbaits and work them low and slow over the reef, or drop down live baits with just enough weight to let them slowly flutter down the water column to the waiting bass.

\*\*\*\*\* SIDEBAR \*\*\*\*\*

### **Worse Sculpin injury I've ever seen**

Decades ago – before we had limits on many of our sportfish – I was fishing on a half-day sportboat on a day when the skipper put us on some very hungry Sculpin. One angler said they were his favorite eating fish and he caught himself a gunny sack full.

He figured he'd save himself some money by taking them home to fillet rather than pay the deckhand to do it. So when he was ready to step off the boat he picked up his big heavy gunny sack of whole Sculpin and swung it casually over his shoulder. You should have seen the look of agony on that man's face when dozens of Sculpin spines poked through the skin of his back and the chemical fire began to spread through his nervous system.

A minute later the man was writhing on deck in sheer torture. The skipper radio'd up to the landing to call for an ambulance. After he was hauled away the rest of us disembarked. I never did hear how the man fared.

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