

# California Corbina

## History of the Fishery

The California corbina (*Menticirrhus undulatus*) is a nearshore croaker that is reserved for the recreational fishery. It has been illegal to take corbina with nets since 1909, and illegal to buy or sell them since 1915. This wary species is a challenge to anglers. Sometimes corbina can be seen in small schools, swimming slowly along the bottom seeking food. While feeding in this manner, it seldom takes bait. The corbina is considered one of the most difficult fish to catch in southern California, although on occasion it takes an angler's bait without hesitation. Its temperamental behavior, fine fighting qualities, and tasty flesh make it a popular sport fish.

Corbina can be taken throughout the year, but fishing is best in summer and early fall. Most corbina are caught along sandy surf-swept beaches, but they are also taken from piers and jetties; anglers on private and rental boats, and commercial passenger fishing vessels seldom take them. A 1965-1966 survey estimated that 30,000 corbina were taken by southern California shore anglers along the open coast, making it the third most abundant species accounting for 13 percent of the surf-angler's creel. Anglers use conventional, spinning, and fly-fishing gear. The best baits are soft-shelled sand crabs, mussels, bloodworms, and clams.

The annual number of corbina caught by anglers has been quite variable. Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey annual catch-estimates for 1980 through 1998 ranged between 17,000 and 75,000 fish; the average was 44,600. Annual catch estimates were much lower in the 1990s than during the 1980s; however, catches-per-unit-effort were similar.

## Status of Biological Knowledge

The California corbina is a slender croaker with a gray to bluish back and a white flattened belly. It has a short, stiff chin barbel and may have wavy oblique lines on its sides. The corbina ranges from Point Conception, California to the Gulf of California. It is found along sandy beaches and shallow bays to depths of 45 feet, but is most common in about six feet of water. It is usually found in small groups of several individuals, with larger fish being more solitary.

Corbina can grow to 30 inches and weigh 8.5 pounds; a verified specimen measuring 28 inches and weighing seven pounds, four ounces was caught in 1955. Females grow faster than males, especially after two years, and reach a larger size. A three-year-old female is about 15 inches whereas a three-year-old male is about 13 inches. Apparently, corbina residing in bays grow much faster than those on the open coast. A 23-inch female corbina caught on the open coast was eleven years old, whereas similarly sized females from the bay were aged at six years. More than 50 percent of females are mature at 12 inches (two years) and all are mature at 15 inches (three years). Males mature at about 10 inches (two years). The spawning season is from May through September and is heaviest from June through August. Spawning apparently takes place offshore, since running-ripe fish are not often found in the surf zone; eggs are pelagic. Small (1.5 to 3 inches) corbina have been captured inside the surf zone to 30 feet of water.

The corbina feeds predominantly on benthic organisms. Individuals may be seen feeding in the surf, at times in water so shallow their backs are exposed. They scoop up mouthfuls of sand and separate out food by pumping sand through their gill openings. The diet of juveniles consists of clam siphons and small crustaceans. As they grow, they consume larger parts of clams and sand crabs.

Limited tagging studies indicate that the corbina does not move around much; it has no discernible migratory pattern. The greatest distance traveled was 51 miles.



California Corbina, *Menticirrhus undulatus*  
Credit: DFG

## Status of the Population

Population size, recruitment, and mortality of California corbina are unknown. Beach seine hauls along the open coast from 1994 through 1997 yielded slightly lower but similar numbers of corbina to those obtained during a similar study from 1953 through 1956. In addition, similar angler catch-per-unit efforts during the 1980s and 1990s indicate that the population is sustaining itself under present recreational harvest levels.

## Management Considerations

See the Management Considerations Appendix A for further information.

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