

Spotfin Croaker

History of the Fishery

The spotfin croaker (*Roncador stearnsii*) is a nearshore croaker reserved for the recreational fishery. It has been illegal to take them with nets since 1909, and illegal to buy or sell them since 1915. Anglers can experience good fishing when there are croaker “runs” and when “croaker holes” are found. Most of the spotfin croaker catch consists of smaller fish (one to three pounds). Its fighting spirit and delicate taste make it a prized sport fish.

Spotfin croaker can be taken throughout the year, but fishing is best in late summer. Most spotfin croaker are caught from shore on piers and jetties along beaches and in bays; they are occasionally taken by private and rental boats but are rarely taken by commercial passenger fishing vessels. Anglers use conventional and spinning gear. The best baits are marine worms, clams, and mussels.

Annual landings of spotfin croaker have fluctuated greatly. Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS) annual catch estimates for 1980 through 1998 ranged between 1,000 and 46,000 fish; the average was 14,900. Catch-per-unit effort has remained relatively low and stable since 1980, but started to increase in the late 1990s.

Status of Biological Knowledge

The spotfin croaker is a medium-bodied croaker with a bluish gray back, brassy sides, and a silver to white belly. It has a large, distinctive black spot at the base of its pectoral fin. The spotfin croaker ranges from Point Conception, California to Mazatlan, Mexico. In California, it is most common south of Los Angeles Harbor. It lives along beaches and in bays over sandy to muddy bottoms at depths from four to 50 feet. Most spotfin croaker are found in 30 feet of water or less, preferring depres-

sions and holes near shore. These “croaker holes” are well known to surf anglers. Spotfin croaker aggregate in small groups or schools of usually fewer than 50 fish; however, schools containing several hundred fish are occasionally encountered.

Spotfin croaker can grow to 27 inches and weigh 14 pounds. A fish weighing 10.5 pounds was eight or nine years old, and a 26.5-inch long individual was at least 15 years of age. During the breeding season, females develop blackish streaks on their bellies, while larger males have golden pectoral and pelvic fins, and are commonly called golden croaker. Apparently, most males are mature at nine inches (two years), and most females are mature at 12.5 inches (three years); all are mature at 14.5 inches (four years). Spawning occurs from June to September. It probably occurs offshore, since few ripe fish have been captured in the surf zone. Small (two- to four-inch) spotfin croaker have been captured inside the surf zone to 30 feet of water.

The spotfin croaker is a bottom feeder. The diet of juveniles consists of small crustaceans and clam siphons. Larger individuals use their strong pharyngeal teeth to crush shells and consume whole clams, mussels, and polychaetes.

A limited tagging program showed that the spotfin croaker moves around considerably, especially from bay to bay, without a discernible pattern. Fish tagged in Los Angeles Harbor were later recaptured as far south as Oceanside.

Status of the Population

Southern California is on the northern fringe of the spotfin croaker population. Their population size, recruitment, and mortality are unknown. Modifications of bay and nearshore environments, including development, land fills, and dredging, have had an adverse effect on the habitats of this species. Beach seine hauls along the open coast from 1994 through 1997 yielded many fewer spotfin croaker than during a similar study from 1953 through 1956. However, catch-per-unit effort estimates from MRFSS data and gillnet sets inside bays and along the open coast indicate that spotfin croaker populations were increasing in the late 1990s.



Spotfin Croaker, *Roncador stearnsii*
Credit: DFG

Management Considerations

See the Management Considerations Appendix A for further information.

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References

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