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A subterminal mouth, absence of a fleshy barbel, and the large black spot at the base of the pectoral fin distinguish spotfin croakers from all other California croakers.

Right: Scott Dahlem released this super spotfin that he caught in Newport Beach Harbor.

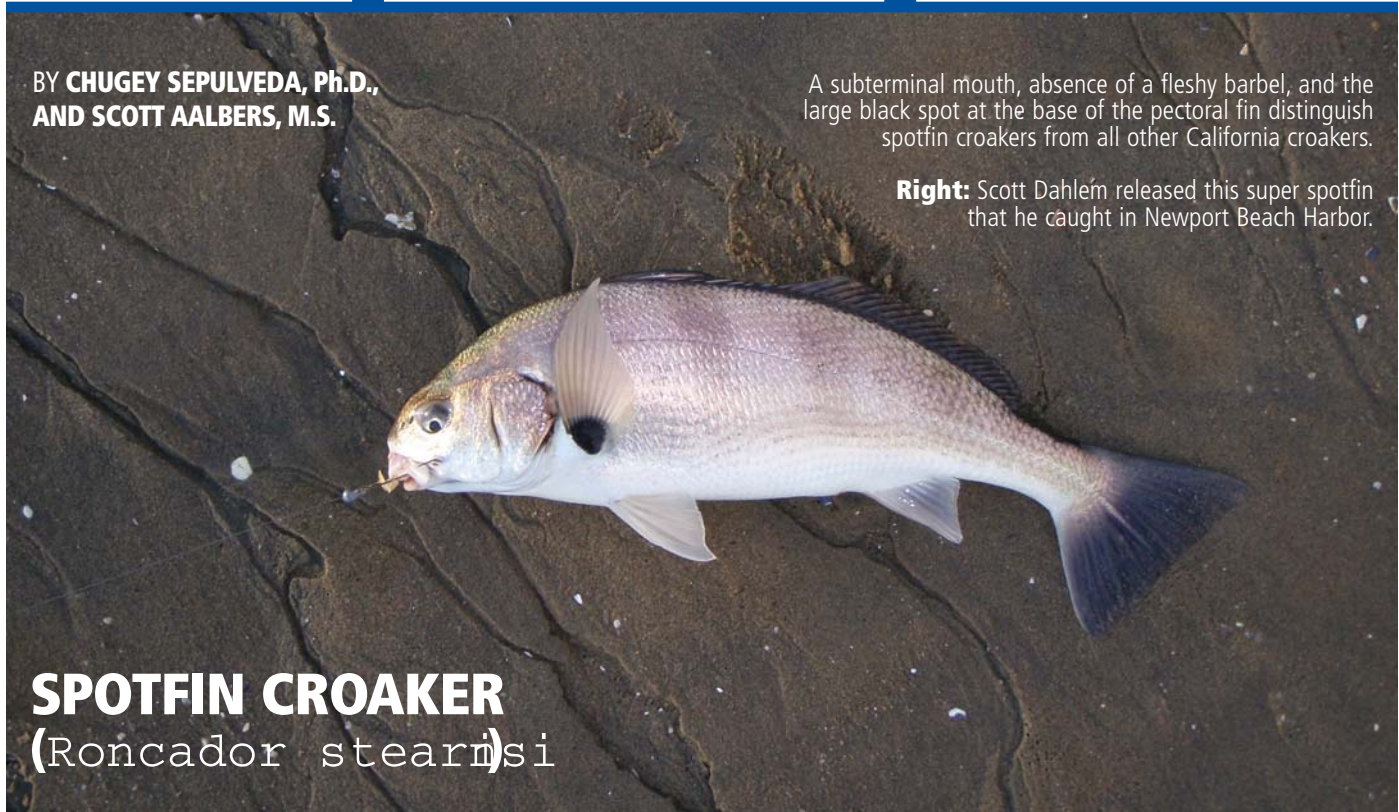


Photo by Scott Dahlem

SPOTFIN CROAKER (*Roncador stearnsi*)

The spotfin croaker is a coastal species that frequents the surf zone and shallow sandy embayments between Point Conception and Mazatlán, Mexico. This species can be identified by a large black spot at the base of the pectoral fin, the absence of a fleshy barbel below the lower jaw, and a mouth

that is oriented downwards (subterminal). As a member of the family *Sciaenidae* (croakers and drums), male spotfin have the ability to produce sounds by contracting specialized muscles along the gut cavity that resonate the gas bladder like a drum (hence the spotfins genus, *Roncador*, which is the Spanish translation for “one who snores”). Low-frequency sounds produced by male croakers are believed to be a form of communication that signifies reproductive readiness and assists in the formation of spawning aggregations.

In California, the spotfin croaker is managed exclusively for recreational fishers, as it has been illegal to commercially target or sell this species since 1915. Although their abundance along the coast has been shown to fluctuate from year to year, recreational fishery data suggests that populations were on the rise during the late 1990s. Inter-

annual variability in spotfin catches off Southern California may be related to the distribution and range of this species along the California coast. Because Southern California lies at the northern extent of the range of the spotfin, it may be that annual fluctuations are much more apparent in this region compared to other more southern parts of the spotfin distribution. It is also possible that the observed increase in the late 1990s was in response to both environmental factors, such as El Niño events, as well as management efforts, which restricted the coastal gillnet fishery to waters outside of three miles in the early 1990s, which likely reduced some spotfin bycatch.

While most spotfin croaker caught off Southern California range between 12 and 18 inches, some of the larger individuals may reach over 27 inches in length and a weight of over 10 pounds.

Most male spotfin become mature around two years, and most females begin to reproduce after about three years. Some of the oldest spotfin have been estimated to be at least 15 years old. Spotfin croaker are most abundant along Southern California beaches during the summer months (June through September), which coincides with their spawning season, with a peak in late July and early August. At this time, the females may develop dark streaks along the ventral body and gut region, while males have been shown to have bright-yellow pectoral fins.

A small-scale tagging study conducted by the California Department of Fish and Game provides the only movement data that we know of for this species. From this work it was shown that spotfin croaker can move considerable distances, with fish moving between bays and the coast. One individual tagged in Los Angeles Harbor moved as far south as Oceanside, CA.

They can often be observed along beaches and shorelines when they expose their dorsal fins or leave a V-wake while feeding in the surf. This species has a sub-terminal mouth that is used

to prey upon a variety of invertebrates along the sediment. Favored prey items include sand crabs, clams, mussels, worms, and ghost shrimp. Once ingested, their large pharyngeal teeth are used to crush the hard shells of mollusks and small crustaceans.

A prized catch of surf and bay fishers, spotfin are also great quarry for younger fishers because they can be taken on relatively light tackle along sandy or muddy bottoms. Ideal for shore, pier, and bay fishers, spotfin are also harvested extensively along the Baja California and Mexico coastlines. Much of the landings in Mexico are taken in inshore artisanal gill-nets and beach seines. Unfortunately, most of the croaker catch is lumped into one major grouping (corvinas), making precise take estimates for this species difficult to tabulate.

Similar to other inshore species, spotfin stand to benefit from improved coastal water quality and habitat restoration projects. This resource is especially important for those fishers that enjoy surf or pier fishing, providing entertainment for all ages. Similar to all of our coastal resources, as long as we abide by our regulations and harvest only what is needed, we should see spotfin counts continue to flourish for years to come.



Most information provided by the California Department of Fish and Game, California's Living Marine Resources (2001).

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