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Species Spotlight: Cabrilla

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Cabrilla is one of the most challenging inshore species for anglers. Perhaps the hardest-hitting fish in existence, their raw strength and powerful runs make them challenging to land. The thrill of catching a cabrilla always keeps anglers coming back for more.

Overview

Cabrilla is the common name for several Mexican fish species. The most targeted of these is the leopard grouper (*Mycteroperca rosacea*) and, to a lesser degree, the spotted cabrilla (*Epinephelus analogus*). Known for their toughness and forcible runs, they are exceedingly difficult to pull out of the rocky bottom structures and shorelines where they live. And to top it off, they're incredible on the table.

They inhabit Mexican waters in the Pacific Ocean from Magdalena Bay south to Cabo San Lucas and along both coasts of the Sea of Cortez. Like other types of groupers, they populate areas with rough underwater terrain. Rugged shorelines, submerged rocky points, and boulder-strewn near-shore reefs are prime cabrilla habitats. Anglers targeting cabrilla typically fish in depths ranging from very shallow to about 150 feet.

As juveniles, cabrilla feed on a mixture of crustaceans and small fish. Mature cabrilla are mainly fish eaters, including anchovies, herring, sardines, and small reef fish. Exhibiting the traditional grouper shape, their background color ranges from greenish to gray-brown and is dotted with reddish spots. Additionally, the upper part of their body is mottled with pale circles and patches that resemble a leopard's spots. They are stocky and incredibly powerful fish.

The average size of a cabrilla is 4 to 10 pounds, and fish over 20 pounds are considered trophies. The [IGFA record leopard grouper](#) is a 28-pound 10-ounce beast caught near Loreto, Mexico, in the Sea of Cortez.

A very small percentage of cabrilla exhibit a yellow or golden coloration. It is considered an omen of good luck to catch and then release a “golden grouper”.



Tips on How to Catch Cabrilla

- **Fish the rocks:** Cabrilla can be found at rocky points, boulder-strewn shorelines, and submerged rock formations.
- **Dawn and dusk are best:** Cabrilla are most active near sunrise and at sunset, so fish early and late for the best bite.
- **Look for moving water:** As ambush feeders, cabrilla are more abundant in areas where currents and wave action will keep the baitfish coming to them.
- **Use stout gear:** Cabrilla are capable of strong short runs back to their rocky shelters. Light rods, reels, line, and tackle will result in breakoffs if you can't stop their initial run.

Cabrilla Behavior

Cabrillas are solitary, territorial fish. Adults inhabit rocky reefs, submerged boulder fields, rock walls, rocky headlands, seamounts, and similar terrain.

Living in these rocky areas, cabrillas emerge to ambush their prey and dart back into their homes in the crevasses and underwater caves. When hooked, cabrillas are known for short, powerful runs back into rocky cover.

Cabrillas usually attack small bait fish from below with explosive bursts of speed as they rush out of the rocks to engulf their prey.

Fishing for Cabrilla: Tackle & Techniques

Tackle

- **Rods:** Rods for cabrilla fishing have been referred to by Southern California anglers as “bass rods on steroids”. They are medium-to-heavy rods, 8’ to 9’ long, and require enough backbone to stop cabrilla during their initial runs. Rods by Calstar (Grafighter 800M), Seeker (Inshore Pro 809) or Shimano (Teramar 86HB) are good choices. Casting plugs to cabrilla is one of the primary fishing methods anglers use, so it’s crucial to select a rod that is beefy enough to handle these fish but light enough so you can cast it all day. AFTCO has a great buyer’s guide for rod and reel selection. Check it out [here](#).
- **Reels:** Paired with these rods are level wind reels in the 400 or 500 class. Strong drags are needed to stop a cabrilla at the initial strike. The Diawa Lexa series (LX-HD400H-P) or the Shimano Tranx (TRX400 or TRX500) will get the job done. Some anglers fish with slightly lighter rods and reels that are easier to cast, but the tradeoff is more break-offs compared to a heavier setup. Either way, a reel should have a retrieve ratio of 6.5 to 1; lures for cabrilla must be retrieved ultra-fast.
- **Line material and strength:** Reels are spooled with braided line that ranges from 65 to 80-pound test. A monofilament top-shot is often used to absorb the shock of a cabrilla’s violent strike and should be used when fishing with a locked down drag or an extra-stiff rod.
- **Leaders for cabrilla fishing:** Leaders need to be on the heavy side, 60 to 80-pound test fluorocarbon or monofilament leaders 3’ to 4’ long are recommended.

Techniques, Baits, & Lures for Cabrilla

- **Techniques:** The most popular way to fish for cabrilla is to cast artificial lures from small boats to rocky shorelines and over submerged rocky terrain. Dropping flat fall

jigs, trolling artificial lures, and fishing with [live bait](#) and cut bait are also effective methods of catching cabrilla.

- **Lures for cabrilla:** Cabrilla readily attack artificial fishing lures, and most anglers targeting them use artificials. When casting to cabrilla grouper along rocky shorelines, jerk baits and swim baits are extremely popular. Baits in the 4 ½ to 7 inch range, such as the Yo-Zuri Hydro Minnow LC, the Rapala Floating Magnum, the Shimano Current Sniper, and the [AFTCO Blue Fever Swimmer](#) are all reliable choices. These [lures](#) can be used for trolling as well.
- To fish deeper waters, use yo-yo jigs. Dependable jig selections include the Salas DX, the Salas 6X Junior, and the Major Craft Jigpara Standard.
- During the fall and winter, cabrilla prey on smaller fish, so you need to downsize your lures to match the hatch. This time of year, anglers fish with micro-jigs such as Shimano Coltsnipers, Diawa Saltigas, and the smaller Major Craft Jigparas.
- Breakoffs are common when cabrilla fishing, so bring plenty of lures. Heavy-duty hooks and split rings are a must.
- **Natural baits for cabrilla:** Live baits include anchovies, herrings, sardines, and small mackerels. Use whichever bait species is prevalent where you are fishing. Cut bait should be as fresh as possible.



How to Fish for Cabrilla

Most cabrilla fishing is done from small boats. Although some anglers will trailer their boats down to Mexico, most anglers hire a [local guide](#) and fish from a panga. There are numerous

Sea of Cortez fishing charters and guides that target cabrilla. If you are planning a trip, the area from Bahía de los Ángeles to La Paz on the Sea of Cortez is an outstanding coastline for cabrilla.

To catch cabrilla, you have to fish the rocks. Spend your time on the water fishing rocky shorelines, points, outcrops, pinnacles, and boiler rocks.

Cabrilla are most active in the early morning and late afternoon and are most likely to be feeding in shallow water. Approach the shoreline carefully and position the boat so you can cast your bait close to the rocks.

A cabrilla's strike is unmistakable, and the first couple of seconds of the battle determine whether or not you will land the fish. If a cabrilla can turn and gain line, it will rush back to the rocks and break off. Keep maximum pressure on the cabrilla at all times, especially right after the initial strike. They are difficult fish to control, and broken lines on the rocks are common.

Before sunrise, use larger, shallower-running jerk baits and swimbaits in dark colors. Retrieve the lure as fast as you can, really cranking it; you can't reel it in too fast for a cabrilla.

Once the sun is up, stay with the larger baits but switch to lighter colors. Then, when the sun gets higher, switch to smaller, deeper-running lures.

Late in the morning, the fish move into deeper water, and the action can be slow. The higher the sun's angle, the deeper the fish tend to hold. Stay vigilant and look for deeper rocks that appear as dark spots in the water; they often harbor cabrilla.

Use yo-yo jigs as you approach **midday**. In water up to about 80 feet deep, cast the jig and let it sink to the bottom. When it hits the bottom, reel it to the surface as fast as you can. In deeper water from 80 to 150 feet deep, go with a heavier jig. Drop the jig to the bottom, crank it up a third of the way, then let it fall and repeat.

As the **afternoon** progresses, you reverse the sequence of techniques you used in the morning. At dusk, you should be fishing the shoreline and shallow structure.

Cabrilla is absolutely one of the most challenging fish you can pursue. Pound for pound, they might be the hardest-fighting fish species. Everything about chasing cabrillas—the difficulty of landing one, their delicious flavor, and the stunning scenery of the rugged Mexican Coast will keep you coming back time and time again. Check out our full lineup of [saltwater how-to blogs](#) to maximize your days on the water.

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John Flanagan writes about fishing, boating, business, and coastal lifestyle. A life-long fisherman, licensed captain, and aficionado of all things coastal, he pursues his passions on the coastal waters of North Carolina. [Learn more here.](#)