

WHITE SEABASS

By Terry Maas

In Southern California, no other gamefish stirs the passions of divers and anglers alike than the elusive white seabass (wsb)—a fish revered for its majesty, mystery and excellent taste. A freediver may spend years stalking through kelp forests before encountering his first wsb, perhaps glimpsing a tail vanishing into the edge of visibility. This fish is spooky! Sensing divers with keen sight and hearing, wsb often scoot even before appearing in the hunter's visual range.

Huge schools of wsb used to proliferate off the coast of Southern California and Northern Baja California. Spotter planes reported seeing acres of kelp forest turned whitish yellow due to the high fish concentrated there. Two important initiatives are helping to bring wsb back into our waters. Proposition 132, passed in 1990 and which became law in 1993, has prohibited the very destructive practice of gillnetting wsb in near-shore waters. Wsb schools, which travel at night, were easy prey as they swam into these deadly nets.

The Hubbs Research Center, aided by the United Anglers of Southern California, and recreational dive and angling clubs manage a program for the propagation and distribution of juvenile wsb. Small fry are spawned and reared at Hubbs' labs in San Diego. When they are large enough to transport, the small fish are taken to volunteer-manned grow out pens set up in Southern California harbors. At the lab, a small needle-sized identification wire is introduced under the skin overlying their gills, which allows scientists to track these fish as they grow and are eventually caught. A special scanner reads the fish's data from the identification wire.

Thanks to these two programs, freedivers are seeing increasing numbers of wsb off our coast. Here are my top 10 tips for hunting wsb:

1. QUIET, QUIET, QUIET. Be quiet. These fish are extremely sensitive to any noise you might make, which includes splashing fins, ear clearing, gear clanking and even snorkel clearing at the surface.
2. SMOOTH, SMOOTH, SMOOTH. Swim smoothly. Besides having keen hearing, wsb have a very sensitive lateral-line system, which can sense the smallest of pressure waves you might generate from swimming jerkily or swinging your gun.
3. LISTEN. Because wsb are very comfortable in very dirty water, they rely on the ears and lateral lines as major sensors of their environment and they communicate by croaking. There are several distinct types of croaking: a quick-tempo breeding croak, a general rallying croak (KRaaaaK...AH, KRaaaaK...AH), and a short alerting croak (Pop, Pop.) It takes practice to learn these sounds, but when you

- can identify the warning croak, you know that they literally are within feet, and maybe inches of you.
4. NETWORK. Most successful wsb hunters have a close knit-group of friends who hunt wsb and who share information about water conditions and fish sightings.
 5. USE YOUR LEGS: Unless I know for certain that wsb are in the vicinity, I will generally move quite rapidly through the kelp until either I see or hear a wsb. That's when I change my behavior radically to slow motion.
 6. SWIM IN SLOW MOTION: When I know wsb are near, I dive as if I was swimming at $\frac{1}{4}$ speed. I release the air from my snorkel at the surface so it makes no noise. I tip over very slowly, and once down to the fish's depth, proceed very slowly. Quite often, I simply park next to a kelp stalk and wait.
 7. LOCATE FISH ON THE SURFACE: A favorite tactic for freedivers, especially off the Channel Islands, is to drive the boat through the kelp forest with an observer on the bow. When conditions are right, and fish are near the surface, you will actually see these fish swimming lazily. Park a short distance away, lower the anchor very quietly and swim very slowly to the location of the surface sighting. Sometimes while swimming on the surface, you will see a school of wsb milling in circles just feet below. Don't try to dive directly down on them, because they will bolt. Try to inch quietly away from the school on the surface and make a dive 30 feet away from the school and then come back and approach them from the side.
 8. LOOK FOR A KELP ROOM: Wsb often congregate in kelp clearings and over sand channels. Once you locate a particular clearing, remember it because they will return year after year.
 9. FIND THEIR DEPTH: Especially early in the season, you'll find wsb in water 10 feet deep or less. Because the water is generally turbid in the shallows, you need to be very alert for these fish as they appear out of the gloom. Unless your gun is pointed directly at them, chances are that by the time you get repositioned, the fish will have dissolved back into the gloom. You can find these areas from the boat by looking for a green-water edge where the water has a sharp demarcation in color and visibility. Wsb like to patrol the edges of these dirty water lines dipping in and out of the dirty water. Other times, you'll find wsb in deep water where the temperature or currents are more favorable. Until you find their depth, which is relatively constant for the day, you'll need to alternate between deep and shallow dives.
 10. HUNT UP-CURRENT: Wsb nearly always concentrate in the up-current part of the kelp forest. Generally, there is a part of the kelp forest where the prevailing current direction is most dominant. Often, even if the current is coming temporarily from the other direction, they will still concentrate in the area of the

kelp where the current has been most prevalent. You'll find that wsb enter the kelp and become more shallow and accessible at the change of tides—top high tide is best.