ROCKFISH IDENTIFICATION- PELAGIC and NON-PELAGIC

For the purposes of sport fishery management, rockfish are divided into two groups, **pelagic** and **non-pelagic**. Bag and possession limits differ for the two groups in many areas, so it is important to be able to distinguish them. This chart shows the most common species in each group.

Pelagic Rockfish:

Six open-water (pelagic) species often found mid-water in schools, close to rocky structures. Moderately long-lived (most fish are 7-30 years old).

BLACK ROCKFISH

(black bass); Dark gray to black with white belly. Usually uniform in color, but may have lighter patches along back. No pores on lower jaw.
Size: up to 25 inches.

DUSKY ROCKFISH

Brownish body color with whitish belly, tinged with pink or orange; fins tinged with pink or orange; more common in deep water. Three pores on each side of lower jaw, and two dark bars on each cheek.
Size: up to 20 inches.

YELLOWTAIL ROCKFISH

Olive green to greenish brown with lighter underside; fins distinctly yellowish green.
Size: up to 26 inches.

WIDOW ROCKFISH

This is a relatively slim species in various shades of brown or brass that lighten towards the belly.
Size: up to 23 inches.

BLUE ROCKFISH

Rarely caught in Alaskan waters. Blue or black color with vague striping on forehead. Lighter towards the belly. Very deep bodied with large pectoral fins.
Size: up to 21 inches.

DARK ROCKFISH

Uniform black to dark blue on back and sides with slight gradual lightening on the belly, more common in shallow water.
Size: up to 20 inches.

Non-Pelagic Rockfish:

Bottom-dwelling species found on or near the ocean floor, usually in rocky or boulder-strewn habitat. Extremely long-lived (most fish are 15-75 years old). If the rockfish is not one of the pelagic species pictured above, then it is a non-pelagic rockfish.

QUILLBACK ROCKFISH

Brown body mottled with orange and yellow. Long, prominent spines on a high dorsal fin.
Size: up to 24 inches.

SILVERGRAY ROCKFISH

Greenish to silver-gray body, belly white, tinged with soft orange or pink. Slender body fish with a long lower jaw protruding well beyond upper jaw.
Size: up to 28 inches.

COPPER ROCKFISH

Olive brown to copper with pink or yellow blotches, white on sides and belly. Dorsal fins dark copper brown to black with some white. Rear two-thirds of lateral line is light.
Size: up to 22 inches.

TIGER ROCKFISH

Light pink with five dark red stripes along the side. Two dark bars extend from each eye.
Size: up to 24 inches.

YELLOWEYE ROCKFISH

(red snapper); Orange red and orange yellow, bright golden yellow eye, fins may be black at tips. Juveniles have two light bands along the side, one on the lateral line and a smaller one below the lateral line.
Size: up to 36 inches.

CHINA ROCKFISH

Mostly black, with bright yellow and white blotches and a yellow stripe along most of the lateral line.
Size: up to 17 inches.

Rockfish Conservation · Change the Way You Fish

Rockfish caught in deep water often sustain injuries — referred to as barotrauma — caused by rapid decompression and expansion of gases in the swim bladder. Fish that are released with inflated swim bladders cannot resubmerge and will die. Because of high release mortality, intentional catch-and-release fishing is greatly discouraged, particularly in depths of 60 feet or greater. Alaska anglers can best prevent wasteful rockfish mortality by avoiding waters where unwanted catches are likely. When rockfish are caught incidentally despite avoidance efforts, proper deepwater release techniques can reduce mortality. A recent ADF&G study found that survival of yelloweye released at depth was far higher (98 percent) than survival of fish released at the surface (22 percent).

Do your part for rockfish conservation by following these guidelines to avoid catching rockfish or to minimize your harvest:

1. Avoid fishing in rocky areas with boulders, ridges, and pinnacles. Avoid fishing the steep sides of reefs and rock piles. Lingcod are typically found on top of the reefs while halibut are usually on flat bottoms adjacent to the reefs.
2. Move to a different area if you are catching rockfish unintentionally.
3. When targeting halibut or lingcod, keep your jig or bait well off the bottom.
4. Target other species first. This will allow you to retain your incidental rockfish catch as part of your limit and minimize the number of rockfish released.
5. If targeting rockfish, focus your harvest on pelagic species such as black rockfish. These species are more abundant and can sustain slightly higher levels of harvest.
6. When fishing with bait, use a single circle hook.

Deepwater Release — How to Let Go

A variety of deepwater release devices, or recompression tools, are available commercially or you can make your own using a simple lead head jig. The device should weigh at least 3 pounds to submerge a large rockfish.

- **Make sure the device is assembled and ready to use before you start fishing.** The fish is much more likely to survive if you minimize time at the surface. Dedicate a rod and reel or downrigger for the release device so it can be used immediately.
- **Reel the fish up quickly.** Reeling slowly does not prevent inflation of the swim bladder.
- **Send the fish back down as quickly as possible.** Return it to the bottom or depth of capture to ensure complete recompression.
- **Do not vent or "fizz" rockfish.** Venting or "fizzing" involves puncturing the stomach protruding from the fish's mouth, or puncturing the fish's body to let air out of the swim bladder. This can lead to infection in the body cavity and eventual death.
- **Rockfish caught in less than 60 feet of water are usually able to submerge on their own.** If the fish appears to be inflated or otherwise unable to swim, use a deepwater release device to return the fish to the depth of capture.

For more information on rockfish and deepwater release devices, look under **Fishing Information** on the **Sport Fishing** page at:
adfg.alaska.gov/