



# CABEZON (*Scorpaenichthys marmoratus*)



Cabezon are one of the largest members of the cottid family of fishes, a family commonly known as sculpins. Cabezon can be brown, red or green with dark mottling. They have a long branched skin flaps over each of their eyes. They live on the bottom mostly in rocky areas, but sometimes in areas where rock and sand or mud meet. Cabezon are good eating. They are hearty fish that do well in captivity which has made them a popular target in the commercial live fish fishery that supplies mainly Asian restaurants on the west coast. They are also prized by recreational fishermen.

## OVERVIEW

- **Oregon Conservation Strategy Species**
- **Size:** Up to 39 inches long
- **Weight:** Up to at least 25.2 pounds
- **Lifespan:** Up to about 19 years
- **Key Strategy Habitats:** Nearshore, Estuaries
- **Similar Species:** Red Irish Lord, Brown Irish Lord and Buffalo Sculpin are somewhat similar in appearance.

## FISHING TIPS

- Start in the morning.
- Target rocky reef areas.
- Keep your lure or bait very close to the bottom.
- A variety of baits, lures, and flies work well.
- Remember to check the fishing regulations for the area before you go and be sure you have your fishing license.

## FUN FACTS

**Favorite Food:** Anything that fits in its mouth! Cabezon eat a wide variety of things found on or near the bottom including crabs, shrimps, snails, clams, fishes, fish eggs, and octopus.

- Cabezón is Spanish for “bigheaded”.
- Cabezon are very tasty and have a long history of human harvest going back to Native Americans.
- Sometimes the flesh of cabezon is blue or green in color.
- Cabezon have no scales.
- Cabezon eggs are toxic which protects the eggs from being eaten.
- Females lay large “nests” of sticky eggs.
- Male cabezon guard the nest of eggs.

## RANGE AND DISTRIBUTION

**In Oregon:** Cabezon can be found throughout the state’s marine waters and juveniles occur in estuaries.



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**Everywhere Else:** Cabezon range from southeast Alaska to central Baja. They are more common and abundant from the Queen Charlotte Islands southward. Cabezon can be found from tide pools to depths of about 750 feet, but are more common in depths less than about 240 feet.

## LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY

Cabezon lay large masses of sticky eggs up to 18 inches in diameter and 2 inches thick. Eggs can be laid on exposed rocky areas or in crevices in waters less than about 65 feet deep. Females lay batches of eggs. Males guard the egg nests even if they are laid in tide pools. Cabezon eggs are known to be toxic to humans and have been observed to be avoided by birds and some mammals that eat other fish eggs. Eggs hatch after about 25 to 49 days. The larvae live as plankton in the water column for 3 to 4 months before the young settle to the bottom in nearshore shallow waters including tide pools when they are about an inch or two long. Female Cabezon are larger than males at any given age once they are mature. Female Cabezon mature by the time they are 8 years of age off Oregon and by 7 years of age off California. Females are batch spawners laying several batches of between 57,000 and 152,000 eggs each year with larger fish generally laying more eggs than smaller fish. Cabezon can live to about 19 years old. Several tagging studies suggest that Cabezon have small home range, can stay in the area they were first encountered for years, and those that were moved to other locations tend to return to where they were first captured.

Predators of Cabezon include a variety of fishes and birds as well as harbor seals, sea otters, river otters, and humans. Cabezon are a target species of both recreational and commercial fisheries.

## DIET AND FORAGING

Cabezon eat a variety worms, shrimps, crabs, snails, octopuses, squids, and fish species as well as fish eggs. They concentrate their foraging activities on or near the bottom.

## HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Cabezon live in rocky habitats including manmade structures such as jetties. They also can be found where rocky and sandy or muddy habitats come together in what is often called edge habitat. They are found in the nearshore ocean and in estuaries as juveniles.

## CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

**Threats:** Cabezon are thought to be moderately vulnerable to overfishing based on productivity and susceptibility analysis. Their nearshore lifestyle also puts them in habitats that can be heavily influenced by other human activities.

**Conservation and management:** Cabezon are included in the federal Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan administered by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC). The



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Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife works in concert with PFMC and manages fisheries within state waters. The Pacific Fishery Management Council conducts stock assessments for species to ensure that fisheries for this species are sustainably managed. PFMC conducts stock assessments for Cabezon periodically. There is much still unknown about this species and an extensive list of research recommendations that include: fishery-independent surveys to provide better information about abundance and distribution; defining stock structure; and better age and growth information.

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