

Protecting Black Rockcod – a guide for fishers and divers

The Black Rockcod, also known as Black Cod or Black-Saddled Rockcod, is a large reef-dwelling species belonging to the grouper family. It lives to at least 65 years and can grow up to 1.7 metres in length and over 80 kilograms in weight. The colour of Black Rockcod can significantly vary depending on the environment. Adult fish can change quickly from a uniform dark grey-black to a blotched or distinctively banded dark pattern.

Like most other species in its genus, the Black Rockcod is a protogynous hermaphrodite – first developing as a female and then changing into a male later in life when it is approximately 100–110 cm in length.

The Black Rockcod is a carnivorous species with distinct canine teeth on both the upper and lower jaws. It feeds mainly on other fish and crustaceans.

In NSW, the Black Rockcod is listed as a vulnerable species and there are heavy penalties for harming, possessing, buying or selling them or for harming their habitat.

IDENTIFYING A BLACK ROCKCOD

It is illegal to harm a Black Rockcod so it's important that fishers and divers can distinguish Black Rockcod from other cod species.

The Black Rockcod's most distinctive feature is its black saddle-shaped spot on the base of its tail.

FISHING FOR BLACK ROCKCOD IS ILLEGAL.

If you accidentally catch a Black Rockcod you must immediately release it causing the least possible harm. **Penalties can include fines of up to \$55,000 and/or one year in prison.**

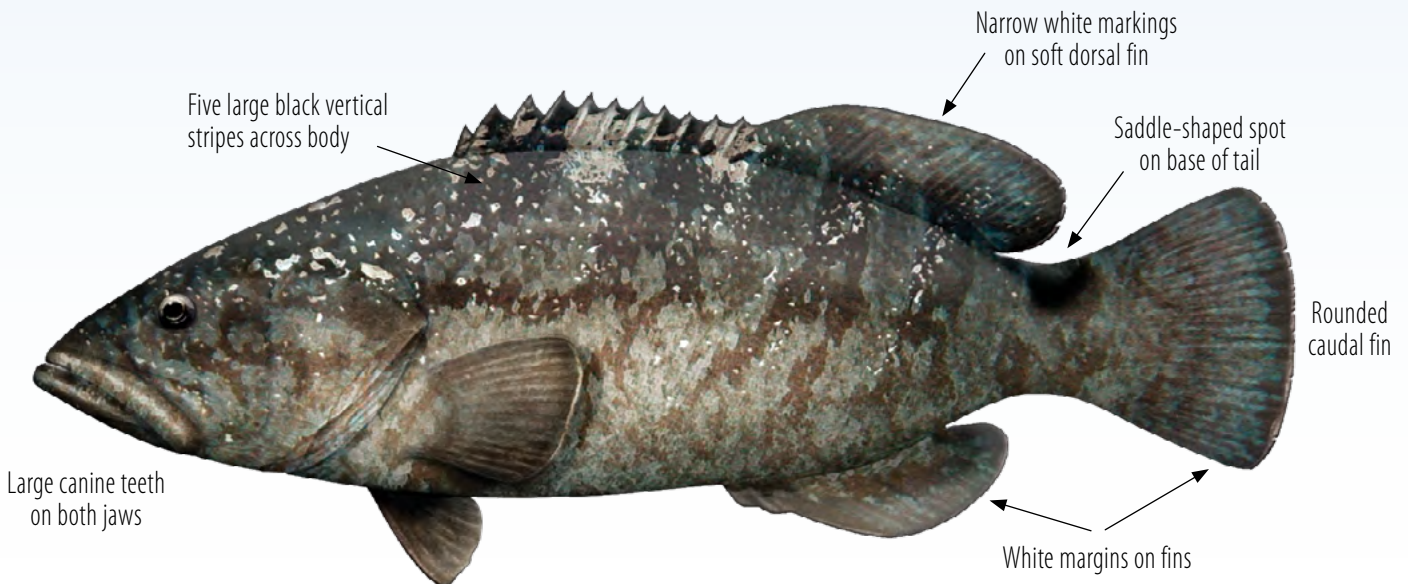


Illustration by Pat Tully

TELLING COD SPECIES APART

Black Rockcod can sometimes be confused with other large cod species.

QUEENSLAND GROPER *PROTECTED*

The Queensland Grouper is one of the largest reef-dwelling fish in the world. In Australia they mostly occur in tropical waters and are rarely found in cooler waters to the south. *Fishing for the species is prohibited in NSW.*

Colour: Juveniles are golden yellow with black blotches. Adults are greenish brown to dark grey with grey fins and patchy pale blotches.

Teeth: 10 to 20 rows of small teeth and no canine teeth. Black Rockcod have 10 or less rows of teeth and large canine teeth in both jaws.

PROTECTED SPECIES – In NSW, the Queensland Grouper and Goldspotted Rockcod are not listed as threatened species, however are still protected. If you catch them accidentally, you must immediately release them causing the least possible harm. **Penalties of up to \$11,000 for individuals and \$55,000 for corporations** apply for taking or possessing a Queensland Grouper or a Goldspotted Rockcod in NSW.



An adult Queensland Grouper. Illustration by Pat Tully



A juvenile Queensland Grouper. Illustration by Pat Tully

GOLDSPOTTED ROCKCOD (ESTUARY COD) *PROTECTED*

The Goldspotted Rockcod, also known as Estuary Cod, can be found in turbid coastal reefs and are often found in brackish water over mud and rubble. *Fishing for the species is prohibited in NSW.*

Colour: Tan with numerous orange spots on the head, body and fins.



A Goldspotted Rockcod. Illustration by Pat Tully

BANDED ROCKCOD (BAR ROCKCOD)

The Banded Rockcod, also known as Bar Rockcod, is a deep water species which occurs along the east coast of Australia. It is usually caught in depths of 110–370 metres. Fishing is permitted in NSW however a bag limit and local fishing rules apply.

Colour: Vertical broad dark bars, the first on the neck and last on the base of the tail fin.

Tail fin: Straight. The Black Rockcod has a rounded tail fin.



A Banded Rockcod (Bar Rockcod Cod). Illustration by Pat Tully

PROTECTING BLACK ROCKCOD ENVIRONMENTS



Photo by David Harasti

- » Black Rockcod are found in subtropical and temperate waters of the south-western Pacific. Their distribution stretches along the whole NSW coast and includes Lord Howe Island.
- » They are a slow-moving, inquisitive and territorial fish that are usually found in caves, gutters and beneath bommies on rocky reefs, from near shore environments, including rock pools, to depths of at least 50 metres.
- » Due to overfishing in past decades, it is now unusual to find large Black Rockcod in areas where they were once common.
- » Part of the Black Rockcod's habitat range is protected within the State's network of marine parks and aquatic reserves.
- » You can help save the Black Rockcod by following the rules for these special places.
- » Each of these areas have special fishing rules that will help Black Rockcod numbers recover.

WHY IS THE BLACK ROCKCOD THREATENED?

Black Rockcod populations have been significantly reduced over time due to a number of factors including:

- » Past overharvesting by line, net and spearfishers;
- » Hooking and handling injuries as a result of accidental hookings;

- » Loss or degradation of estuarine and intertidal nursery habitats; and
- » Overfishing of larger males before species protection was put in place in 1983 may have impaired subsequent recruitment and recovery.

DIVING WITH BLACK ROCKCOD

Black Rockcod have a territorial and curious nature. They are known to inhabit the same cave or overhang for long periods.

If you see a Black Rockcod on your dive, make sure you:

- » Do not disturb or unintentionally harm them;
- » Do not touch, feed or harass them.

HANDY FISHING TIPS

When fishing, please consider the following tips to maximise Black Rockcod survival:

- » Use suitable tackle for the species that you are targeting and minimise the time spent to land the fish.
- » Use methods and rigs that reduce deep hooking – target fish with artificial lures or choose non-offset circle hooks when using bait.
- » If the fish is hooked deeply, cut the line as close as possible to the fish's mouth. Do not try to remove the hook.
- » Use barbless hooks or hooks with reduced barbs to make removal easier and minimise damage.
- » Avoid lifting the fish from the water - if possible unhook the fish whilst it is still in the water. Try to retrieve hooks from mouth-hooked fish and release the fish as quickly as possible.
- » Support the weight of the fish properly. Use wet hands or wet gloves when handling fish to minimise damage to their skin. Don't hold the fish by the gills or eyes.
- » Use knotless mesh nets - avoid knotted landing nets which may damage the fish's scales, skin, eyes and fins.
- » Consider the effects of barotrauma when fishing in waters 10 metres or deeper.

If you find that you are catching Black Rockcod or other threatened or protected species, you should consider trying to avoid hooking them by changing your location, baits or your fishing rigs.

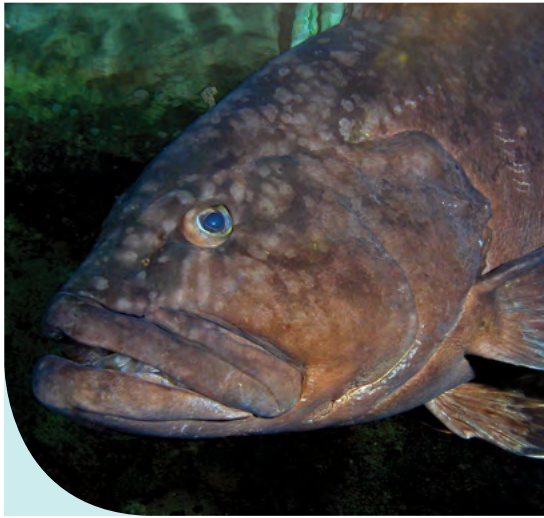


Photo by David Harasti

FIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP

1. Take a moment to study this guide and familiarise yourself with the appearance of the Black Rockcod and other similar looking cod species.
2. If you catch a Black Rockcod (or other threatened or protected species), release it carefully causing least possible harm.
3. Follow the fishing rules in marine parks and other protected areas, and follow the bag and size limit regulations for all species.
4. Report illegal or suspect fishing activities by:
 - » Contacting your nearest Fisheries Office;
 - » Using the Fishers Watch Phone line **1800 043 536**; or
 - » Completing the online report from:
www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/compliance/report-illegal-activity
5. Participate in the NSW DPI Protected and Threatened Species Sighting Program.

If you catch or see a Black Rockcod, record the details and send the information to the NSW DPI Threatened Species Section by emailing:

fisheries.threatenedspecies@dpi.nsw.gov.au or

completing the online report form:

<http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/species-protection/report-it>

WHAT IF YOU ARE NOT SURE?

If you catch a cod and are not sure which species it is, release the fish with minimal harm. Significant penalties apply for buying, selling, possessing or harming any threatened or protected species in NSW.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

NSW DPI has a number of publications available on different cod species. The publications are available online at the NSW DPI website: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au

Alternatively, contact the NSW DPI Threatened Species Section:

Port Stephens Fisheries Institute
Locked Bag 1
Nelson Bay NSW 2315

Email: fisheries.threatenedspecies@dpi.nsw.gov.au

Fishing regulations may change during the life of this publication. It is the responsibility of fishers to ensure they are acting within the law at all times.

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