

BLACK MUSSELCRACKER

Cymatoceps nasutus

IDENTIFYING FEATURES

This species is the second largest member of the family Sparidae. It has a deep, robust body, with a big head. Older specimens develop extended fleshy snouts. They are stockier and more thickset than the white musselcracker. Colour varies with age and size; adults are a sooty grey to black in colour with a white chin and belly. Sub-adults are lighter in colour and have two darker vertical bars on their sides. Small juveniles are noticeably different and have a yellowish-brown colour with white flecks.

Scientific Name: *Cymatoceps nasutus*

Common Names: Black musselcracker, poenskop, black steenbras

Family: Sparidae

Size: Can grow to 1.2 m and weigh 40 kg

DISTRIBUTION

This is an endemic species, only found between Cape Vidal and Cape Town. The bulk of the population is found between Cape Agulhas and the former Transkei. Black musselcracker are extremely resident as juveniles, but adults appear to undertake a once-off northward migration.

HABITAT

This large solitary fish is found on rocky reefs to a depth of 100m. The juveniles are found on shallow subtidal reefs, while adults are generally found on deeper, offshore reefs.

DIET

This fish has powerful jaws lined with rows of crushing molar-like teeth. This allows them to feed on hard shelled invertebrates such as crabs, crayfish, sea urchins and molluscs. They will also feed on squid, octopus and small fish.

REPRODUCTION

The absence of reproductively active adults in the south-western and southern Cape suggests that adults undertake an easterly spawning migration towards the former Transkei and KZN. Spawning predominantly occurs in Transkei waters between May and October

Length at maturity: 53 cm fork length

Age at maturity: 10 years

Maximum age: 45 years

Reproductive style: Protogynous hermaphrodite (change sex from female to male)

Age at sex change: about 18 years

Male to female sex ratio: 1:6

CAPTURE

Black musselcracker are occasionally hooked by shore anglers fishing from rocky points into deep water but are mainly caught from ski-boats fishing on reefs. The strength of this fish and its dogged fighting ability make it a formidable adversary. It is also often targeted by spear fishermen.

SA Angling Record: 37.8 kg

SA Spear fishing Record: 36.0 kg

REGULATIONS

Daily bag limit: 1 per person per day

(This includes both recreational and commercial fishermen)

Minimum size limit: 50 cm total length

Closed Season: None

Other Regulations: None

SASSI: Red List

STOCK STATUS

Black musselcracker have been heavily overexploited and the stock is considered to have collapsed. This is mainly because of their residency as juveniles, slow growth rate, late maturation and sex change. Strict regulations are required to rebuild the stock and the protection of both adults and juveniles in no-take marine protected areas is essential.