



Burbot

The **burbot** (*Lota lota*) is often maligned as being too ugly to be worth an angler's time; however, hidden by its mottled green camouflage is a valuable food and recreational fish. The burbot is the only representative of the cod (*Gadidae*) family in fresh water in North America, and like its saltwater relatives, has mild-tasting white flesh.

Burbot are distributed in fresh waters throughout North America, Europe and Asia with their range extending southward to about 40 degrees north latitude. They occupy most large clear and glacial rivers and many lakes throughout Alaska. Burbot are known by a number of different names including lawyer, loche, eelpout, methy, lush, lingcod, and mud shark.

General description: The burbot has a thin, elongated body that tapers to a point near the tail. Its major distinguishing characteristics are a barbel or "chin whisker", and dorsal and anal fins that run from the middle of the body almost to the tail. The tail is rounded rather than fork shaped. The mouth is quite large and contains numerous rows of small teeth that slant back toward the throat. Burbot have mottled olive-black or brown skin interspersed with yellow patches. Burbot appear to be scaleless but actually have small, almost microscopic scales.

Life history: Burbot are a relatively long-lived and slow-growing species. In Alaska, burbot older than 20 years are not uncommon. It typically takes burbot from five to seven years to reach 18 inches in length. This is also the length at which most Alaska burbot spawn for the first time. Burbot spawn under the ice in late winter (February to March) and have been observed to mill together forming a large writhing ball while spawning. Eggs are very small, and an individual burbot can produce over a million eggs.

Young burbot feed mainly on insects and other invertebrates. By the age of five or six, burbot begin to feed almost exclusively on fish. Adult burbot can appear sluggish, but they are voracious predators, feeding mostly at night. Once a burbot has captured a fish, it is reluctant to give it up. Its large mouth, strong jaw, and large number of inward slanting teeth account for the burbot's efficiency as a predator. Whitefish, sculpins, lampreys, and other burbot are common food items. Burbot will also sometimes eat mice or shrews.

Fishing: Burbot can be caught in the summer as well as through the ice in the winter. In some areas set-lines or "trot-lines" are used. Individual set-line hooks must have a gap of greater than three-quarters of an inch and be set on the bottom. Set-lines must be inspected every 24 hours and identified with the angler's name and address. Seasons for the set-line use and maximum allowable number of hooks vary between areas, so check your regulations.

Burbot can also be caught using standard bait fishing techniques with a fishing pole. A 2/0 or 4/0 single hook baited with a chunk of fresh or frozen fish (herring or whitefish work well) and a sinker located 18 to 24 inches above the hook is a good setup. Cast the bait out and allow the weight to rest on the bottom. In a river the bait will move around near the bottom in the current. When a consistent tug is felt, reel in your catch.

Most fishers like to keep only burbot larger than 18 inches. The best way to release any fish that has swallowed the hook is to just cut the line. The most popular fishing areas in Interior Alaska are large, glacial rivers such as the Yukon and Tanana rivers. Some of the best fishing occurs near rocky bluffs, in back eddies, and near the mouths of clear tributary streams. Burbot are also found in many lakes of Interior and Southcentral Alaska.

The easiest way to clean a burbot is to hang it by its head from a nail, cut around the skin near the neck, and pull the skin down to the tail using a pair of pliers. The fish can be left whole with fins and head removed or it can be fileted. Your burbot is now ready to be fried, baked, or poached. No matter how it is cooked, the meat is flaky and a gourmet's delight.

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