

Blackfish



Tautoga onitis
(Drawing reprinted with permission from National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institute. Illustrated by Charles B. Hudson, 1896)

The Facts

Blackfish supports a popular fishery in the angling community, and they are easily distinguished by the dark coloration (dark green or black) and leathery skin that is covered in a thick layer of mucous, making them very slippery to the touch. This is a stout bodied fish with a blunt nose and thick lips; its mouth has large conical teeth in the front, and flat crushing teeth in the rear. They are members of the Wrasse family, so their mouthparts are adapted to crush and grind food into very small particles — almost to the consistency of talcum powder. Local names include “blackfish” and “tautog” (which is the name used by anglers in New England); “bulldog” refers to older fish weighing over 10 lb.

Migration

They range along the Atlantic coast from Nova Scotia to South Carolina; there is no sustained fishery north of Massachusetts. These fish are associated with rocky bottoms where they feed on a variety of mollusks and crustaceans (mussels, crabs, barnacles). They are normally slow swimmers with a slow growth rate, and they can live for as long as 34 years (22 lb). The average fish that is caught by anglers is 6-10 years old (3-4 lb). Males are generally bigger and they live longer than females. Older males display a pronounced difference in their external features; the very large males have an enlarged white chin, with white margins on the pectoral and caudal fins. Sexual maturity occurs at approximately age 3 or 4, and the males outnumber females in older fishes.

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Fishing Season

These fish do not undergo seasonal migration, but move inshore as sea temperatures rise in the spring, and they spend winter in offshore waters at depths between 50 ft to 150 ft. They first appear in New York Bight in late March and early April, often as by-catch in the cod fishery that is conducted on offshore wrecks. They move inshore by the end of April each year and remain close to shore in depths ranging from 5 ft to 25 ft until the water gets warm, before they head for deeper water. They are difficult to locate by July, until mid-September when they reappear. Some of the best fishing is in this second run until in November, then the fish return to deeper water on the Continental Shelf. Conservation measures are being implemented for this fish and you should contact New York State Department of Environmental Conservation or call 1-800-REGS-DEC for update information on fishing regulations.

Angling

Blackfish often share the same areas as porgies, usually rocky terrain including rock piles, shipwrecks and artificial reef. Blackfish instinctively head for deeper water once hooked, and it is necessary to turn the fish around to avoid the risk of having the line severed on sharp rocks or barnacles. These are very strong fighters and promise a memorable experience to the angler. Fishing for blackfish requires a more substantial outfit than what is required for porgy. Experts recommend a stout rod about 8 ft in length with a long handle; the spinning spool should also be strong with 20-30 lb test “abrasive resistant” line. The terminal tackle should be equally sturdy, and the angler should be prepared to replace lost tackle. These fish have a small mouth and lures are rarely used during fishing, however, there are a wide variety of shellfish to use as bait including blue mussels, steamer clams, green fiddler and calico crabs.

Contact your local bait & tackle store for advice about fishing with artificial lures.

Visit our website at www.seagrantsunysb.edu/Fishery/ResourceCenter.htm for additional information.



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This information sheet was prepared by the Fishery Resource Center to address the needs in angling and charter boat communities.