

Bluefish



Pomatomus saltatrix

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

The Facts

Bluefish are schooling fish that prefer open ocean waters rather than coastal areas. They have a notorious reputation for their predatory behavior on other fish species. Bluefish have been reported to kill prey without eating it, and they have been known to occasionally bite human bathers. It is one of the most abundant and frequently caught food and sport fish along the Atlantic coast, supporting vibrant recreational and commercial fisheries. Local names used for bluefish include: “snapper” or “snap mackerel” (10 inch fish), “blue” or “cocktail blue” (2 lb fish), and “gorilla gator” (15-20 lb fish). Their strong biting power makes them an excellent sport fish, especially for those anglers who enjoy fishing in a blitz.

Migration

Interestingly, although bluefish are found all over the world, they are rare or absent in the Caribbean Sea. They spend a lot of their time in oceanic waters but they move inshore to coastal areas, mainly to feed on schools of mackerel, and possibly to avoid larger predatory species (tunas, sharks and billfishes). Bluefish have a fast growth rate, becoming sexually mature by age 2 (approximately 18 inches). These fish can grow to a relatively large size (>25 lb), and they live for over 12 years.

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Fishing Season

Fish form schools that are comprised of similar-sized animals, and these aggregations sometimes extend over several miles. The first migrating fish schools appear in offshore waters in mid-May to early June; these schools are migrating from the north, and they wait for the inshore waters to get warmer before coming into the coastal areas. The schools usually move into New York Bight by the end of June, and are caught along Long Island's south shore. During the peak summer months (July) they will move to deeper waters until the ocean surface temperatures have fallen — this is especially true for fish in Long Island Sound where they will not leave depths of 60-80 feet except at night time. The best time to fish for bluefish is August to September when the schools are preparing for the southern migration; bigger fish are the last to arrive between October and November. 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

Bluefish appear along beaches and at inlets where they are caught in the surf. Since these fish move to deeper waters during the long hot summer days, the best fishing occurs in the late evening and early morning. Their voracious feeding habit makes them relatively easy to catch, and they can be taken using a wide variety of techniques. Popular angling techniques include: trolling, casting, live-bait fishing and jigging. Fishing rigs require the use of wire leaders or extra long shank hooks, because their teeth cut through monofilament lines easily. Care should be taken when landing bluefish, and fish should be handled to prevent injury from the sharp teeth (which can sever a finger!). Children should never be allowed to unhook bluefish. These fish are usually gaffed because a net will not stand up to the damage caused from the sharp teeth. Also, fish must be clubbed before the angler is able to retrieve the lure.

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

Visit our website at www.seagrant.sunysb.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.