

Weakfish



Cynoscion regalis

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

The Facts

The name weakfish can be misleading, because these fish are certainly not “weak” and they are renown for their good fight and tenaciousness, making fast and sudden turns when hooked on light tackle. Instead, the name refers to the tendency for the jaw muscles to tear when the fish is hooked. Weakfish are able to produce a croaking sound by vibrating specially adapted abdominal muscles against the swim bladder. Only males have the special drumming muscles. Large fish are referred to locally as “tiderunners” (because they move in and out with the tide); fish less than 3 lb are called “schoolies,” and are often taken by anglers targeting porgies. All other sizes that lie between the ranges mentioned are simply referred to as “weak” or “sea trout.”

Migration

This species ranges from Florida to Massachusetts Bay, with greatest abundance along the Virginia coast. This is the only species in the family that inhabits the waters around New York. It is a summer time resident in our area occurring in the bays along the south side of Long Island, between the North and South Forks, and along the north shore. They spend a significant amount of their first four years migrating to different areas — mainly south along coastal areas in the fall and winter. Both genders start to mature from age 1, although some fish will not mature until age 3 or 4. This species has a relatively slow growth rate, and females are generally larger in size.

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Fishing Season

First catches of weakfish begin around the end of April (although the fish arrive earlier) on the south side of Long Island. They do not occupy deep-water while visiting during the summer months. Best fishing occurs between May and July, but fishing generally continues throughout the season. Fishing is typically a nighttime activity (6-9 pm) when the fish are feeding. Preparations for the fall migration begin in September when fish start to form schools, which continue until October (or as late as November) when the schools start moving offshore and southward. 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

The angler in search of weakfish should look for bottom-type structures that these fish favor for coverage and feeding; these sites include docks, breakwaters, elevations on the bottom (e.g. sandbars), rocks that produce rips, and deepwater drop-offs. These fish are taken by many techniques from boats (trolling, chumming, live bait fishing and drift fishing), and from shore (surf casting, still fishing and live-bait fishing). The typical gear is comprised of light to medium tackle, but landing weakfish depends on the angler's skill. The rigging is typically light, consisting of a main line of 8-15 lb test attached to a single hook, since these fish cannot be hauled using heavy rigging due to the weak mouthparts. Patience is the key to landing this fish because the weak jaw muscles present a challenge for most anglers. Weakfish strikes at a variety of lures, and plastic jelly worms are very popular; other natural bait includes shrimp, sea worm, bunker, eels and squid-strips.

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.