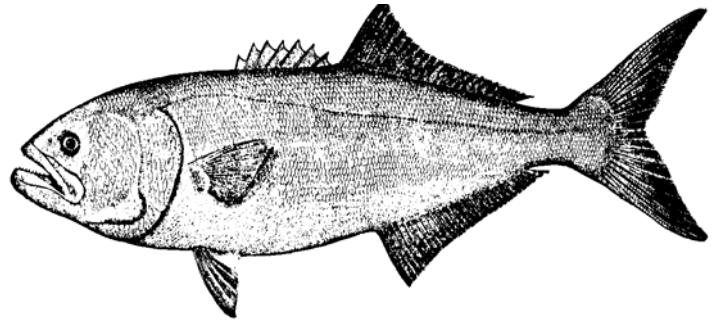


Bluefish (*Pomatomus saltatrix*)

Good to eat and fun to catch, Bluefish are of great economic importance to the recreational and, although to a much lesser extent, the commercial fishing industry along the east coast of the United States including the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary and the Mid-Atlantic Bight.



Bluefish are a migratory fish with a portion of their population coming into the waters off the coasts of New York and New Jersey each April and May. From there they move inshore for the summer to the delight of recreational anglers. The adults stay for a month or two before going back to the ocean. The juveniles, also known as snappers, migrate into the Estuary in early summer and remain there till fall.

Besides their recreational and commercial value, Bluefish are an important part of the Estuary's food web. They are voracious predators, feeding on squid, small shrimp and other smaller fish, especially menhaden and silversides. In turn, they are eaten by larger animals including birds of prey such as the osprey.

Bluefish mature during their second year. Fertilization of eggs is external; eggs and sperm are broadcast into open water without pre- or post-natal care. Larvae drift about, feeding on plankton until they become large enough to begin their migrations south or north to get to their coastal nursery areas including those located within the Harbor Estuary. Bluefish spawn in the spring in the South Atlantic Bight (below Cape Hatteras) and again in the summer in the Mid-Atlantic Bight. The young of the year from both seasons are considered estuarine dependent and can be found in those habitats from South Carolina to Rhode Island until they are ready to head south for the winter. As the water temperature declines and the days become shorter, schools of Bluefish orient themselves southward. Smaller fish tend to travel close to shore during both the spring and fall migrations. Older, larger fish travel near shore in their northern range but generally shift farther offshore when migrating south. Bluefish can live up to 12 years and they can grow to the length of about 39 inches and weigh up to 31 pounds.

Most Bluefish are caught recreationally in the Mid-Atlantic States from New York to Virginia. Landings peaked in early 1980's with about 47,000 US tons landed in 1981 and again in 1985. Landings averaged 20,000 US tons from 1982, but have been under 8800 US tons since 1995. Catch and release practices have increased. During 2002-2004, an average of 63% of Bluefish caught recreationally was released as compared to an 18% average from 1981-1983.

Bluefish are managed under the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's joint Fishery Management Plan for Bluefish. The Amendment to this plan includes restrictions to the harvest of bluefish but it is interesting to note that Bluefish currently are not being over-fished. In fact there seems to have been an increase in the abundance of Bluefish in recent years. In 2004,

stock biomass was approximately 104 million pounds. Periodic disease outbreaks over the past 20 years suggest that the species is sensitive to coastal water quality degradation.

Bluefish are subject to similar regulations in New York and New Jersey. Recreational fishers may take up to fifteen Bluefish per day and the season extends year-round in both states. In New Jersey there are no size limits; in New York there is no size limit for the first ten caught however after that the next five must measure at least 12" in total length.



This entry was researched and written by Claire Antonucci, Rosemary Higgins and Cathy Yuhás of the New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium Extension Program. It is part of a larger project, "The Key Species of New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary" produced with funding from the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program.