



SPECKLED TROUT FACTS

by
Jerald Horst
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The spotted seatrout, *Cynoscion nebulosus*, or as we call it in Louisiana, the speckled trout, is one of the most popular saltwater fish in the state. Besides being popular in many south Louisiana restaurants, it is targeted by more recreational fishermen than any other saltwater fish. In the last 10 years, recreational fishermen have harvested an average of 6,578,061 speckled trout from Louisiana waters annually – this is more than 93% of the combined recreational/commercial harvest. The best year for recreational landings was 2000 with a take of 9,615,942 specks and the poorest year was 1990, the year after the great freeze, with 2,679,167 landings.

Although the commercial catch had been regulated by minimum sizes and gear restrictions, the recreational fishery was unregulated until 1977, when a combined daily limit of 50 was placed on speckled trout and redfish. In 1984 the possession limit was reduced to the daily limit, and a new saltwater fishing license was required. This was followed by a 12-inch minimum size (14-inch commercial) in 1987 and the recreational limit was reduced to 25 in 1988. Speckled trout management and biology remain an area of high public interest. Some of the most commonly asked questions on the subject are answered below.

Why do we have a 12-inch minimum size on speckled trout? A minimum size of 12 inches allows most fish to spawn at least once before reaching harvestable size. All of the males and more than 75% of the females are sexually mature at 12 inches long. The minimum size also increases the overall yield of the fishery. Each year since the regulation went into effect, the average size of recreationally caught specks has been more than 13 inches. Before the minimum size requirement, the average size of recreationally taken specks was as low as 10 inches.

Why don't we have a larger minimum size, such as 14 inches? Speckled trout have sex-specific growth and survival rates. Males grow slower and don't grow as large as females. In Louisiana, males do not reach a size of 14 inches until their third or fourth years. Since few specks live beyond age 5, and more than 70% of the total speckled trout population is age 3 or younger, very few males grow to larger sizes. This would result in a loss of recreational opportunity to harvest the males and could possibly cause a shift of harvest pressure to females.

How many of the undersized, released speckled trout really survive?

The majority of hook-caught speckled trout survive when released. Louisiana conducted a 18-month study ending in 1995 on the survival of released speckled trout. The survival rate depended on the fishing method. Treble hook artificials had a 97% survival rate, single hook artificials were 91%, treble hook with bait had 83%, and single hook with bait was 74%. The overall average survival rate was 82.5%. Research done in 1984 in Texas showed a survival rate of 73%, and a Georgia study, done in 1990, showed a 63.8% rate.

Why don't we close the season during spawning time? Speckled trout exhibit a protracted spawning season, lasting from April to September. Females ready to spawn have even been recorded in March and October. Closing the season during spawning would result in a 5 to 7 month closure. Also, from a biological perspective, any removal of a female fish from a population has the same impact. Regardless of whether the fish is caught 8 months or 8 days before it spawns, the result is the removal of the fish and all of her future offspring. Since there is little biological advantage to such a measure and since the closure would take place during the months of best fishing weather and most intense recreational activity, the negatives outweigh the possible benefits.

Why can't I catch more big trout? Aside from the fact that there are many more small trout than large ones, large speckled trout are very specialized creatures. Large trout are not as widely distributed as small trout. The largest trout are taken in the spring, next largest in winter, then fall and summer, out in the Gulf. Large but lesser sized trout are taken near beaches, lesser still in lakes and bays, and the smallest usually in the marsh. Anglers prefer to fish for specks in summer and the second preference is fall. Fishing is most intense in sheltered inside waters. More big trout are caught in spring because they move into shallow beach and bay habitats at that time for their first spawn of the season. The rest of the summer and early fall, the larger trout tend to stay in cooler Gulf waters and only periodically enter beach and bay habitats for subsequent spawns. Many of the large fish winter offshore, with a few wintering in the interior marshes, where they are very sluggish.

Large trout also have very different food habits than school trout. Small trout eat large amounts of shrimp and other crustaceans. As trout become larger, their diet shifts toward fish, the larger, the better. Studies in Texas and Mississippi show that really big trout strongly prefer to feed on mullets; a large trout will find the largest mullet it can handle and try to swallow it. Often the mullet is half or two-thirds as large as the trout. The key to catching large trout is to fish where they are and use big baits.

What is the future of recreational speckled trout fishing? The future of the fishery depends on two factors: good habitat and good management. If our coastal areas remain unpolluted and coastal erosion is controlled, management will be the key. Very few more speckled trout can be produced from other sources. If the entire commercial speckled trout harvest were divided up equally among Louisiana's over 400 thousand recreational anglers, each sport fisherman would get less than one fish per person per year. Research has also shown that very few speckled trout appear in shrimp trawl bycatch. This means that gains and losses will be the result of management within the recreational fishery. Management priorities, as set by recreational leadership, will determine whether the fishery is managed for liberal limits and smaller fish or restrictive creel limits and larger fish.