

This Month

Tautog

Colloquial Nickname: Blackfish, chinner

Scientific name: *Tautoga onitis*

Field Markings: Males and older fish are uniformly olive green, cark chocolate or black in color with irregular mottling along the side. Females and young tautog are paler with large mousy brown and gray mottling on the sides.

Size: Up to 22 inches long.

Habitat: Open water near rocky shores, pier docks, breakwaters, mussel beds.

Seasonal Appearance: Year-round, most common from April through November.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

Tautog are heavy, stout fish with a broad tail and a high, arched head. They are the northern relative of the family of wrasses that are common in tropical waters. Tautog are related to and often confused with another species of wrasse - the cunner. The tautog has a blunt snout with a small mouth, thick lips and strong conical teeth. They have a scaleless cheek region that is smooth to the touch. Their dorsal fin extends the length of the back and has sharp spines.



Tautog become blacker as they grow older, and their coloring also varies depending on the local bottom habitat. The distinguishing feature of the adult male tautog is the large protruding forehead. Mature males are often referred to as "chinnners" because of the white patch on the chin.

Tautog feed entirely on invertebrates, including crabs, mussels, mollusks, shrimp, amphipods and sea worms, using

their strong back teeth to crush any hard shells. These fish are not active swimmers and, when not feeding, they often gather in groups under the safety of a ledge or hole in the rocks, sometimes lying on their sides. Although tautog are active during the day, they remain close to cover. At night they are quiet and inactive, hiding from predators.

Juvenile tautog stay near the sites where they were hatched and are frequently found in eelgrass beds where invertebrates are abundant. The adults gather around rocky bottoms, ledges, pilings and submerged wrecks.

RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

Although they are sometimes sold commercially, most tautog are caught recreationally. Taken by rod and reel and by spear from May through October, tautog are an important sport fish in Narragansett Bay. There is a "live fish" fishery in Rhode Island where living adult tautog are captured for restaurants, and customers can select live fresh fish from the tanks.

Increased pressure by commercial gill-net fisheries and recreational fishermen has resulted in serious decline of stocks. In addition, tautog grow slowly, taking a long time to reach sexual maturity. This makes it difficult for the stocks to rebound quickly when overfished. In many states, including Rhode Island, a minimum size limit for recreational fishing has been imposed to help maintain the population.

HOW TO GET YOUR OWN COPY

RISAA members can purchase their own copy of *The Uncommon Guide To Common Life on Narragansett Bay* for \$15 from the RISAA Merchandise Committee. Stop by the committee table at any monthly RISAA meeting.



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