



Species Profile...

TAUTOG

Introduction

Prized for being a “delicious fish,” tautog is a highly sought after recreational species from Massachusetts through Virginia. Approximately 90% of the total harvest is taken by anglers, who catch them among hard structures such as rocky shorelines, piers, pilings, and natural and artificial reefs. Recently, the commercial fishery has expanded in some states, such as New York, where there has been an increased demand for tautog in the live fish market.

A slow growth rate and high site fidelity (tautog tend to stay near and return to their “home” reefs) make tautog particularly susceptible to overfishing. The 2016 stock assessment update indicates this non-migratory reef fish would be more appropriately managed as four stock units. **The stock is overfished in all regions except Massachusetts-Rhode Island,** with overfishing occurring in the Long Island Sound and New Jersey-New York Bight regions.

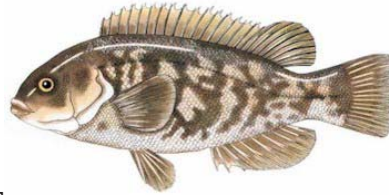
Spawning stock biomass (SSB) has remained at low levels and management measures have proven insufficient to rebuild the stock.

Amendment 1 to the Tautog Fishery Management Plan (FMP), approved in October 2017, adopts a four-unit stock structure and implements a new management program to rebuild overfished tautog populations.

Life History

A member of the wrasse (Labridae) family, the tautog is a stout fish with an arched head and broad tail. Juveniles are greenish in color and become darker with age. Fishermen have given tautog the nickname “blackfish” due to its dark mottled sides that are either dull black, brown, blackish green, or blackish blue. Anglers also call tautog “white chin” because this coloring pattern commonly occurs on large males.

Tautog are slow growing and can live 35 to 40 years. Males and females are sexually mature at three to four years of age,



Tautog

Tautoga onitis

Common Names: blackfish, tog, whit chinner, black porgy

Family: Labridae, commonly referred to as wrasses, which have protactile mouths, usually with separate jaw teeth that jut outwards. Many species can be recognized by their thick lips, the inside of which is sometimes curiously folded.

The word “wrasse” comes from the Cornish word wragh, a lenited form of gwragh, meaning an old woman or hag.

Interest facts:

- Tautog have several specialized adaptations for living around hard structures, including a blunt nose, thick lips, and powerful jaws.
- They have conical (pointy) teeth in front, crushing teeth in back, and a set of pharyngeal teeth in their throat, which allow them to pick-up, crush, and sort hard prey such as mollusks and crustaceans.
- Their rubbery skin has a heavy slime covering that protects them while swimming around rocks
- They are particularly hardy and can survive for hours kept on ice - which makes them desirable for the live fish market.

Maximum Age/Size: 34 years / 3.1 feet

Stock Status: Overfished in Long Island Sound through Virginia, with overfishing occurring in the Long Island Sound and New Jersey-New York Bight regions.

but studies have shown that larger females produce significantly more (and potentially higher quality) eggs than smaller females.

Tautog are distributed along the Northeast Atlantic coast from Nova Scotia to Georgia, with the greatest abundances occurring in the U.S. between Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and Chesapeake Bay.

North of Cape Cod, tautog typically remain close to shore in waters less than 60 feet deep. South of Cape Cod, they inhabit waters 40 miles offshore at depths up to 120 feet.

During spring, as water temperatures approach 48° F, tautog migrate inshore to spawn in estuaries and nearshore marine waters. They may remain inshore throughout the summer, then move to deeper (80-150 feet) offshore wintering areas as fall approaches and water temperatures drop below 52° F. Toward the southern end of their range, some adults may remain offshore throughout the year.

Tautog are daytime feeders, and feeding activity peaks at dawn and dusk. Adults feed primarily on oysters, mussels, and invertebrates, while the juvenile diet consists of amphipods and copepods. There are no species that preferentially feed on tautog, but fish-eating birds such as cormorants prey on juveniles. Smooth dogfish, barndoor skate, red hake, silver hake, sea raven, and goosefish have been reported to feed on both adults and juveniles.

Throughout their life, tautog aggregate around structured habitats. Shallow, vegetated estuaries and inshore areas serve as juvenile nurseries, while larger juveniles cohabitate with adults in deeper offshore waters. North of Long Island, tautog are generally found around rocks and boulders. Toward the southern end of their range, tautog often inhabit wrecks, jetties, natural and artificial reefs, and shellfish beds. **(to page 7)**