

SPECIES SNAPSHOT

A 2025 status update for South Carolina's saltwater species

RED DRUM

Red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), often referred to as “spottail bass” or “redfish,” are the most commonly targeted sportfish in coastal South Carolina waters. Anglers can keep up to two red drum per person and six per boat per day within the 15-23” slot limit in state waters (regulations last changed by legislature in 2018). Possession in federal waters is prohibited.



SIZE

Juvenile red drum fall within the 15-23” slot size at approximately one to two years of age and typically weigh between one and five pounds. The state record for South Carolina was a 75-pound fish caught in 1965.

AGE

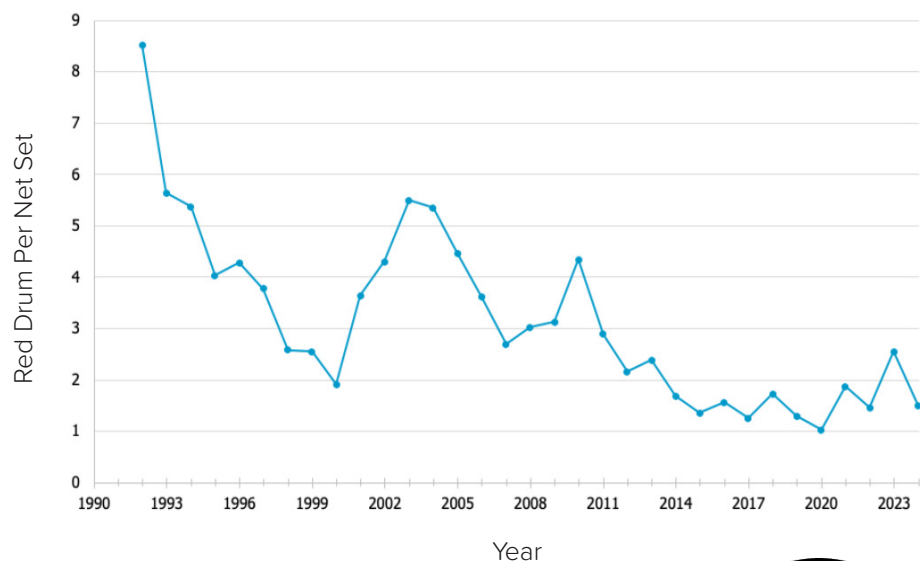
Red drum mature between 3-5 years of age, and South Carolina's oldest recorded red drum was 41 years old. The larger the fish, the more eggs she produces, making the health of our largest and oldest red drum critically important.

HABITAT

Juvenile red drum mainly inhabit estuaries, including shallow tidal creeks and salt marshes. Adults inhabit the open ocean for much of the year but take up residence in coastal sounds and inlets during late summer and fall, when spawning occurs.

Red Drum Numbers Have Declined in SCDNR Surveys Over Time

- The year 2020 marked an all-time low in the average number of red drum caught by SCDNR biologists in the trammel survey. The number of red drum caught in 2024 (1.5 fish/set) is similar to the ten-year average.
- This graph represents just one of many data sets used to determine the health of SC's red drum population.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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How do we get these numbers?

In gray are areas of the coast covered by the SCDNR trammel net survey, one of three studies that targets red drum.



- Working from customized boats, SCDNR biologists conduct three different survey types in every major South Carolina estuary to capture and study red drum at every stage of its life cycle.
- Since 1990, the collection of this data has allowed biologists to track the health of our state's red drum by keeping tabs on population numbers, size, age and other biological information over time.
- SCDNR biologists also maintain a nationally recognized stocking program for red drum and have released an average of one million young fish annually over the last 10 years in studies designed to tell us more about their life history.

Many factors impact red drum numbers



FISHING PRESSURE

As our coastal population has grown, so too has angling pressure. In the last 30 years, the number of saltwater fishing trips in SC has grown by 144%. Even though anglers release most red drum, ~8% still die due to capture stress.



ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Red drum spawn during a short window in August and September, and the environmental conditions during this window can have a great impact on the number of larvae that survive.



HABITAT AVAILABILITY

Young red drum rely on small tidal creeks and saltwater marshes. The availability and quality of these waters, which are vulnerable to coastal development, are critical to sustaining our red drum population.

You can help red drum in South Carolina

HANDLE WITH CARE

When catch-and-release fishing, always handle fish with wet hands and/or a rubber-coated net. Minimize the time that fish spend out of the water and revive them before release.

USE THE RIGHT RIG

When targeting large, adult red drum (sometimes called "bull reds"), minimize gut hooking by using circle hooks (at least size 9/0) and a short leader/fixed-weight rig.

BUY A FISHING LICENSE

Even if you don't fish, consider purchasing a fishing license. Saltwater license fees help fund research and protection efforts for red drum and other saltwater species.