

SPECIES SNAPSHOT

A 2025 status update for South Carolina's saltwater species

SEATROUT

Spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*), also known as “speckled trout,” are one of the most popular saltwater fish in South Carolina – but they’re not true trout. These members of the drum family can be found in saltwater creeks, rivers and estuaries throughout the year. Anglers can keep up to 10 seatrout per person per day with a minimum size of 14 inches total length.



AGE

Spotted seatrout mature at roughly one year. The oldest seatrout in South Carolina was nine years old, although most fish captured are four years or younger. Spotted seatrout spawn in groups during evenings from April to September.

SIZE

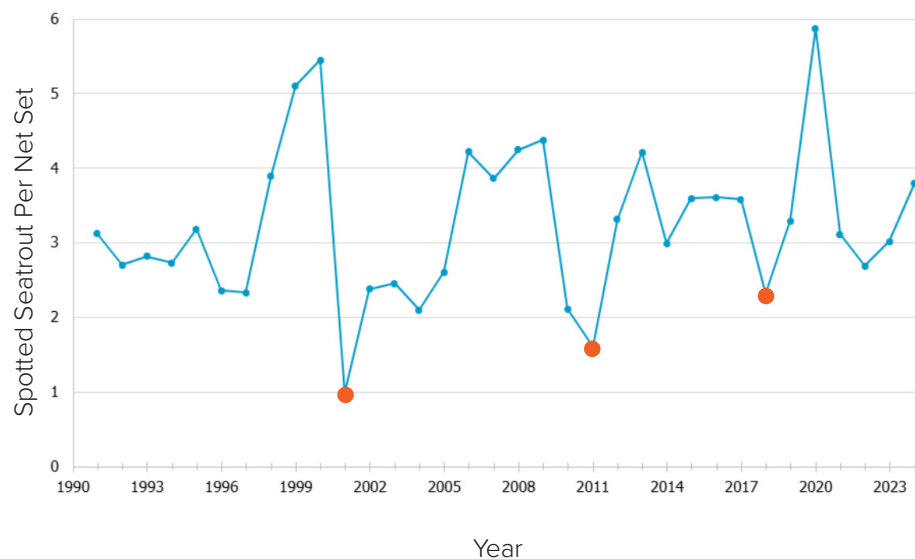
Females grow faster than males and typically reach the 14” minimum harvest size within two years. The catch of larger fish (>20”) is dominated by females. The state record was an 11-lb, 13-oz fish caught in Murrells Inlet in 1976.

HABITAT & LIFE CYCLE

Young seatrout use tidal creeks and saltmarshes as nursery areas where they can avoid predators and find prey. Within their first year, they move into larger creeks, rivers, and bays, where they spend the rest of their lives.

Seatrout Numbers Drop During Cold-Kill Events but Can Rebound Rapidly

- Spotted seatrout populations in South Carolina are heavily influenced by winter kills, when waters drop below a critical level and kill large numbers of seatrout (these years in orange at right).
- The number of spotted seatrout caught in 2024 (3.8 fish/set) was slightly above the ten-year average.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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How do we get these numbers?

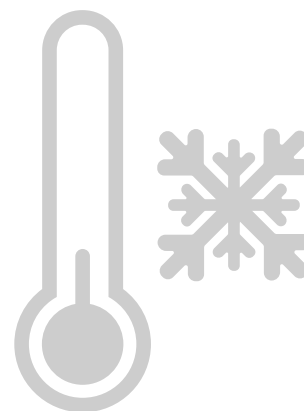
In gray are areas of the coast covered by the SCDNR trammel net survey, one of two programs that targets seatrout.



- South Carolina Department of Natural Resources biologists collect the majority of the state's spotted seatrout information through two main sampling programs: a trammel net survey that targets higher salinity areas of estuaries and an electrofishing survey that looks at lower salinity areas in the upper reaches of tidal rivers. Collectively, these surveys allow researchers to look at seatrout of all ages.
- Electrofishing and trammel net data have been collected for over 20 and 30 years, respectively, allowing biologists to follow long-term trends in local seatrout populations and collect information on life history.

Cold weather events are a major driver of spotted seatrout numbers

While many factors impact the population health of spotted seatrout in South Carolina, (including habitat quality and fishing pressure), cold water events known as “winter kills” are the largest driver of population size. When temperatures drop below a critical level (usually the low to mid-40s Fahrenheit), spotted seatrout can die in large numbers or become so cold stunned that they become easy prey for dolphins, birds and other predators. You can see examples of these drops in orange on the previous page's graph – there were cold weather events in 2001, 2011 and 2018. Fortunately, with the assistance of anglers practicing catch and release, sea trout numbers can rebound within a few years.



You can help spotted seatrout in South Carolina

CATCH & RELEASE AFTER COLD KILLS

After winter cold kills, anglers who release seatrout through the spawning season (Apr.-Sep.) help the population rebound more quickly.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Spotted seatrout are soft-bodied and lack the thick scales that help protect some fish. As a result, they must be handled gently to increase their chances of survival upon release.

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 seatrout and other saltwater species.