

## Red Drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*)

Picture a surf fishing scene on North Carolina's Outer Banks and you will probably imagine a huge red drum being hoisted with some difficulty by a grinning, wader-clad angler. Most anyone who has spent much time fishing or visiting the Carolina coast will have at least heard of this species. Red drum photographs are commonly displayed on bulletin boards at coastal tackle shops, restaurants and fishing piers. In fact, the N.C. General Assembly in 1971 designated the red drum as the official State Saltwater Fish. In North Carolina, larger drum are frequently called "channel bass" while small drum are almost invariably referred to as "puppy drum." In the states of the Deep South along the Gulf of Mexico, this species is most commonly called the "redfish," and is well known to gourmet cooks for its table qualities.

### History and Status

Red drum have been of moderate commercial importance in North Carolina since colonial times. In the early 1900s, Beaufort in Carteret County was the center of the state's red drum fishery. Dealers and fishermen at that time recognized four sizes or "grades" of fish: puppy drums, yearling drums, 2-foot drums and old drums. Yearling and 2-foot drums were the most valuable and were shipped to urban markets in the North. Puppy drums were also mixed with an assortment of fish and shipped. The old drums were usually not eaten

fresh and had little market value, but fishermen found them rather tasty after they had been salted and dried on the roofs of their houses.

In modern times, red drum are still fished for commercially. Available data from commercial landings indicate that numbers of red drum present in North Carolina vary considerably from year to year. Since the 1960s, red drum have also become increasingly popular with recreational hook-and-line anglers and, today, a significant portion of the fish harvested is taken in this manner. In recent years, North Carolina red drum size distributions reveal fewer large fish and more small fish than previous records show. This indicates that drum are being harvested before they have a chance to grow to a large size and are, in essence, being overfished.

### Description

In the drum family of fishes found in North Carolina, the red drum is second only to the black drum in size, reaching a maximum length of 5 feet and a weight of approximately 75 pounds. Red drum are rather robust in form and have a blunt snout with a mouth well adapted to feeding on the bottom. The tail has a squared-off rather

than forked shape. The scales are large and on old specimens they are about the size of guitar picks. One or more black ocellated spots occur on the upper sides near the base of the tail. Red drum are a coppery color, darker along the back and upper sides, shading gradually to a grayish-white underside.

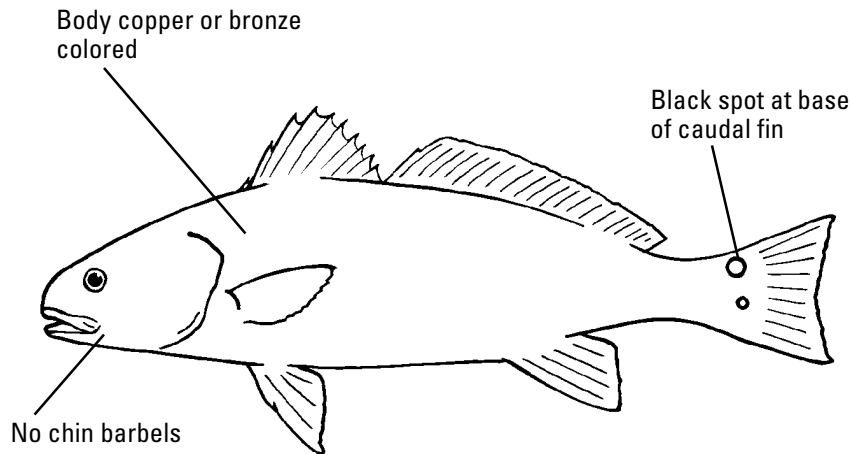
### Habitat and Habits

Both estuaries and inshore oceanic waters are critical habitats for red drum. In North Carolina, the males reach sexual maturity at 2 years of age; females mature at 4 years of age. Spawning occurs near inlets and beach sloughs from August to September at water temperatures ranging from 64 to 82 degrees. A 35-inch long female may release 3.5 million eggs. The eggs hatch in approximately 20 hours, and larvae are transported by winds and currents into the less saline estuarine nursery areas. There, the young fish feed on copepods, amphipods and small shrimps for six to eight months. Juvenile



**Range Map:**

Occupied range ■



fish gradually move oceanward into more saline waters as they grow larger. Adults off North Carolina and Virginia migrate seasonally, generally north and inshore in spring, and south and offshore in the fall.

### Range and Distribution

On the Atlantic Coast, red drum occur from Massachusetts south to Key West but are most common from Virginia southward. Range along the Gulf of Mexico extends from southwest Florida to Tuxpan, Mexico. Red drum occur seasonally all along the North Carolina coast.

### People Interactions

Red drum, like most creatures on this Earth, are affected by human activities. Activities that have altered water salinity in sounds, or dredged and impounded shallow nursery areas have degraded red drum habitat. Fortunately, laws such as those associated with the Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA) of 1974 have slowed the rate of habitat degradation. However, overfishing now appears to be a greater threat to the state's red drum populations. More restrictive length limits have recently been put into effect in an effort to relieve fishing pressure on the species and to permit more small drum to live longer and thereby reach larger sizes.

### Reference

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### Credits

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## RED DRUM

### Classification

Class: Osteichthyes (bony fishes)

Order: Perciformes

### Average Size

Length: 2.5 feet

Weight: 10 pounds

### Food

Crabs, shrimps, sand dollars, menhaden, mullet, pinfish, pigfish, sea robin, lizardfish, spot, croaker and flounder

### Spawning

Occurs at dusk during late summer and fall near inlets and sloughs. Eggs released and fertilized at mid-depths, float to surface where they hatch. Larvae are transported into estuaries.

### Young

Hatch in 20 hours at 75 degrees, are transported into estuaries where they feed on copepods, amphipods and tiny shrimps.

### Life Expectancy

Approximately 50-plus years. The oldest red drum aged in North Carolina was 56 years old.