

# Florida Seatrout

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TOSH BROWN

One of Florida's most popular game fish, the spotted seatrout sports distinct round black spots on its back and usually has one or two prominent canine teeth at the tip of its upper jaw.

The spotted seatrout is one of the most accessible game fish in Florida. Surveys show that the spotted seatrout is the fish Floridians most want to fish for — more so even than snook and redfish.

Seatrout depend on clear, clean coastal waters and abundant seagrass meadows to provide food and shelter for their offspring. Young seatrout seek protection from predators in heavy grass and mangrove roots along quiet shorelines.

Although seatrouts' size and age at maturity varies by region, scientists say that 12- to 14-inch Florida seatrout generally are one year old and sexually mature. Most 28- to 30-inch seatrout are three years of age. Yet biologists have found 23-inch seatrout in one area of the East Coast as young as one year.

Seatrout from the Indian River,

a brackish lagoon stretching from the Jupiter Inlet to St. Augustine, seem to grow larger and more rapidly than those from other areas. The average Indian River seatrout ranges from 1 to 3 pounds, compared to predominant West Coast seatrout weights of 8 ounces to 2 pounds.

Indian River seatrout attain weights of more than 14 pounds. The largest seatrout ever aged by Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) scientists — a 13-pounder measuring close to 34 inches — came from the Indian River and was 7 years old.

Compared to other marine game fish, seatrout enjoy one of the longest spawning seasons. Spawning frequencies can vary from one geographic region to another, depending on water temperatures and salinities. In most

areas of the state, spawning occurs from late April to early October. In warmer regions, it can happen from February to October.

Spawning usually commences with the arrival of mid-70-degree water temperatures. In areas of south Florida such as the Ten Thousand Islands, seatrout can spawn more than a dozen times a year.

Florida seatrout populations started declining in the early 1970s, not only because of deteriorating water quality and loss of seagrass beds, but also due to intense fishing pressure. With the numbers of marine anglers increasing year after year, the take of seatrout keeps increasing. The average saltwater angler harvests 9.7 pounds of seatrout every year.

According to research scientists with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the seatrout's biggest problem is that its life cycle depends on the same coastal areas humans find most attractive to live in. As much as 70 percent of the state's human population lives in the same coastal counties as the spotted seatrout. In Tampa Bay alone, more than 40 percent of the seagrass beds have been lost over the past 20 years.

Shoreline development along both Florida's east and west coasts has damaged or destroyed much of the habitat seatrout need to live and reproduce. By 1989, the FWRI recorded significant drops in seatrout populations statewide. The ultimate answer to restoring and managing Florida's seatrout stocks for future generations lies with sound ecosystem management including fishing regulations, improved methods for treating runoff and with enhancement programs to replace lost seagrasses.