

Sheepshead



Sheepshead
(*Archosargus probatocephalus*)

Sheepshead have a silver body with black bars. They get their name from their unique teeth that resemble sheep teeth with incisors in the front and molars in the rear of their mouth. They are occasionally confused with juvenile Black Drum due to their silver and black stripes. The teeth and a continuous dorsal fin are quick ways to differentiate between the two.

Spawning Season

In Louisiana, nearly all male Sheepshead older than two years and almost all females older than one year are mature and able to spawn.

Sheepshead spawning season occurs in late winter and early spring, February to April, with March and April being the peak months. Adults migrate offshore to spawn then return to nearshore and estuarine waters.

Spawning occurs several times during each season with frequency ranging from daily to once every 20 days. Females that spawn closer to shore produce around 11,000 eggs while those further offshore average 87,000 per spawning year. Eggs hatch around 28 hours after fertilization.

Sheepshead larvae spend about a month in open water before being transported inshore by favorable currents to grow in the protection of the coastal estuaries.



Habitat

Sheepshead are common from the mid-Atlantic southward throughout the Gulf of America, and in fewer numbers throughout the Caribbean. Sheepshead live primarily in salt to near-fresh estuarine waters, but migrate into nearshore and offshore waters.

Adult Sheepshead are common near hard structures such as rock jetties, piers, oilrigs, pilings, and oyster reefs. Juvenile Sheepshead stay close to the shore in submersed vegetation with mud bottoms until they reach about 2 inches long then they move out to structure with the adults in late summer.

Diet

Sheepshead are omnivores and eat a large variety of prey, including barnacles, oysters, clams, worms, crabs, fish, and plants. Their front incisor-like teeth allow them to scrape barnacles off pilings and other structures, while their multiple rows of back molars crush and grind shell.

While mollusks are always on the menu, Sheepshead change up their diets depending on the time of year and their locations. They tend to consume more fish in the spring, plants in the summer, and worms in the fall/winter.

A Sheepshead's taste for immobile species like barnacles may play an important role in the control of invertebrates found on the sides of rocks, pilings, docks, and boats and help maintain biodiversity.

Age & Growth

Ear stones, called otoliths, can be used to calculate the age of a fish. Field biologists remove these hard structures from the skulls of fish and send them to LDWF's Age and Growth Lab. At the lab, otoliths are cut into small sections and placed under a microscope to reveal growth rings. In a process similar to aging trees, biologists count the number of rings to determine the age of a fish. Fish age, length, and weight data is used to estimate information about the population such as growth rates and overall size. Fishery managers use this information along with other information gathered on a species to recommend regulations that will ensure fish are not being caught too quickly and that enough fish are left to reproduce and keep a population healthy. The chart below shows that Sheepshead grow rapidly during the first few years of life, and then growth slows as they get older. Once Sheepshead mature, they invest more energy in reproduction rather than growth.

AGE (YEARS)	AVERAGE LENGTH (INCHES)	APPROXIMATE LENGTH RANGE (INCHES)
1	7.5	6-9
2	12	9.5-14
3	14.5	12-17
4	16	13-19.5
5	17	14-21
6	18	14.5-21.5
7	18	14.5-22
8	18.5	15-22
9	19	15-22.5
10	19	15-22.5

Data Source: LDWF Fish Management

Contact Information

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
2000 Quail Drive
Baton Rouge, LA 70808
225-765-2800
www.wlf.louisiana.gov

Licenses and Boat Registration
225-765-2887 or 225-765-2898

Recreational Oshore Landing Permits
rolp.wlf.la.gov

Enforcement
225-765-2987



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Sheepshead Management

Louisiana manages the recreational and commercial harvest of Sheepshead. Currently there are no recreational daily harvest or size limits, and a 10-inch commercial size limit. The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission sets limits based on stock assessments and other biological and technical data provided by LDWF. LDWF biologists meticulously collect data during both dockside sampling of anglers' catch and sampling conducted on research vessels. LDWF gathers information on recreational and commercial harvest of saltwater fish, including Sheepshead, through its LA Creel Survey and Commercial Trip Ticket Program, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) commercial statistical records, and the NMFS Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). The LA Creel survey, replaced the MRIP survey starting in 2014, but historical data from MRIP has been calibrated ("converted") for use to evaluate current stocks.

Landings of Sheepshead in Louisiana have averaged over 2 million pounds per year in the most recent decade. The highest harvests on record (over 4 million pounds) occurred during the mid-90's. After enacting commercial gear restrictions in 1995, commercial landings declined. In the most recent years, recreational landings comprise approximately 50% of the total Louisiana Sheepshead harvest (LDWF, Assessment of Sheepshead (*Archosargus probatocephalus*) in Louisiana Waters 2025 Report).

Quick Facts

- Sheepshead commonly weigh 2-8 pounds, but can reach 20 pounds.
- Sheepshead have been documented at 20 years old in Louisiana and 35 years old in the Chesapeake Bay.
- Thought of by many as difficult to clean, Sheepshead reward those who choose to clean them with a delicious, firm, white meat that is perfect for a number of cooking methods.



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