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THE BLACK DRUM (POGONIAS cromis)

Prepared in the Division of Fishery Biology

Of considerable interest among the food fishes of our Atlantic and Gulf Coasts is the black drum, Pogonias cromis, occurring with varying abundance in the different localities along its range, from Massachusetts to the mouth of the Rio Grande. This fish often reaches a weight of about 20 pounds, while individuals weighing over 50 pounds are not rare. The largest black drum caught, of which there is record, weighed 146 pounds. The adult is dusky and occasionally has considerable bronze or silver on the head and along the sides. After death the fish becomes much darker and in general appearance is uniformly black. Until the young are about a foot in length they are silvery gray and have 4 or 5 distinct black vertical bars along the sides which become obscure in later life.

As a food fish the black drum is not esteemed, as its flesh is apt to be coarse and unpalatable. However, it is frequently cut into steaks and sold at a low price in many localities along our coast. Its low value precludes its shipment far from the sea coast, although the smaller fish are considered by many quite equal or even superior to its relative, the redfish (Sciaenops ocellatus). With the channel bass or redfish it affords good sport to surf fishermen.

Texas leads all other States in the production of black drum; the following table shows the principal commercial distribution of black drum in 1940:

<u>States</u>	<u>Pounds</u>	<u>Value</u>
Texas	491,700	\$24,585
Florida	129,700	3,887
Louisiana	92,300	4,615
North Carolina	88,400	2,652
Virginia	36,400	364
South Carolina	33,500	1,174
	<u>872,000</u>	<u>\$37,277</u>

The drum is usually caught in haul seines incidental with other food fishes, although many are taken in pound nets along the Virginia coast. With the channel bass or red drum it frequently offers good sport to surf fishermen, especially off the New Jersey coast.

The drum is a bottom feeder and grubs around on the bottom in search of shellfish and other marine invertebrates on which it feeds. It is provided with broad pavement-like teeth and very powerful jaws which can easily crush all but the most heavily armored shellfish.

A small mollusc (Mulinia transversa corbuloides), found in deep mud, constitutes the principal food of the fish in Texas and the stomachs of young as well as adult drum are usually filled with the crushed shells of this clam. This is interesting in that it helps to explain the preference of both young and old fish for the extremely shallow and muddy bays along the Texas coast where the species abounds at all times of the year. In Florida the drum spawns in March, but in the vicinity of Virginia and Maryland spawning does not occur until the end of April or in May at which time the first catch of drum is made in the pound nets. The drum, as determined by investigations along the coast of Texas, spawn principally in the early spring from February to May, although spawning fish in small numbers may be found as late as September and October. A distinct spawning migration of the adult ripening fish takes place from the various bays and lagoons to the Gulf of Mexico where spawning occurs. This movement from the bays, occurring principally from late January through March, in the vicinity of Corpus Christi, Texas, has permitted a short seasonal fishery conducted by means of anchored gill nets set near the entrances to the various bays to intercept the migrating fish.

The larval or young drum come into the bays in great numbers through the passes and make their way to shallow bays and lagoons where feeding conditions are probably most suitable to the young fish. The adult fish after spawning reenter the bays also, although drum of all sizes from 4 inches up may be caught in moderate numbers along the beaches in the Gulf of Mexico at all times of the year.

On the basis of scale and length-frequency studies it appears that the black drum reaches an average length of about 10 inches by the end of the first year; 14-1/2 inches by the end of the second year; 16-1/2 inches by the end of the third year, while a fish about 27 inches long may be approximately 7 years old. A commercial size is reached by the end of the first year, and the fish are hardly desirable for food after the third year, since the flesh tends to become coarse and may be infested with parasites which reduce its marketability if not its wholesomeness.

Sexual maturity is usually attained at the end of the second year. The large drum are exceedingly prolific, a female 44 inches long, taken near Corpus Christi, Texas, in March, 1927, yielded from four to five million eggs in nearly ripe condition.

The scales of the drum find a unique application in the manufacture of "fish scale jewelry" to be seen in Florida, their fine lustre and hardness rendering them adaptable for this purpose. So firmly are the scales attached to the fish that an axe or a hatchet is necessary to remove them.

The fact which gives the fish its name is its ability to make a loud drumming noise under water. Some specimens kept in the New York Aquarium for a number of years could be heard all over the building.