

# Atlantic Croaker

*Micropogonias undulatus*

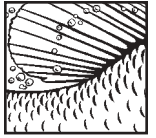


The Atlantic croaker is one of the most abundant fishes in North American coastal waters. It is an important commercial fish as well as an important sport fish.

Coastal Wetlands

# Atlantic Croaker

*Micropogonias undulatus*



## APPEARANCE

**Length:** 12 inches (30 cm)

**Weight:** 1/2 to 2 pounds (226 g to 0.9 kg)

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Three to five pairs of small *barbels* or “whiskers” on their chins help them feel for food on the sea floor.
- Lateral line extends to tip of *caudal* (tail) fin.
- *Inferior* mouth (located to the bottom of the head facing the ground)
- Brown vertical stripes on its sides
- Adults—silver with a pinkish cast
- Young—silvery and iridescent
- Older fish are brassy in color with vertical brown streaks formed by spots that are on their scales.

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** Atlantic coast from Massachusetts southward and throughout the Gulf of Mexico

**Diet:** Shrimp, crabs and *detritus* (dead and decomposing plant and animal matter)

**Predators:** Striped bass, shark, spotted seatrout, other croakers and humans

**Sexual maturity:** Along the Gulf Coast, at about one year old. This varies in other areas.

**Spawning season:** Fall, with peak between August and October

**Eggs:** Between 100,000 and 2 million eggs, each about 0.35 mm in diameter

**Young:** After hatching, the *larvae* (immature stage) drift toward land. They are abundant on soft bottoms, such as mud, where there are large amounts of *detritus* for them to feed on.

**Life span:** Up to eight years

## HABITAT

Atlantic croaker prefer estuaries and bays through the spring and summer, then travel offshore in the fall to breed.

## BEHAVIOR

Atlantic croaker “croak” by vibrating their swim bladders with special muscles as part of their spawning ritual. A swim bladder is a pocket full of air inside the fish that helps keep it afloat and facing upright. This behavior attracts females.

## NOW YOU KNOW!

- Atlantic croaker are also called hardheads, King Billies and grumblers.
- Croaker that live in the northern part of their range mature later and live longer than those in the southern part of their range.
- Because of predation, more than 95% of the Atlantic croaker population dies every year.
- Atlantic croaker should not be eaten raw because they may pass *trematodes* (parasites) to humans.
- The croaker is closely related to spotted seatrout and red drum.

## ATLANTIC CROAKER AND PEOPLE

The Atlantic croaker is a very important commercial fish. Millions of pounds are caught and sold every year in the United States and exported to other countries. The annual catch of croaker has declined in the past few years, probably due to over fishing. The best times for fishing for Atlantic croaker are from summer into the fall. They are easily caught on bait (dead shrimp) when fishing on the bottom. Small Atlantic croaker are used as a bait fish to catch other fish, especially spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*) and crabs.

