2026 NORTH CAROLINA RECREATIONAL COASTAL AND JOINT FISHING WATERS GUIDE FOR SPORTS FISHERMEN

UPDATED 9/2/2026

****IMPORTANT** CHECK WITH DIVISION OF MARINE FISHERIES FOR MOST CURRENT MINIMUM LENGTHS AND CREEL LIMITS.**
252-515-5500 OR 800-682-2632 OR www.ncmarinefisheries.net
You can also download the Fish Rules Mobile App at https://fishrulesapp.com/
Persons engaged in recreational fishing in North Carolina Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters are required to possess a Coastal Recreational Fishing License in accordance with G.S. 113-174.1

	STATE COASTAL AND JOINT FISHING WATERS (Internal and 0-3 miles)		FEDERAL MANAGEMENT INFORMATION
FINFISH SPECIES (note symbols)	**Minimum Length**	**Bag Limits (per person)**	
Bluefish (M) ▲▲	None	5/day (M)	https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/bluefish
Cobia ▲▲	See the most recent Cobia DMF proclamation at www.ncmarinefisheries.net		http://www.asmfc.org/species/cobia
Wahoo	None	2/Day	http://safmc.net/regulations/
Dolphin (B)	None	10/Day	
King Mackerel (H)	24" FL	3/Day	
Spanish Mackerel (H)	12" FL	15/Day	
Tuna: Bluefin, Bigeye and Yellowfin (G)	Bigeye and Yellowfin tuna 27" Curved FL	Yellowfin tuna 3/Day	https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/atlantic-highly-migratory-species
Spiny Dogfish	None	None	https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/atlantic-spiny-dogfish
Sharks (G)	See most recent DMF proclamation at www.ncmarinefisheries.net		https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/atlantic-highly-migratory-species
Blue Marlin (G)	99" LJFL	1 per vessel per trip, either blue marlin or white marlin	
White Marlin (G)	66" LJFL		
Sailfish (G)	63" LJFL	1/Day	
Red Drum (Channel Bass, Puppy Drum) (C)▲▲	18" Min – 27" Max TL	1/Day	https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2017-title50-vol13/pdf/CFR-2017-title50-vol13-sec697-7.pdf
Flounder▲ (All Species)	**Sep 1 – 14: OPEN Sep 15 – 30: CLOSED, UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS**		*https://www.deq.nc.gov/marine-fisheries/fisheries-management-proclamations/2026/flounder-recreational-internal-coastal-and-joint-fishing-waters-and-atlantic-ocean-waters/open*
Spotted Seatrout (Speckled Trout) ▲	**14"–20" TL, 1 greater than 26" TL**	**3/day**	*No Federal Regulations*
Weakfish (Gray Trout) ▲	12" TL	1/Day	https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2017-title50-vol13/pdf/CFR-2017-title50-vol13-sec697-7.pdf
Sheepshead ▲	14" TL	5/Day	*No Federal Regulations*
Black Drum (C) ▲▲	14" Min – 25" Max TL	10/Day	*No Federal Regulations*
Tarpon	UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS		*No Federal Regulations*
Striped Bass ▲	***UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS (A)***		Fishery Conservation Management (CFR-2017-title50-vol13-sec697-7.pdf) *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/atlantic-striped-bass*
American Shad (D)	None	(D)	*No Federal Regulations*
Hickory Shad (D)	None	(D)	*No Federal Regulations*
Alewife and Blueback Herring	***UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS***		*No Federal Regulations*
American Eel (E)	9" TL	25/Day	*No Federal Regulations*
Scup (North of Cape Hatteras only)	9" TL	30/Day	*https://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/sustainable/recfishing/regs/index.html*
Black Sea Bass (P) (North of Cape Hatteras)	13"TL	15/Day	SEASON OPEN May 1- Dec. 31 *https://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/sustainable/recfishing/regs/index.html*
Black Sea Bass (P) (South of Cape Hatteras)	13" TL	7/Day	http://safmc.net/regulations/ *https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-50/chapter-VI/part-622/appendix-Appendix%20C%20to%20Part%20622*
Snappers, Groupers, Porgys, Triggerfish, Jacks, Tilefish, Grunts, Spadefishes, Wrasses and Sea Basses (H)	See the most recent Snapper/Grouper Complex recreational DMF proclamation at www.ncmarinefisheries.net		http://safmc.net/regulations/
Mullet (striped and white) (O)▲▲	100/Day (species combined)		*No Federal Regulations*
Spot	None	50/Day	*http://www.asmfc.org/species/spot*
Atlantic Croaker	None	50/Day	*http://www.asmfc.org/species/atlantic-croaker*
PROHIBITED FINFISH SPECIES			
COASTAL AND JOINT FISHING WATERS (Internal waters and Atlantic Ocean out to 3 miles)			
Sharks: whale, basking, white, sand tiger, bigeye sand tiger, Atlantic angel shark, bigeye sixgill, bigeye thresher, bignose, Caribbean reef, Caribbean sharpnose, dusky, Galapagos, longfin mako, oceanic whitetip, shortfin mako, narrowtooth, night, sandbar, silky, sevengill, sixgill, and smalltail. Other finfish: river herring, Atlantic sturgeon, shortnose sturgeon, Nassau grouper, Goliath grouper, Warsaw grouper, speckled hind and red snapper.			

SHELLFISH and CRUSTACEANS		STATE COASTAL FISHING AND EEZ WATERS (Internal waters and 0-200 miles)	
		Minimum Size	Bag Limits (per person)
BLUE CRAB (F) ▲▲		5" Carapace Width	**UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS from January 1-31 North of Highway 58 bridge** **UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS from March 1-15 South of the Highway 58 bridge** 50 Crabs/Day not to exceed 100 Crabs/Vessel/Day
STONE CRAB CLAWS (J)		2 ¾ " Propodus Length	**UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS from June 15 – August 15** (no possession limit during open season)
SPINY LOBSTER (K)		3" Carapace Length (L)	2/Trip
HARD CLAM (I)		1" Thick	100 Clams/Day not to exceed 200 Clams/Vessel/Day
OYSTER (I)		SEASON CLOSED	UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS
BAY SCALLOP		SEASON CLOSED	UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS
CONCHS and WHELKS		None	10/Day not to exceed 20/Vessel/Day
MUSSELS		None	100/Day not to exceed 200/Vessel/Day
SHRIMP (N)	**Closed Shrimping Area**	None	48 quarts (heads on) or 30 quarts (heads off) of shrimp per person per day or if a vessel is used, per vessel per day (Cast Net Only)
	Open Shrimping Area	None	48 quarts (heads on) or 30 quarts (heads off) of shrimp per person per day or if a vessel is used, per vessel per day (Cast Net Only). Recreational Commercial Gear License (RCGL) holders are allowed up to 96 quarts (heads on) or 60 quarts (heads off) of shrimp if more than one person aboard a vessel possesses a valid RCGL.

SYMBOLS TO LOOK FOR:

(A) **Albemarle Sound Management Area**: SEASON CURRENTLY CLOSED; **Central Southern Management Area (CSMA)**: Unlawful to possess striped bass (including hybrid bass); **Atlantic Ocean**: Year-round: 1 per person per day and a harvest slot limit of 28 inches to 31 inches TL. Unlawful to gig, spear, or gaff striped bass; **see the most recent DMF proclamation at www.ncmarinefisheries.net**.

(B) Limit of 10 per person per day or 54 per trip, whichever is less. On head boats, limit is 10 per person per day. No sale of recreational bag limit on vessels operating as charter or head boats.

(C) Unlawful to possess red drum greater than 27" TL. Unlawful to gig, spear, or gaff red drum. One **black drum** per person per day over 25" TL is allowed.

(D) For aggregate creel limits for American shad and hickory shad, **see the most recent DMF proclamation at** www.ncmarinefisheries.net. Unlawful to take or possess American shad from the Atlantic Ocean.

(E) Season open January 1 – August 31, except year-round when taken by baited pots.

(F) It is illegal to possess immature female crabs at any time and it is illegal to possess dark sponge crabs from April 1 – April 30.

(G) In state or federal waters, federal permit required for Highly Migratory Species, tunas, billfishes, swordfish and sharks (excluding Atlantic bonito, little tunny (false albacore), and blackfin tuna): https://hmspermits.noaa.gov/ 978-281-9370. Prior to removal from vessel, all billfishes, swordfish and bluefin tuna must be reported at NC HMS reporting stations. See the DMF website for more details. For seasons, bag limits, size limits or closures for tunas, billfishes, and sharks contact NMFS Highly Migratory Species Division 800-894-5528.

(H) For seasons, bag limits and size limits on snapper, grouper, and mackerels contact the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council 843-571-4366 or www.safmc.net, and **see the most recent Snapper Grouper or Mackerel recreational DMF proclamation at** www.ncmarinefisheries.net

(I) Contact DMF or visit www.ncmarinefisheries.net to **see the most recent DMF shellfish and polluted area proclamations** for seasons, areas, or other restrictions. An interactive map of areas closed to the harvest of shellfish due to water quality monitoring by DMF's Shellfish Sanitation section can be viewed at, https://ncdenr.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5759aa19d7484a3b82a8e440fba643aa. Oyster season is October 15 – March 31 unless closed earlier by proclamation.

(J) Propodus (forearm) length is measured by a straight line from elbow to the tip of the lower immoveable finger. The propodus (forearm) is defined as the largest section of the claw assembly that has both a moveable and immovable finger and is located farthest from the body of the crab. Unlawful to possess stone crab bodies or fail to immediately return to the waters from which taken. Unlawful to use a device to take stone crabs that can puncture, crush, or injure the crab body, such as gigs, spears, grabs, hooks, or similar devices. Unlawful to remove, take or possess stone crab claws from June 15 through August 15 (no possession limit during open season).

(K) **See the most recent DMF proclamation at** www.ncmarinefisheries.net it is unlawful to possess an egg bearing spiny lobster or a spiny lobster which eggs have been scrubbed or removed. It is unlawful to possess aboard a vessel or land detached spiny lobster tails, or to use a gaff hook, spear, or similar device to take spiny lobsters.

(L) The carapace is measured beginning at the forward edge between the rostral horns and eyes, excluding any soft tissue, and proceeding along the middle to the rear edge of the carapace.

(M) Creel limit for bluefish is set by proclamation **see the most recent DMF proclamation at** www.ncmarinefisheries.net The recreational creel limit for bluefish is 5 fish per person per day in all private (non for-hire) recreational fisheries. Recreational anglers engaged on a for-hire vessel can possess up to 7 bluefish per person per day.

(N) Areas open to the taking of shrimp are set by proclamation, **see the most recent DMF proclamation at** www.ncmarinefisheries.net.

(O) The recreational individual bag limit for mullet (striped and white combined) is 100 fish per person per day. The recreational vessel limit is 100 fish per angler fishing up to a maximum of 400 fish per vessel. For Hire Operations may possess the 100 fish individual bag limit for all anglers fishing on the boat up to the 400 fish vessel limit, including in advance of a trip.

(P) Black Sea Bass are to be measured with a Total Length (TL) as the straight-line distance from the tip of the snout to the tip of the tail (caudal fin), **excluding any caudal filament**, while the fish is laying on its side. The mouth of the fish may be closed and/or the tail may be squeezed together to give the greatest overall measurement.

▲ Size and creel limits for fish taken in inland waters are the same as the recreational limits for those species in adjacent joint and coastal waters.

▲▲ *For size, creel, season, and other requirements for fish taken in inland waters, please see www.ncwildlife.org*

Total length (TL) is measured from tip of snout with mouth closed to top of compressed tail except black see bass (see note (P) above). Fork length (FL) is measured from tip of snout to middle of fork in tail. Lower jaw fork length (LJFL) is measured from lower jaw to middle of fork in tail. Curved fork length (CFL) is the measurement of the length taken in a line tracing the contour of the body from the tip of the upper jaw to the fork of the tail. Anglers cannot catch both a federal and state bag limit for the same species on the same trip.

Ocean boundary is defined as water seaward of the COLREGS Demarcation Lines as indicated on National Ocean Service navigations charts.
No one may possess aboard a vessel or while engaged in fishing any fish subject to limits without head and tail attached, except for mullet when used for bait and hickory shad when used for bait provided not more than two fish per boat/operation may be cut at any one time – Reference 15A NCAC 03M_0101

Morehead City Office (24 hours)	Elizabeth City Office	Manteo Office	Washington Office	Wilmington Office	NMFS (Fed. Reg.)
800-682-2632 or 252-515-5500	800-338-7805 or 252-381-6000	252-473-5734	800-338-7804 or 252-948-3800	800-248-4536 or 910-796-7215	301-427-8505

THIS FLYER IS EFFECTIVE September **2, 2026,** AND IS FOR GENERAL INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES AND HAS NO LEGAL FORCE OR EFFECT. **FISHERY RULES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE.** THESE RESTRICTIONS APPLY TO FISH TAKEN FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES AND INCLUDE HOOK AND LINE. Updated State regulations can be found at https://deq.nc.gov/recreational-size-bag-limits and updated Recreational Commercial Gear License information can be found at https://deq.nc.gov/recreational-commercial-gear-license.

FOR INLAND WATER FISHING REGULATIONS, CALL WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION 919-707-0220 OR WWW.NCWILDLIFE.ORG

Effective December 1, 2025, any Red Drum, Flounder, Spotted Seatrout, Striped Bass, and Weakfish harvested must be reported at deq.nc.gov/report-my-fish.

Mandatory Reporting

Proclamations

STATE AND FEDERAL REGULATIONS CAN ALSO BE FOUND AT www.FishRulesApp.com