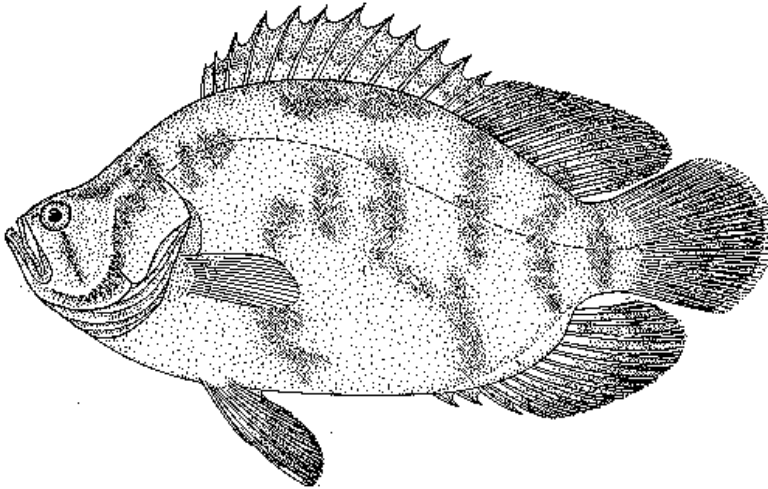


Tripletail, *Lobotes surinamensis*



Tripletail occur worldwide in warm seas. In the western Atlantic Ocean, they occur from Cape Cod to Argentina and throughout the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. Tripletail are attracted to floating objects and are often caught around buoys, channel markers, and floating debris. While little information on their biology is available, a preliminary analysis of samples taken from commercial fishery landings made in Florida has provided some information on their age, growth, and reproduction (Armstrong *et al.* 1996a). Apparent maximum ages in these samples were 6 years for males and 7 years for females (Armstrong *et al.* 1996a). The ages from otoliths, although preliminary and unvalidated, indicate that tripletail grow rapidly during their first few years of life (Table 1). Females were slightly larger than males. The smallest mature male found was 11.8 inches total length (TL), and the smallest mature female was 14.2 inches. It was estimated that males mature at about 11.8–15.7 inches and females at about 13.8–19.7 inches TL.

Table 1. Length-weight relations for tripletail

| Weight in lbs = a (inches TL) ^b | a | b | Source |
|--|----------|-------|--------------------------------|
| Male, Florida | 0.000409 | 3.217 | Armstrong <i>et al</i> (1996a) |
| Female, Florida | 0.000395 | 3.237 | Armstrong <i>et al</i> (1996a) |

Total annual landings of tripletail in Florida during 2005 were 197,337 pounds. These landings were fairly evenly distributed by coast (53% Atlantic, 47% gulf) and mostly by recreational fishers (97% of statewide landings by weight). Commercial landings were highest in Brevard County on the Atlantic coast (Fig. 1). The recreation landings were evenly distributed along both coasts (Fig. 2). The 2005 total landings of tripletail were 36% lower than the average landings in the previous five years (2000-2004) and were 15% lower than the 1982–2005 historical average landings (Fig. 3). Tripletail landings have fluctuated greatly on the Atlantic coast. Estimated total annual landings between 1986 and 1991 do not include commercial landings of tripletail because they were not reported separately from other fishes. Since 1991, Atlantic landings have fluctuated without trend but with high landings from 1995-2002, followed by low landings in 2003, 2004, and 2005 (Fig. 3). In 2005, Atlantic coast landings were only about 104,000 pounds. After peaking at about 600,000 pounds in 1996, gulf coast landings have

been less than 200,000 pounds per year from 2003-2005. Gulf coast landings show an increasing trend through 1991 (peaked at about 150,000 pounds), after which gulf coast landings drop considerably and have fluctuated between 10,000 and 90,000 pounds per year.

Between 1992 and 2005, the commercial catch-per-trip on the Atlantic coast has been fairly stable and varied around 7-8 pounds per trip (Fig. 4). On the gulf coast, commercial-catch rates have fluctuated around 5-7 pounds per trip from 1992-2001, since then catch rates have been steadily increasing, though the estimates are less precise (Fig. 5). Recreational catch rates on the Atlantic coast have been stable and fluctuate around 1 fish per trip since 1992 (Fig. 6). On the gulf coast recreational catch rates are imprecise before 1999, since then catch rates have been fairly stable at about 1 fish per trip (Fig. 7).

The present condition of the tripletail stock in Florida is unknown due to uncertainties associated with available life history information and poor estimates of recreational landings (Armstrong *et al.* 1996a). Comparisons of 1995 estimates of instantaneous fishing mortality rates ($F=0.24-0.54$ per year) with biological reference points indicated that the stock was not overfished at that time; estimates of spawning potential ratios ranged from 21% to 57% (Armstrong *et al.* 1996a). In 1996, regulations for the recreational and commercial catch of tripletail were established (Chapter 68B-49). The current regulations for tripletail harvest include a 15" minimum size, a 2 fish per day recreational harvest and possession limit, and 10 fish per day commercial vessel limit. In addition, the regulations on commercial fisheries only permit the use of hook and line gear, allowing a 2 fish per day by-catch for tripletail otherwise legally harvested in nonconforming gear. The regulations also designate the species as a "restricted species" and prohibit the use of multiple hooks in conjunction with natural bait and snagging (snatch hooking). Effective August 1998 the sale of undersize tripletail was also prohibited.

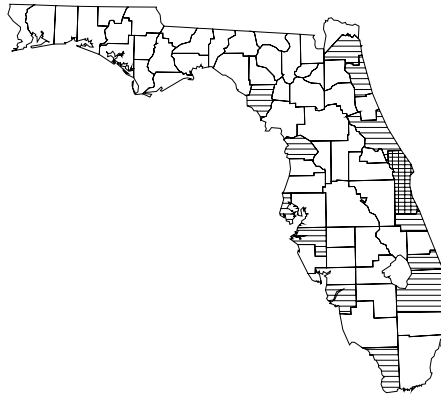


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of commercial landings of tripletail during 2005

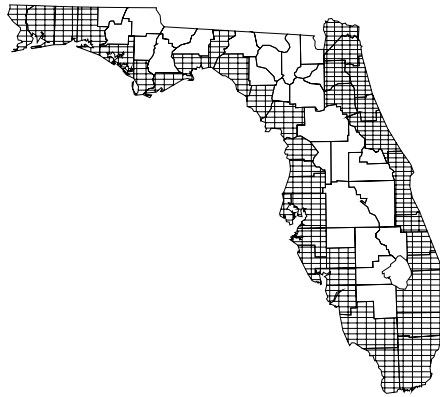


Figure 2. Geographic distribution of recreational landings of tripletail during 2005

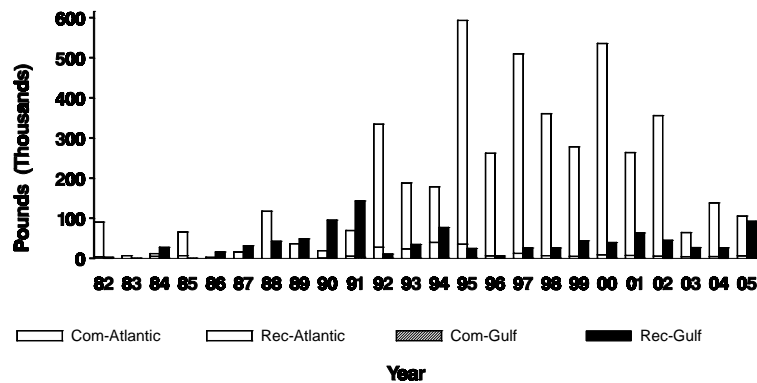


Figure 3. Total annual landings of tripletail on the Atlantic and gulf coasts of Florida, 1982–2005 Commercial landings were not available for the period 1986-1990.

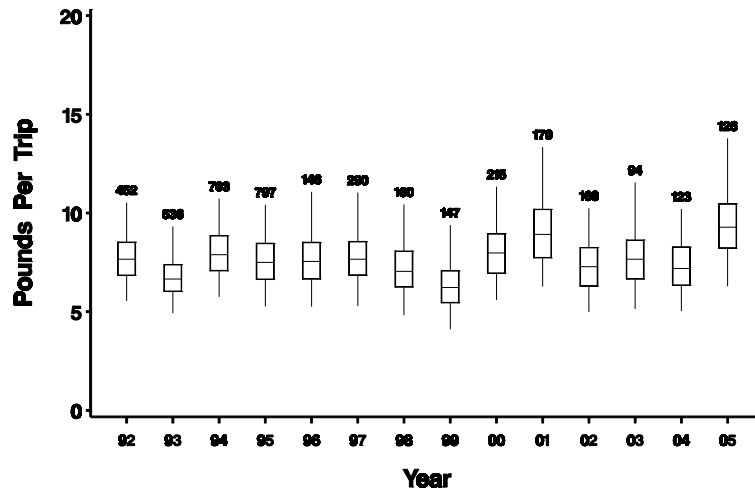


Figure 4. Annual standardized commercial catch rates (pounds) for tripletail on the Atlantic coast of Florida, 1992–2005

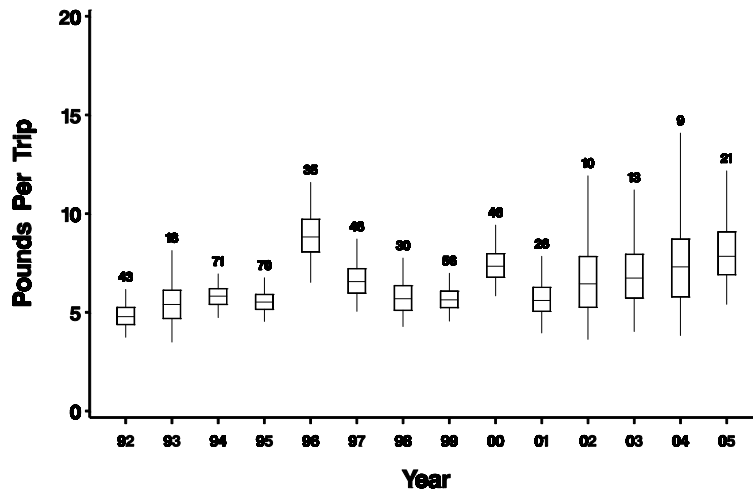


Figure 5. Annual standardized commercial catch rates (pounds) for tripletail on the gulf coast of Florida, 1992–2005

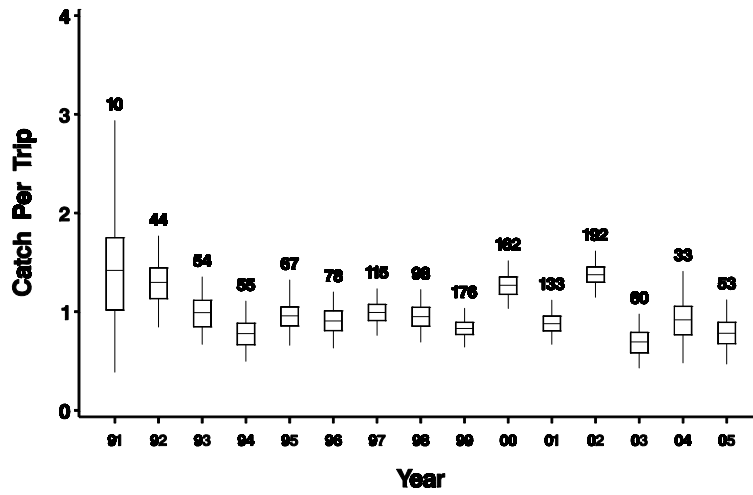


Figure 6. Annual standardized recreational total-catch rates (numbers) for tripletail on the Atlantic coast of Florida, 1991–2005

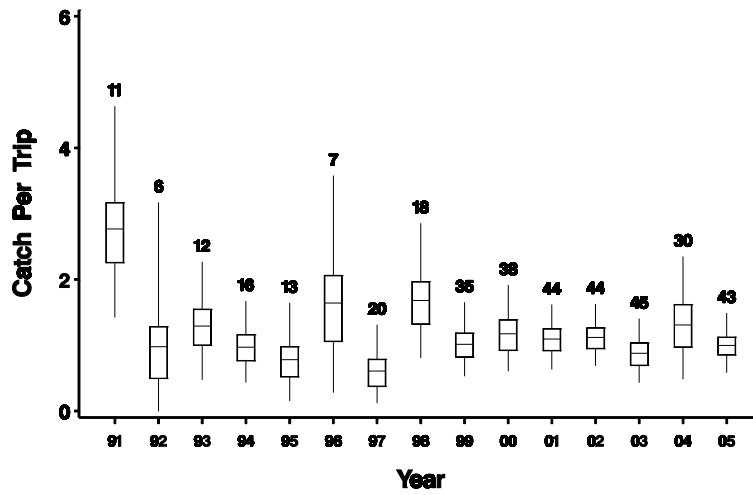


Figure 7. Annual standardized recreational total-catch rates (numbers) for tripletail on the gulf coast of Florida, 1991–2005