

Kingfish

Menticirrhus saxatilis (Bloch and Schneider) 1801
[Jordan and Evermann, 1896-1900, p. 1475.]

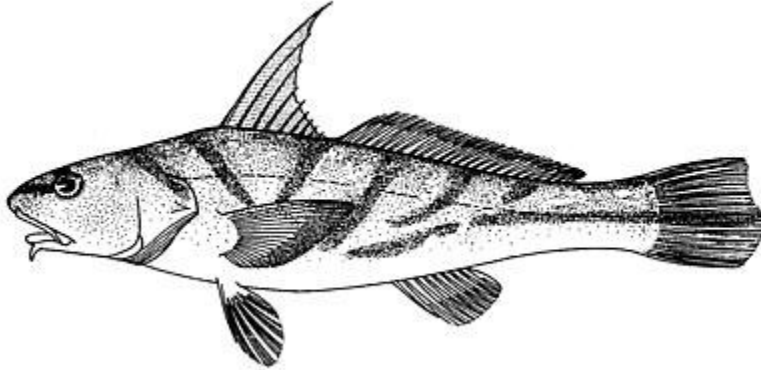


Figure 219 - Kingfish (*Menticirrhus saxatilis*), Pensicola Florida.
From Goode. Drawing by H. L. Todd.

Description

The kingfish resembles the weakfish in the general arrangement and the relative sizes of its fins, the second dorsal being much longer than the first or than the anal. But its first dorsal (10 spines) is relatively much higher and more pointed than that of the weakfish, with the third spine not only much prolonged but filamentous at the tip in the adult (a noticeable character); the rather blunt nose, and snout overhanging the mouth, give the kingfish a very characteristic cast of countenance (fig. 219). Its upper jaw, furthermore, projects beyond the lower, whereas the reverse is the case in the squeteague. Its chin bears a barbel, which the weakfish lacks, its lips are fleshy, and it has no canine teeth. Its tail, too, is of very characteristic outline, with the lower half rounded but the upper half concave suggesting (though not exactly paralleling) the tail of the sea bass (p. 407). Its body is about as slender, proportionally, as that of a squeteague, but the kingfish carries its weight farther forward (it is deepest below the first dorsal fin), and it has a weak-tailed appearance remotely suggesting a hake (p. 222). We need merely note further that the filamentous spine of the first dorsal is longer in large fish than in small ones; that the second dorsal (one stout but short spine followed by 24 to 27 rays) occupies more than one-third of the length of the back and tapers slightly from front to rear; that the anal fin (one long spine and 8 rays) stands under the middle of the soft dorsal; and the pectorals are pointed and relatively much longer than those of the squeteague.

The Kingfish and its immediate relatives have no air bladder, hence makes no sounds, in which they differ from other members of their family.

Color

Leaden or dusky gray above, (sometimes so dark as to be almost black) with silvery and metallic reflections; milky or yellowish-white below. The sides are cross marked irregularly with dark bars. These run obliquely forward and downward behind the spiny dorsal fin, but the foremost one or two bars run in the opposite direction, so that they form a V-shaped blotch or two dark V's below the fin. The pale belly is bounded above by a dark longitudinal streak on either side. The fins are dusky or blackish; the first dorsal fin anal, pectorals, and ventrals are tipped with dirty white.

Size

Kingfish grow to a maximum length of 17 inches and a weight of about 3 pounds, but the general run are from 10 to 14 inches long, weighing ½ to 1½ pounds.

Habits

Kingfish, like squeteague, are summer fish, appearing on the coast in May, to vanish in October. They are confined to the immediate vicinity of the coast during their stay, frequenting in closed as well as open waters, even entering river mouths, and they are unknown on the offshore banks. They run in schools, keep close to the ground, prefer hard or sandy bottom, and feed [page 425] on various shrimps (perhaps their chief diet), crabs, and other crustaceans, small mollusks, worms, and on young fish.

Breeding habits

Kingfish spawn in bays and sounds from June until August, but it is not likely that any young that might be hatched in the Gulf of Maine from eggs laid by the occasional visitors would survive its low temperature, Welsh and Breder[94] describe the spawning and early development of this species. Young fry of ¾ to 1-inch already show most of the structural characters of the adult, including the scales, and so are readily recognizable as kingfish though they vary widely in color, ranging from the pattern of the adult to almost uniform blackish brown. Welsh and Breder found from an examination of the scales, confirmed by a large series of measurements, that kingfish are 4 to 6 inches long by the first winter, average about 10 inches the second winter, and 13¾ the third. Many males ripen when 2 years old, but few females until 3 years old.

General range

Atlantic coasts of the United States from Florida (Pensacola, Key West) northward regularly to Cape Cod; most numerous from Chesapeake Bay to New York; known as far north as Casco Bay, Maine, as a stray.

Occurrence in the Gulf of Maine

This excellent food and game fish reaches the Gulf of Maine only as a stray from the south. So far as we can learn the only positive records of it within our limits are as follows, south to north: Monomoy and North Truro on Cape Cod in 1896 (collected by Dr. W. C. Kendall); one taken at Provincetown, July 1847, another there in November of that same year and many small ones, apparently chilled by the cold, that appeared in that harbor in 1879; one taken at the entrance of Boston Harbor in a lobster pot some time before 1833; one at Lynn in 1840; one 8 inches long off Marblehead on October 15, 1872; one of 6½ inches at Danvers, October 28, 1874; others at Nahant (one record),[95] and in Casco Bay.

Catch statistics, if taken at face value, would suggest that kingfish reached the northern shore of Massachusetts Bay (Essex County) in unprecedented numbers during the period 1931 to 1938,[96] but we are informed by William Royce of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service that all the fish taken by vessels sailing out of Gloucester during these years were credited to that port, irrespective of where caught or where they were landed. There is no reason to suppose that any of these kingfish or "king whiting" actually came from as far east or north as Cape Cod, or even from anywhere in southern New England waters for that matter. And this applies equally to 466 pounds reported in 1932 from Maine.

It is, in short, an unusual event for a kingfish to round the elbow of Cape Cod, or for a small school of its fry, nor have we heard of any taken anywhere in the Gulf during recent years.

Importance

The kingfish is not plentiful enough in the Gulf to interest either commercial fishermen or anglers. It is one of the better table fishes, and a favorite with surf anglers along the coasts of New York, New Jersey, and southward, as it bites readily and fights well. In the words of a well-known angler, "no fish that swims the sea makes a better dish. Certainly no bottom living fish plays such a game for the angler's real delight." [97]

[94] Bull. U. S. Bur. Fish., vol. 39, 1924, pp. 191-194.

[95] Small amounts of "kingfish" appear in the pound-net returns published by the State of Massachusetts at various localities in Massachusetts Bay, but fishermen inform us that these were not the true kingfish but some large species of the mackerel tribe.

[96] For Essex County, Man., 2,029 pounds reported during 1931; 34,981 pounds for 1933; 5,100-10,600 pounds for 1933, 1935, 1937 and 1938.

[97] Rhead, Bait Angling for Common Fishes, 1907. p. 145.

Fishes of the Gulf of Maine by Bigelow & Schroeder is the seminal work on North Atlantic fishes. It was originally published in 1925 with William Welsh, a Bureau of Fisheries scientist who often accompanied Henry Bigelow on his research cruises. In the late 1920's, Bigelow began a long association with William C. Schroeder, publishing a number of papers and reports on fishes of the North Atlantic, including the first revision of *Fishes of the Gulf of Maine*. This excerpt is from that 1953 edition.

