

## **Fishing / By John Clark**

Over the past five years, we have seen more Delaware anglers going deep. Deep – as in heading to offshore water that drops hundreds of feet down to bottom fish. Many of these trips may have started out targeting some of our big pelagic species near the surface, such as tuna and marlin, but have ended up fishing the bottom and targeting tilefish. The two species of tilefish most often pursued by anglers, Golden and Blueline, are beautiful denizens of the deep ocean bottom that grow to large size and also taste great. But the increasing popularity of tilefish along the Atlantic Coast has led the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and states including Delaware to take precautionary measures to prevent overfishing.

Golden Tilefish are found on the continental slope off the entire U.S. Atlantic coast, typically at depths from 250 to 1,200 feet, while Blueline Tilefish are found in continental slope waters from Delmarva south, typically at depths from 250 to 800 feet. Both species are large, with the Golden growing to 48 inches, and the Blueline to 32 inches. Both also are long-lived and slow growing. Although the Golden tilefish population seems stable, the Blueline tilefish population has been decreasing.

Commercial fishermen have been targeting tilefish for many years, but landings have recently reached levels not seen since the early 1990s. Meanwhile, recreational tilefish angling has increased with the growing popularity of offshore fishing, as well as the advent of fishing gear such as electric reels, that make the taking of tilefish in their deepwater habitat practical. The catch of Blueline tilefish off Delaware by the recreational fishing sector, documented by reporting the daily catch to NMFS, increased from 25 in 2010, to 9,267 in 2014. This spiraling increase in recreational catch is important to note because tilefish inhabit such deep water, that most suffer barotrauma when reeled to the surface and will not survive if thrown back.

Delaware's new tilefish regulation went into effect in January of this year. It limits commercial tilefish landings to 300 lbs. per day and limits recreational anglers to seven tilefish (Golden and Blueline combined) per day. This regulation is a sensible precaution that should prevent overfishing and allow these fisheries to continue to thrive.

***Mr. Clark is administrator of DNREC's Fisheries Section.***