

SEA GRANT

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A very unusual fish, a wreckfish, was recently caught and submitted to the Alabama Marine Recourses Division for state record recognition.

Wreckfish are a large, sea bass type of fish that live in the deep waters of the western and eastern Atlantic. They are found in 140 feet of water to over 3,000 feet of water from Norway to South Africa and Newfoundland to the northeast coast of Florida. They also are found in the South Atlantic from Uruguay to Argentina and in New Zealand. Most sources of information do not mention wreckfish being found in the Gulf of Mexico.

The occurrence of wreckfish off the Alabama coast suggests either a random, wandering individual was hooked or the possibility of an undiscovered population and points out again how little we know about the deep waters of the ocean.

When wreckfish were found off the southeast U.S. coast in the 1980s, a commercial fishery developed and some studies were done to support management of the fishery. One thing scientist noted was that small fish were rarely caught but smaller fish were commonly caught in the eastern Atlantic around the Azores, Madeira, and in the Mediterranean. They also noticed that large adult fish caught off of the U.S. often had hooks in them that are only used by fishermen in the eastern Atlantic. These two bits of information plus some genetic testing suggested that adult wreckfish found off the southeast U.S. coast migrated from the Azores and Madeira of the eastern Atlantic. Here, off the U.S. coast, adults spawn and apparently currents carry the developing juvenile back to eastern Atlantic. Given these possibilities, it does not seem too unlikely that some wreckfish could find their way into the Gulf of Mexico.

Wreckfish grows to 220 pounds. The world record for hook and line is 158 pounds and the pending Alabama record is 68 pounds.

The commercial fishery for wreckfish in the U.S. peaked at about 1.7 million pounds and then dwindled away. The fish were still abundant but the difficulty and cost of catching fish in deep water far off shore proved to be too high compared to less expensive imports and more traditional domestic species.