

STATE MANAGED SPECIES – RIVER HERRING

**FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE
RIVER HERRING
AUGUST 2024**

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

Original FMP Adoption:	February 2000	
Amendments:	Amendment 1	September 2007
	Amendment 2	May 2015
Revisions:	None	
Supplements:	None	
Information Updates:	None	
Schedule Changes:	None	
Comprehensive Review:	2027	

In North Carolina blueback herring (*Alosa aestivalis*) and alewife (*Alosa pseudoharengus*), collectively known as river herring, are managed under Amendment 2 to the North Carolina Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for River Herring. The original FMP, adopted February 2000, focused on issues pertaining to stock conditions (overfished and recruitment overfishing), habitat degradations, and research/monitoring expansion to provide assessment and socioeconomic data (NCDMF 2000). Amendment 1 implemented a no-harvest provision for commercial and recreational fisheries of river herring in coastal waters of the state, effective in 2007 (NCDMF 2007). This was a result of the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF) 2005 stock assessment of river herring (data through 2003) that determined blueback herring and alewife were overfished and overfishing was occurring. There was minimal recruitment with continued declines in abundance for both species and high fishing mortality rates (Grist 2005). Additional management strategies included gear restrictions and stock recovery indicators (based on blueback herring). Amendment 1 also included a 7,500 pounds limited research set-aside harvest to be used for data collection and to provide product to local herring festivals. The DMF Director allocated a maximum of 4,000 pounds to be used for this discretionary harvest season by permitted fishermen, which occurred in the Chowan River Herring Management Area around Easter week each year. Additional outcomes of Amendment 1 included implementing monitoring programs; endorsing additional research on predation, restoration, impediments, bycatch; and supporting spawning area habitat protection.

Amendment 2 was finalized in 2015 with three management issues: 1) eliminating the discretionary river herring harvest season and permit since it was not serving the intended purposes of providing biological data for stock analysis and local product; 2) moving the Albemarle Sound/Chowan River Herring Management Areas to 15A NCAC 03R .0202, which corrected a reference and corrected the boundary of the Cashie River Anadromous Fish Spawning Area, and 3) removing alewife and blueback herring from exceptions in the Mutilated Finfish Rule 15A NCAC 03M .0101 (NCDMF 2015a).

Due to the Rules Review Committee receiving at least 10 letters requesting legislative review (pursuant to G.S. 150B), a portion of the third issue to prohibit possession of river herring (alewife and blueback herring) greater than six inches aboard a vessel or while engaged in fishing from

the shore or a pier underwent legislative review during the 2016 spring short session. Since a bill was not introduced specifically disapproving the rule, the rule was effective June 13, 2016, in the River Herring Rule 15A NCAC 03M .0513.

In addition to the State FMP, river herring are managed through Amendment 2 of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Interstate FMP for Shad and River Herring. Adopted in 2009, Amendment 2 requires management measures from the ASMFC be adopted by North Carolina as the minimum standard for the fishery, while the North Carolina plan can adopt additional measures (ASMFC 2009). Additionally, Amendment 2 requires that states and jurisdictions develop sustainable FMPs to maintain a commercial and/or recreational river herring fishery past January 2012. Since a no-harvest provision is in place, North Carolina does not have a sustainable FMP. If Amendment 2 established targets are met in the future and allowing harvest is desired, a sustainable FMP would need to be developed by the state and approved by the ASMFC.

To ensure compliance with ASMFC interstate requirements, North Carolina also manages river herring under the North Carolina Fishery Management Plan for Interjurisdictional Fisheries (IJ FMP). The goal of the IJ FMP is to adopt fishery management plans, consistent with N.C. law, approved by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, or the ASMFC by reference and implement corresponding fishery regulations in North Carolina to provide compliance or compatibility with approved fishery management plans and amendments, now and in the future. The goal of these plans, established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (federal council plans) and the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act (ASMFC plans) are like the goals of the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997 to “ensure long-term viability” of these fisheries (NCDMF 2015b).

Management Unit

Blueback herring and alewife management authority lies with the ASMFC. Responsibility for management action in the Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ), located 3–200 miles from shore, lies with the Secretary of Commerce through the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act in the absence of a federal FMP. The DMF also has a state FMP in place for statewide management of river herring.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of Amendment 2 to the North Carolina River Herring FMP is to restore the long-term viability of the river herring population. To achieve this goal, the plan adopts the following objectives:

- Identify and describe population attributes necessary to sustain long-term stock viability.
- Protect, restore, and enhance spawning and nursery area habitats.
- Initiate, enhance, and/or continue programs to collect and analyze biological, social, economic, fishery, and environmental data needed to effectively monitor and manage the river herring fishery.
- Promote education and public information to help the public understand the causes and nature of problems in the river herring stocks, its habitats and fisheries, and the rationale for management efforts to solve these problems.

The goal of Amendment 2 to the ASMFC Interstate FMP for Shad and River Herring (River Herring Management) is to protect, enhance, and restore east coast migratory spawning stocks of alewife

and blueback herring in order to achieve stock restoration and maintain sustainable levels of spawning stock biomass. To achieve this goal, the plan adopts the following objectives:

- Prevent further declines in river herring (alewife and blueback herring) abundance.
- Improve our understanding of bycatch mortality by collecting and analyzing bycatch data.
- Increase our understanding of river herring fisheries, stock dynamics and population health through fishery-dependent and independent monitoring, in order to allow for evaluation of management performance.
- Retain existing or more conservative regulations for American shad and hickory shad.
- Promote improvements in degraded or historic alosine critical habitat throughout the species' range.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

River herring is a collective term for alewife and blueback herring. River herring are anadromous fish, meaning they migrate from the ocean, into coastal bays and sounds, and into freshwater rivers and streams to spawn. Alewife spawn in rivers, lakes, and tributaries from northeastern Newfoundland to South Carolina, but are most abundant in the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast. Blueback herring prefer to spawn in swift flowing rivers and tributaries from Nova Scotia to northern Florida but are most abundant in waters from the Chesapeake Bay south. Mature alewife (ages 3–9) and blueback herring (ages 3–9) migrate rapidly downstream after spawning. Juveniles remain in tidal freshwater nursery areas in spring and early summer but may also move upstream with the encroachment of saline water. As water temperatures decline in the fall, juveniles move downstream to more saline waters. Little information is available on the life history of river herring after they emigrate to the sea and before they mature and return to freshwater to spawn.

Adult river herring feed primarily on zooplankton (small, often microscopic animals floating in the water column) although they may also feed on fish eggs, crustacean eggs, insects and insect eggs, and small fish in some areas and in larger individuals. In general, alewife are larger than blueback herring of the same age and with each species females are larger than males. Total length for either species in North Carolina rarely exceeds 12 inches.

Stock Status

An Atlantic coastwide river herring stock assessment update was completed in August 2017, with data through 2015, by the ASMFC. Results indicate that river herring remain depleted and at near historic lows on a coastwide basis (ASMFC 2017). The North Carolina portion of the coastwide stock assessment is for the Chowan River blueback herring stock only, due to the long-term data available for this area. River herring in other parts of the state are currently listed as unknown by the ASMFC due to the lack of data for these systems. The stock assessment update found that, although the North Carolina stock in the Chowan River was not experiencing overfishing (harvesting from a stock at a rate greater than the stock's reproductive capacity to replace fish removed through harvest), the stock remains overfished. The factors leading to the stock status remain largely unchanged since the 2012 stock assessment, despite insignificant fishing pressure. The spawning stock biomass (SSB) for blueback herring, a stock status indicator, remains 12% of the amount necessary to replace itself in the complete absence of fishing (Figure 1).

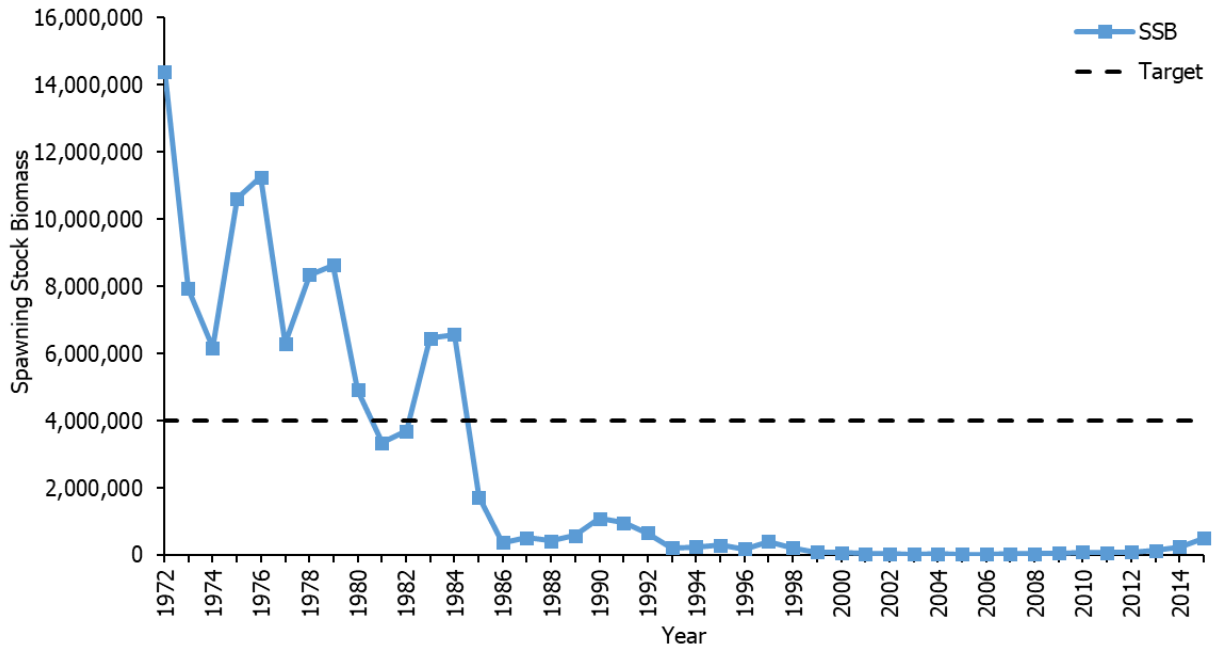


Figure 1. Annual predicted spawning stock biomass (SSB) in pounds for the Chowan River blueback herring stock, compared to the SSBTarget, 1972–2015. SSB is a stock status indicator and 2015 is the terminal year for the last river herring stock assessment update (ASMFC 2017).

Stock Assessment

The ASMFC stock assessment update used a forward-projecting, age-structured statistical catch-at-age model for the Chowan River blueback herring stock. The stock assessment incorporated blueback herring data from total in-river catches, age compositions, length compositions, and a fisheries-independent juvenile index to estimate age-3 abundance and mortality rates, from 1972 to 2015. Based on the 2015 fishing mortality rate and female spawning stock biomass estimates, the Chowan River blueback herring population is overfished but over-fishing is not occurring. Estimates of fishing mortality have been close to zero since the moratorium. Juvenile abundance is well below the North Carolina Amendment 2 target of 60 fish per haul with no increasing pattern evident. The percentage of repeat spawners varied from 2007 through 2010, remaining below the target of 10%, but has exceeded the target since 2011 to the highest level in 22 years of 16.8% in 2015. The SSB for blueback herring has been increasing since 2010 but remains at approximately 12% of the target of 3.9 million pounds. The ASMFC is conducting a benchmark stock assessment for river herring with data through 2021. The results of the assessment are expected to be available in August 2024.

It is worthy to note the importance habitat and water quality play in the recovery of the river herring stocks in North Carolina and coastwide (NCDMF 2009). In North Carolina, considerable habitat has been lost through wetland drainage, stream channelization, and conversion to other uses. Some streams are blocked by dams, storm debris, and other physical barriers. Migration and spawning may be affected by the replacement of small road bridges and culverts. Oxygen consuming wastes are discharged into several streams and practices to control non-point discharges are inadequate causing nuisance algal blooms, fish kills, and fish diseases over the years. The DMF initiated a survey of culverts and obstructions following Amendment 1 to the North Carolina River Herring FMP. The list created from the survey has resulted in the replacement of failing culverts and prioritized others for replacement or repair.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

In 2007, Amendment 1 to the North Carolina River Herring FMP implemented a no-harvest provision for commercial and recreational fisheries of river herring in coastal waters. The North Carolina River Herring FMP Amendment 2, adopted by the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) in May 2015, eliminated the discretionary river herring harvest season and permit, removed alewife and blueback herring from exceptions in the Mutilated Finfish Rule, and prohibited the possession of river herring (blueback herring and alewife) greater than six inches aboard a vessel or while engaged in fishing from the shore or a pier.

Commercial Fishery

North Carolina landings of river herring from 1972 through the mid-1980s peaked at 11.5 million pounds (Table 1; Figure 2). Most landings occurred in the Chowan River and Albemarle Sound system. River herring landings declined sharply starting in 1986, prior to the implementation of regulations specific to river herring, first implemented in 1995.

Table 1. Commercial harvest (weight in pounds) of river herring from North Carolina, 1972–2006. Commercial harvest prohibited since 2007.

Year	Weight Landed (lb)	Year	Weight Landed (lb)
1972	11,237,143	1990	1,157,625
1973	7,925,898	1991	1,575,378
1974	6,209,542	1992	1,723,178
1975	5,952,067	1993	916,235
1976	6,401,360	1994	644,334
1977	8,523,813	1995	453,984
1978	6,607,153	1996	529,503
1979	5,119,150	1997	334,809
1980	6,218,523	1998	521,930
1981	4,753,723	1999	443,494
1982	9,437,703	2000	332,336
1983	5,868,332	2001	306,761
1984	6,516,109	2002	174,860
1985	11,548,278	2003	199,716
1986	6,814,323	2004	188,541
1987	3,194,975	2005	250,021
1988	4,191,211	2006	109,847
1989	1,491,077		
		Mean	3,114,461

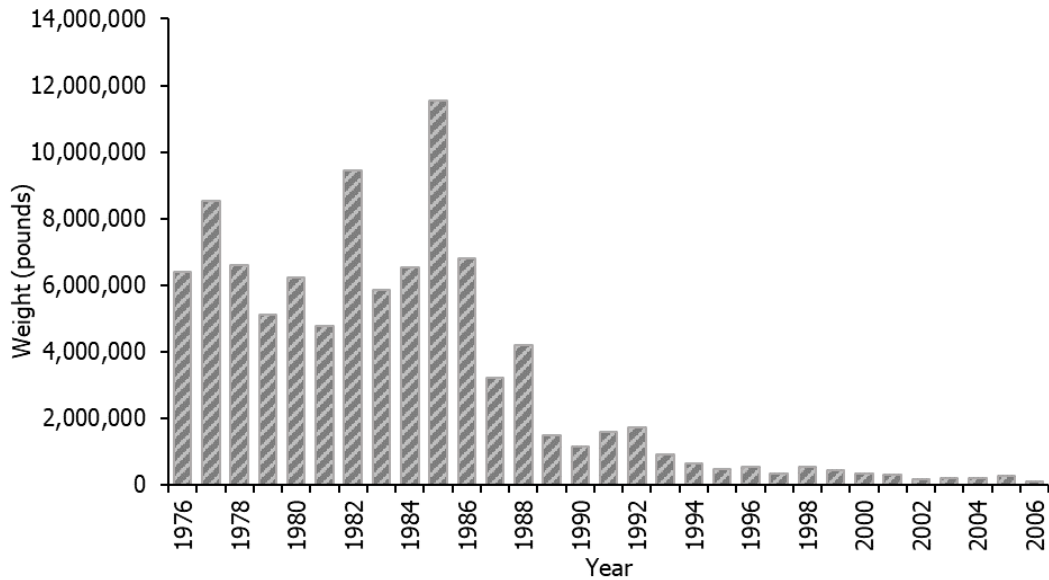


Figure 2. Commercial harvest (weight in pounds) of river herring from North Carolina, 1972–2006. Commercial harvest prohibited since 2007.

Amendment 1 implemented a no-harvest provision in 2007, allowing only for a limited discretionary harvest to provide local herring to festivals and continue DMF data collection from commercial fisheries. Table 2 includes information on landings data from 2007 through 2014 when the limited research set-aside season was prosecuted before being eliminated under Amendment 2 in 2015.

Table 2. Harvest (weight in pounds) and value of river herring from the North Carolina discretionary river herring harvest season, 2008–2014.

Year	Permits Issued	Quota (lb/permit/period)	Weight Landed (lb)	Value (\$)
2008	13	250	1,292	775
2009	27	125	643	836
2010	30	125	1,765	1,765
2011	23	150	1,611	1,611
2012	18	150	678	678
2013	12	150	743	743
2014	27	150	989	1,319

Recreational Fishery

There is currently no recreational fishery for river herring per the no harvest provision outlined in Amendment 1. Formerly, most river herring caught recreationally were likely used for personal consumption or for bait. For the years leading up to the 2007 harvest closure, the extent of river herring harvest for personal consumption and bait in coastal North Carolina is unknown.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Commercial fishing activity is monitored through fishery-dependent sampling conducted by the DMF since 1972 in the Chowan River. The dominant gears for river herring were gill nets and

pound nets. In 2007, the no-harvest provision essentially eliminated commercial landings. However, the Chowan River Pound Net survey was implemented in 2008, for the 2009 sampling year, to provide estimates of commercial catch-per-unit effort (CPUE), percent of repeat spawners, and age and sex data for alewife and blueback herring.

Table 3 and Table 4 describe the mean, minimum, and maximum length data for blueback herring and alewife from 1972 to 2023. In 2023, a total of 1,069 blueback herring and 1,572 alewife were measured from the Chowan River pound net survey. The overall average size of blueback herring was 9.00 inches fork length and 9.50 inches fork length for alewife.

Table 3. Mean, minimum, and maximum lengths (fork length, inches) of blueback herring measured from the Chowan River commercial fisheries, 1972–2023. *In 2007 a no-harvest provision for river herring went into effect and the Chowan River Pound Net survey began in 2009.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured	Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1972	9.75	7.00	11.50	2,564	1998	9.25	6.00	11.00	1,361
1973	9.75	5.50	11.50	2,208	1999	9.50	7.75	11.00	720
1974	9.75	7.25	11.50	1,622	2000	9.00	7.75	11.00	1,213
1975	9.50	6.00	11.00	2,428	2001	9.25	7.75	10.75	667
1976	9.75	8.25	11.25	1,564	2002	9.25	8.00	10.75	338
1977	9.75	5.50	11.75	1,425	2003	9.00	7.50	10.50	304
1978	10.00	8.25	11.75	1,342	2004	9.00	7.75	10.25	245
1979	10.00	8.25	12.25	1,218	2005	9.00	7.75	10.75	305
1980	10.00	8.25	11.50	1,229	2006	8.75	7.75	10.00	156
1981	10.00	8.50	12.00	1,469	2007	9.00	7.75	10.75	231
1982	9.75	8.75	11.50	851	2008	8.75	7.50	11.00	928
1983	9.50	8.25	11.25	482	2009*	9.00	7.75	10.50	546
1984	9.25	7.75	11.25	450	2010*	8.75	7.50	10.25	833
1985	9.50	8.50	11.25	388	2011*	9.00	7.50	10.50	500
1986	9.50	7.25	10.75	347	2012*	9.00	7.00	10.50	412
1987	9.50	8.00	11.00	318	2013*	9.00	7.75	10.75	492
1988	9.25	8.00	11.25	314	2014*	8.50	7.50	10.25	691
1989	9.25	8.25	10.75	273	2015*	8.75	7.75	10.75	589
1990	9.25	8.00	10.75	275	2016*	8.75	7.75	11.00	456
1991	9.25	8.00	11.00	357	2017*	9.00	7.50	10.25	528
1992	9.25	8.00	10.75	368	2018*	9.00	7.75	10.50	1,232
1993	9.25	7.50	10.50	160	2019*	9.25	8.00	10.50	868
1994	8.75	8.00	10.75	84	2020*	9.25	8.00	10.75	733
1995	9.25	8.25	10.50	322	2021*	9.00	7.50	10.25	525
1996	9.50	8.00	11.25	626	2022*	8.75	7.50	10.75	601
1997	9.50	8.00	11.25	625	2023*	9.00	7.75	10.75	1,069

Table 4. Mean, minimum, and maximum lengths (fork length, inches) of alewife measured from the Chowan River commercial fisheries, 1972–2023. *In 2007 a no-harvest provision for river herring went into effect and the Chowan River Pound Net survey began in 2009.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured	Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1972	10.25	6.25	12.25	1,337	1998	9.50	7.75	11.00	55
1973	10.00	7.75	12.25	1,471	1999	9.25	8.25	10.00	6
1974	9.00	5.75	11.25	616	2000	9.25	7.75	10.50	798
1975	9.75	7.75	12.00	2,440	2001	9.50	8.25	10.75	835
1976	9.75	8.25	12.00	2,029	2002	9.75	7.75	10.75	963
1977	10.00	5.00	12.25	2,024	2003	9.50	7.75	11.50	1,004
1978	10.25	7.75	11.50	997	2004	9.50	8.00	11.25	720
1979	10.00	7.75	11.50	1,143	2005	9.50	7.75	11.25	539
1980	10.00	8.50	12.25	551	2006	9.50	7.75	12.25	553
1981	9.75	8.50	11.25	1,052	2007	9.00	7.75	11.00	45
1982	9.75	8.50	12.00	752	2008	9.00	7.50	11.25	1,872
1983	9.75	8.00	11.00	457	2009*	9.25	7.75	10.75	1,000
1984	9.75	8.75	11.75	351	2010*	9.50	8.00	11.00	822
1985	9.75	8.25	11.00	272	2011*	9.75	8.00	11.25	806
1986	9.25	8.25	11.00	203	2012*	9.75	7.50	11.25	641
1987	9.25	8.00	11.50	389	2013*	9.25	7.75	13.00	854
1988	9.50	8.00	10.75	312	2014*	9.25	8.00	11.50	1,037
1989	9.50	8.25	10.75	262	2015*	9.25	8.00	11.00	998
1990	9.50	8.00	11.00	194	2016*	9.25	7.75	11.25	773
1991	9.50	7.75	11.25	502	2017*	9.25	7.75	14.00	1,336
1992	9.25	7.75	11.00	300	2018*	9.25	7.75	11.25	1,360
1993	8.50	7.50	10.00	183	2019*	9.50	8.00	11.25	1,004
1994	8.50	8.00	9.00	2	2020*	9.50	8.00	11.25	1,266
1995	9.75	8.75	10.25	41	2021*	9.25	7.50	11.00	873
1996	9.50	8.50	10.50	42	2022*	9.25	8.00	11.25	1,101
1997	9.50	8.75	10.75	47	2023*	9.50	8.00	11.50	1,572

Variation in modal, minimum, and maximum ages throughout the fishery-dependent monitoring is described in Table 5 for blueback herring and Table 6 for alewife, with little variation across the time-series.

Table 5. Modal age, minimum age, maximum age, and number aged for blueback herring collected through DMF fishery-dependent sampling programs, 1972–2022. *In 2007 a no-harvest provision for river herring went into effect and the Chowan River Pound Net survey began in 2009. **Age data for 2023 are unavailable.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged	Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged
1972	5	2	8	1,215	1998	5	2	7	462
1973	5	3	8	1,092	1999	5	3	7	389
1974	4	3	8	920	2000	4	3	9	512
1975	4	3	8	951	2001	5	3	7	311
1976	4	3	9	862	2002	5	3	7	164
1977	5	3	8	767	2003	5	3	7	147
1978	4	3	7	694	2004	4	3	6	130
1979	5	3	8	942	2005	4	3	6	162
1980	5	3	8	1,079	2006	4	3	5	86
1981	5	3	9	794	2007	5	3	6	143
1982	4	3	9	478	2008	4	3	7	474
1983	4	3	8	314	2009*	4	3	7	251
1984	4	3	8	283	2010*	4	3	7	247
1985	5	3	7	249	2011*	4	3	6	175
1986	5	3	7	230	2012*	4	3	7	189
1987	4	3	7	208	2013*	5	3	7	217
1988	4	3	7	201	2014*	4	3	7	198
1989	4	3	6	184	2015*	4	3	7	184
1990	4	2	7	189	2016*	4	3	8	226
1991	4	2	7	242	2017*	5	3	7	250
1992	4	3	7	220	2018*	4	3	6	272
1993	5	2	8	112	2019*	4	3	7	276
1994	4	3	7	71	2020*	4	3	7	253
1995	5	3	7	192	2021*	5	3	7	221
1996	5	3	7	279	2022*	4	3	7	243
1997	4	3	7	180	2023**				

Table 6. Modal age, minimum age, maximum age, and number aged for alewife collected through DMF fishery-dependent sampling programs, 1972–2023. *In 2007 a no-harvest provision for river herring went into effect and the Chowan River Pound Net survey began in 2009. **Age data for 2023 are unavailable.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged	Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged
1972	4	3	9	783	1998				
1973	4	3	9	721	1999	3,6	3	6	6
1974	4	2	7	417	2000	5	3	7	300
1975	4	2	9	842	2001	5	3	7	369
1976	4	3	7	853	2002	5	3	7	341
1977	5	3	8	759	2003	4	2	7	350
1978	4	3	8	736	2004	5	2	7	318
1979	4	3	8	701	2005	5	3	7	253
1980	5	3	8	492	2006	4	3	7	260
1981	5	4	8	532	2007	4	3	6	30
1982	4	3	7	444	2008	5	4	8	588
1983	4	3	7	295	2009*	5	3	7	342
1984	4	3	7	248	2010*	6	3	7	277
1985	5	3	7	195	2011*	6	3	8	211
1986	4	3	6	146	2012*	6	3	8	259
1987	4	3	7	266	2013*	5	2	7	308
1988	4	2	6	228	2014*	4	2	6	328
1989	4	3	7	179	2015*	4	3	7	206
1990	4	2	7	153	2016*	4	3	8	311
1991	5	3	7	319	2017*	5	3	7	346
1992	5	2	8	242	2018*	4	3	7	375
1993	4	2	7	130	2019*	4	3	7	286
1994	4	4	4	2	2020*	4	4	8	310
1995	5	4	6	40	2021*	4	3	9	335
1996	4	3	7	41	2022*	4	3	7	328
1997	4	3	7	18	2023**				

Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrate the overall length at age (mean, minimum, and maximum) for blueback herring and alewife from all age samples collected at any given age from 1972 to 2022. Age data for 2023 are not available for this update and will be included in the 2024 update.

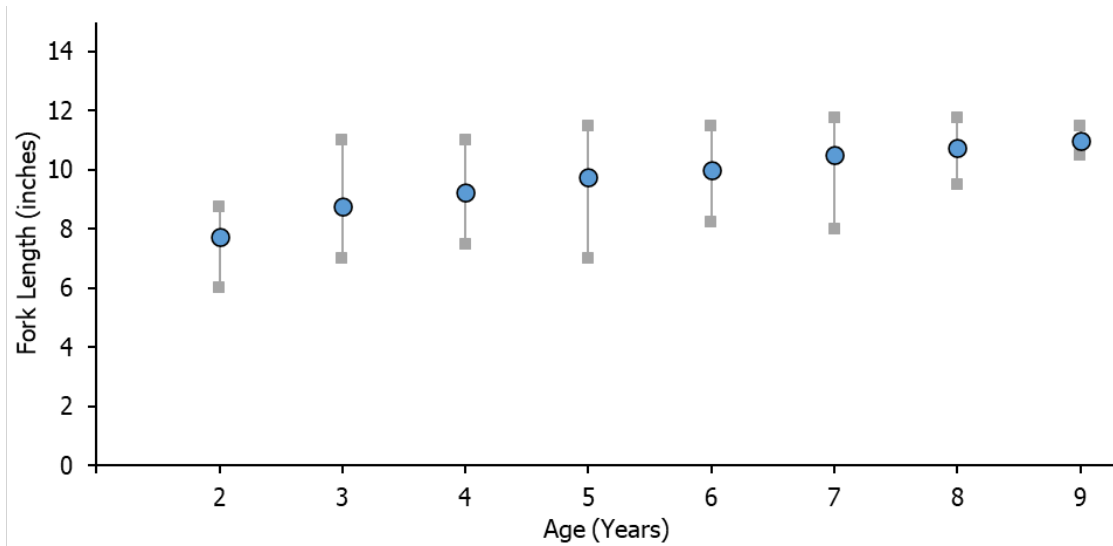


Figure 3. Blueback herring length at age from all age samples collected from fishery-dependent monitoring, 1972–2022. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age. Age data from 2023 is unavailable.

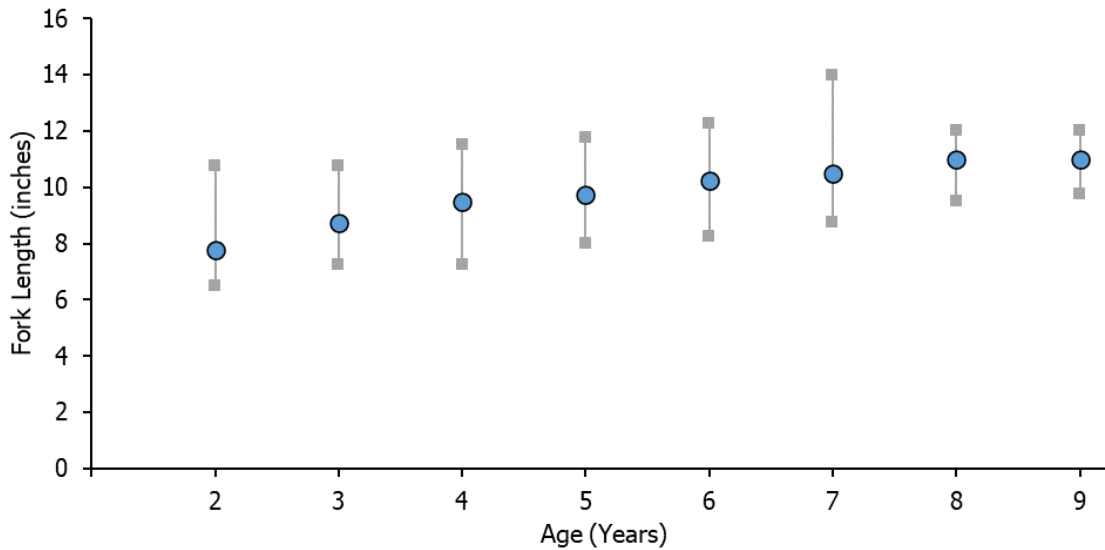


Figure 4. Alewife length at age from all age samples collected from fishery-dependent monitoring, 1972–2022. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age. Age data from 2023 is unavailable.

The DMF has monitored river herring repeat spawning since 1972 (Table 7; Figure 5). Percent repeat spawners for blueback herring from the Chowan River spawning stock is one of the stock recovery indicators identified in North Carolina River Herring FMP Amendment 2. The Chowan River blueback herring spawning stock should contain at least 10% repeat spawners (percent of the spawning stock that have spawned more than once). Since 2011, percentages of blueback herring have increased to levels above the restoration target, except for 2017 and 2022. For alewife percentages have been above the restoration target since 2007, except for 2014. Repeat spawner data for 2023 is not available for this update and will be included in the 2024 update.

Table 7. Blueback herring and alewife percent (%) repeat spawners from the Chowan River pound net survey, 1972–2022. Blueback herring percent repeat spawner is a stock status indicator. *Repeat spawner data are unavailable for 2023.

Year	Percent (%)		Year	Percent (%)	
	Blueback Herring	Alewife		Blueback Herring	Alewife
1972	22	15	1998	7	
1973	17	14	1999	13	67
1974	18	4	2000	14	8
1975	6	10	2001	9	13
1976	11	8	2002	13	38
1977	9	5	2003	16	30
1978	6	8	2004	9	20
1979	16	9	2005	13	15
1980	19	18	2006	0	9
1981	48	29	2007	9	10
1982	11	1	2008	5	14
1983	14	2	2009	3	14
1984	7	34	2010	6	41
1985	10	12	2011	12	27
1986	16	4	2012	13	29
1987	22		2013	14	11
1988	11	6	2014	13	5
1989	4	9	2015	17	18
1990	12	17	2016	16	20
1991	31	21	2017	7	33
1992	26	48	2018	11	31
1993	12	5	2019	13	24
1994	5		2020	11	35
1995	6	8	2021	16	37
1996	13	29	2022	3	19
1997	15	29	2023*		

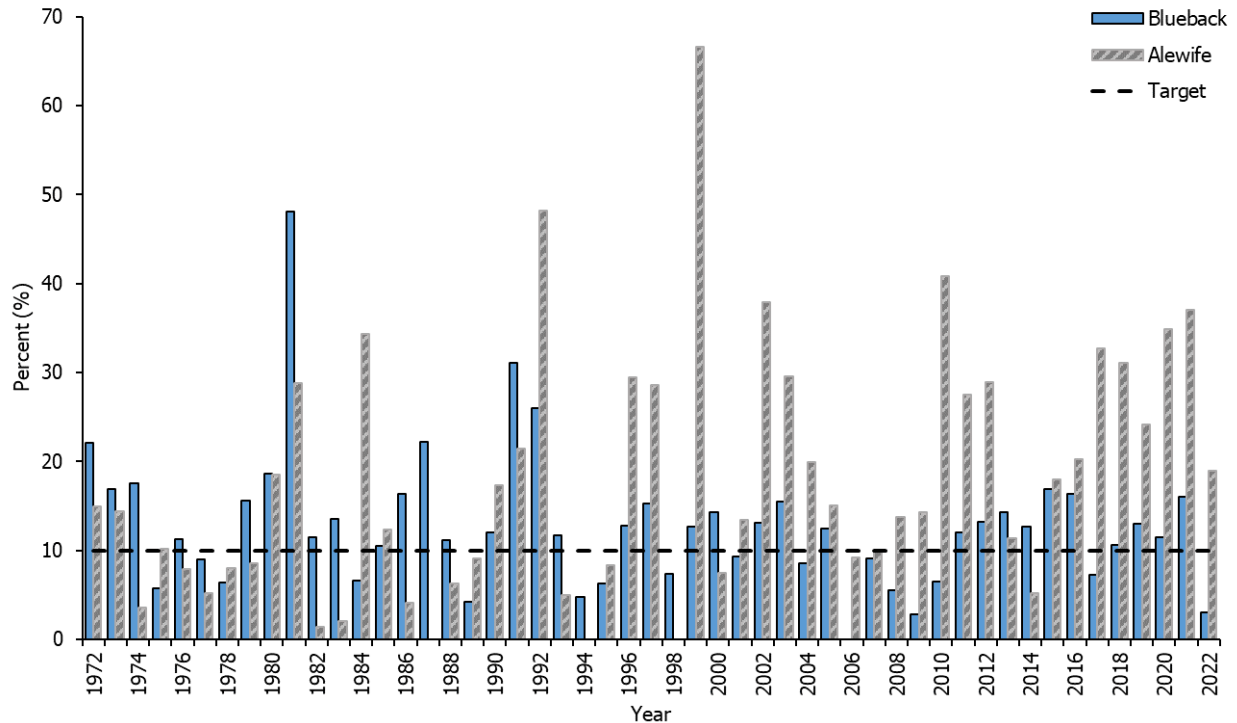


Figure 5. Annual percent of repeat spawners (blueback herring and alewife) and target from the Chowan River Pound Net Survey, 1972–2023. Blueback herring percent repeat spawner is a stock status indicator. Repeat spawner data from 2023 is unavailable.

Total pound-net effort (operable nets per week) estimated total river herring catch (pounds), and CPUE for the Chowan River Pound Net Survey (Table 8) shows a downward trend through 2012 followed by an increasing trend through 2017. CPUE declined from 2017 through 2021, with 2021 having the lowest CPUE in the time series. The participating pound net fishermen contributed environmental conditions, such as drought and a warm spring, to the decrease in estimated river herring landings in 2021. The CPUE exhibited an inclining trend for 2022 and 2023.

In 2023, the CPUE increased and like 2022 was above average for the time series. Approximately 40% of the estimated total river herring catch were blueback herring, based on the weekly subsample of river herring from the survey. The Chowan River Pound Net Survey was operated for 18 weeks in 2023, from late January to middle of May. Alewife were present in the weekly subsample starting in late January. Catches of alewife peaked in mid-February through mid-March before declining in April. Bluebacks appeared in the weekly subsample starting mid-February, with catches peaking in early April and declining through the end of the survey in mid-May.

Table 8. River herring total pound net effort estimated catch (weight in pounds) and catch per unit effort for the Chowan River pound net survey, 2009–2023.

Year	Total Effort (Active Sets)	Total RH (lbs)	Total CPUE
2009	217	89,245	411.3
2010	260	71,532	275.1
2011	286	74,485	260.4
2012	315	18,415	58.5
2013	238	27,396	115.1
2014	271	45,619	168.3
2015	253	49,560	195.9
2016	228	77,372	339.4
2017	231	137,374	594.7
2018	276	86,605	313.8
2019	238	54,932	230.8
2020	249	53,810	216.1
2021	233	9,074	38.9
2022	215	84,497	393.0
2023	267	118,875	445.2
Mean	251.8	66,587	270.4

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

The DMF has conducted the Juvenile Anadromous Survey (Program 100) for river herring, annually since 1972. The survey has been conducted twice a month, using seines, at eleven fixed sites, in the Albemarle Sound-Chowan River area from June through October. Only the first sample from each month is used to calculate the CPUE for juvenile river herring (age 0). CPUE of blueback herring is one of the stock status indicators identified in Amendment 2. The blueback herring CPUE should exceed the three-year moving average threshold of 60-fish per haul, the average for 2021–2023 is 4.22 blueback herring per haul. The three-year average CPUE of juvenile blueback herring has remained well below the threshold of 60-fish per haul since the mid-1980’s (Figure 6). In 2023 overall CPUE was 0.11 for blueback herring, which was a decrease from the previous year (11.06 blueback herring per haul).

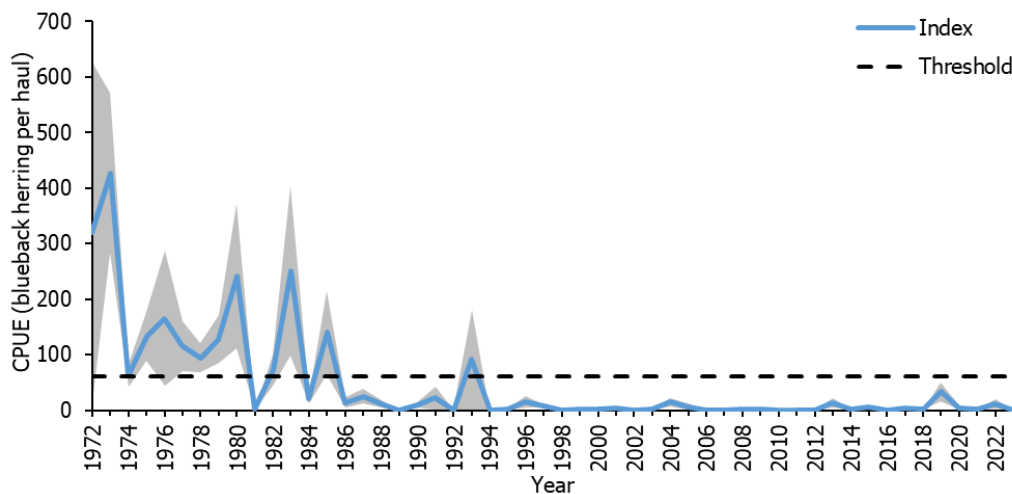


Figure 6. Catch per unit effort (fish per haul) and target of blueback herring collected from Program 100 in Albemarle Sound during June through October 1972–2023. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error. Blueback herring relative abundance is a stock status indicator.

Due to the low numbers of juvenile alewife caught across the time series, these data have not been used for management and are only shown here as an illustration of the trend in abundance (Figure 7). The 2023 overall CPUE was 0.07 for alewife, which was a decrease from the previous year (0.45 alewife per haul).

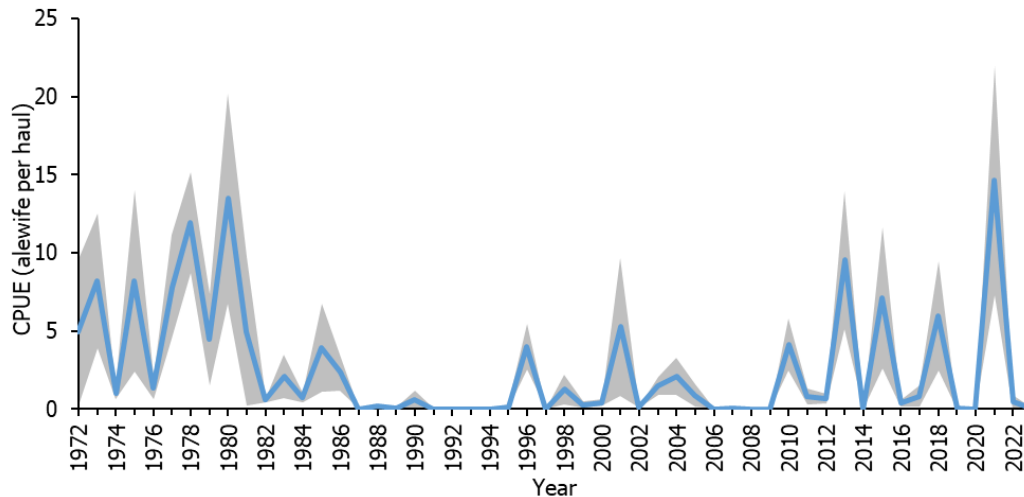


Figure 7. Catch per unit effort (fish per haul) of alewife collected from Program 100 in Albemarle Sound during June through October 1972–2023. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

Adult river herring are monitored using the DMF Albemarle Sound Independent Gill Net Survey (Program 135). Program 135 began collecting biological data on adult river herring in 1991 but did not start collecting aging structures until 1999. The survey uses a stratified random sampling scheme designed to characterize the size and age distribution for key estuarine species in the Albemarle Sound.

Program 135 was suspended in February 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and protected species interactions. The survey resumed in the fall of 2021. In November 2021, the Albemarle Sound Independent Gill Net Survey (IGNS) expanded from six to eight zones and reduced soak time from 24-hours to 12-hours. Additionally, in March 2022, sink gill nets were removed from the survey, reducing effort to 480 yards per set (12 units of effort). Additional zones were added to meet DMF research priorities to expand the spatial coverage of the survey. Soak times were reduced and sink nets were removed to reduce interactions with endangered species through ongoing consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA Fisheries). It should be noted that with such a major change in survey design, the index derived from this survey starting in November 2021 will not be directly comparable to the prior historical time series. When calculating blueback herring and alewife relative abundance using historical IGNS data, all sink gill nets were removed. It is important to note that most blueback herring and alewife intercepted in the IGNS survey are from float gill nets. Therefore, the removal of sink gill nets from the data set did not significantly impact the relative abundance estimates of American shad from the survey.

The river herring relative abundance index has been calculated from Program 135 since 1991 from the 2.5 and 3.0 inch stretched mesh (combined, float net only). Blueback herring and alewife relative abundance index from January through May for the period 1991–2023, are shown in Table 9 and Figure 8. Catch of both species has increased since 2012. No index of abundance is available for 2020 and 2021.

Table 9. Relative abundance index (fish per net) of river herring collected January–May in Program 135 (2.5- and 3.0-inch stretch mesh) in the Albemarle Sound, 1991–2023. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021.

Year	Alewife				Blueback Herring			
	Effort	Sum	CPUE	PSE	Effort	Sum	CPUE	PSE
1991	235	76	0.32	22	235	1,249	5.31	15
1992	273	429	1.57	18	273	1,230	4.51	12
1993	279	72	0.26	36	279	827	2.96	15
1994	264	54	0.20	30	264	305	1.16	25
1995	257	118	0.46	21	257	978	3.81	14
1996	256	67	0.26	46	256	825	3.22	16
1997	262	42	0.16	23	262	1,093	4.17	14
1998	257	36	0.14	21	256	939	3.67	15
1999	270	126	0.47	31	272	1,246	4.58	13
2000	260	556	2.14	15	260	1,447	5.57	12
2001	246	746	3.03	12	246	989	4.02	15
2002	251	202	0.80	14	251	821	3.27	15
2003	276	242	0.88	15	276	1,118	4.05	13
2004	249	243	0.98	16	249	740	2.97	16
2005	252	177	0.70	14	252	786	3.12	17
2006	258	533	2.07	13	258	873	3.38	14
2007	253	1,369	5.41	10	253	707	2.79	16
2008	252	748	2.97	11	250	482	1.93	19
2009	222	583	2.63	12	225	522	2.32	18
2010	207	502	2.43	14	207	409	1.98	21
2011	214	323	1.51	18	211	262	1.24	20
2012	178	197	1.11	13	181	174	0.96	23
2013	188	590	3.14	14	188	677	3.60	17
2014	195	1,014	5.20	11	193	505	2.62	19
2015	223	942	4.22	11	223	839	3.76	15
2016	229	1,091	4.76	11	229	1,019	4.45	14
2017	227	1,037	4.57	10	225	888	3.95	15
2018	189	1,128	5.97	11	189	1,124	5.95	13
2019	228	1,272	5.58	11	230	1,104	4.80	13
2020*	73	525	7.19	15	73	74	1.01	34
2021*								
2022	126	1,144	9.08	10	126	482	3.83	18
2023	132	864	6.55	12	132	710	5.38	16

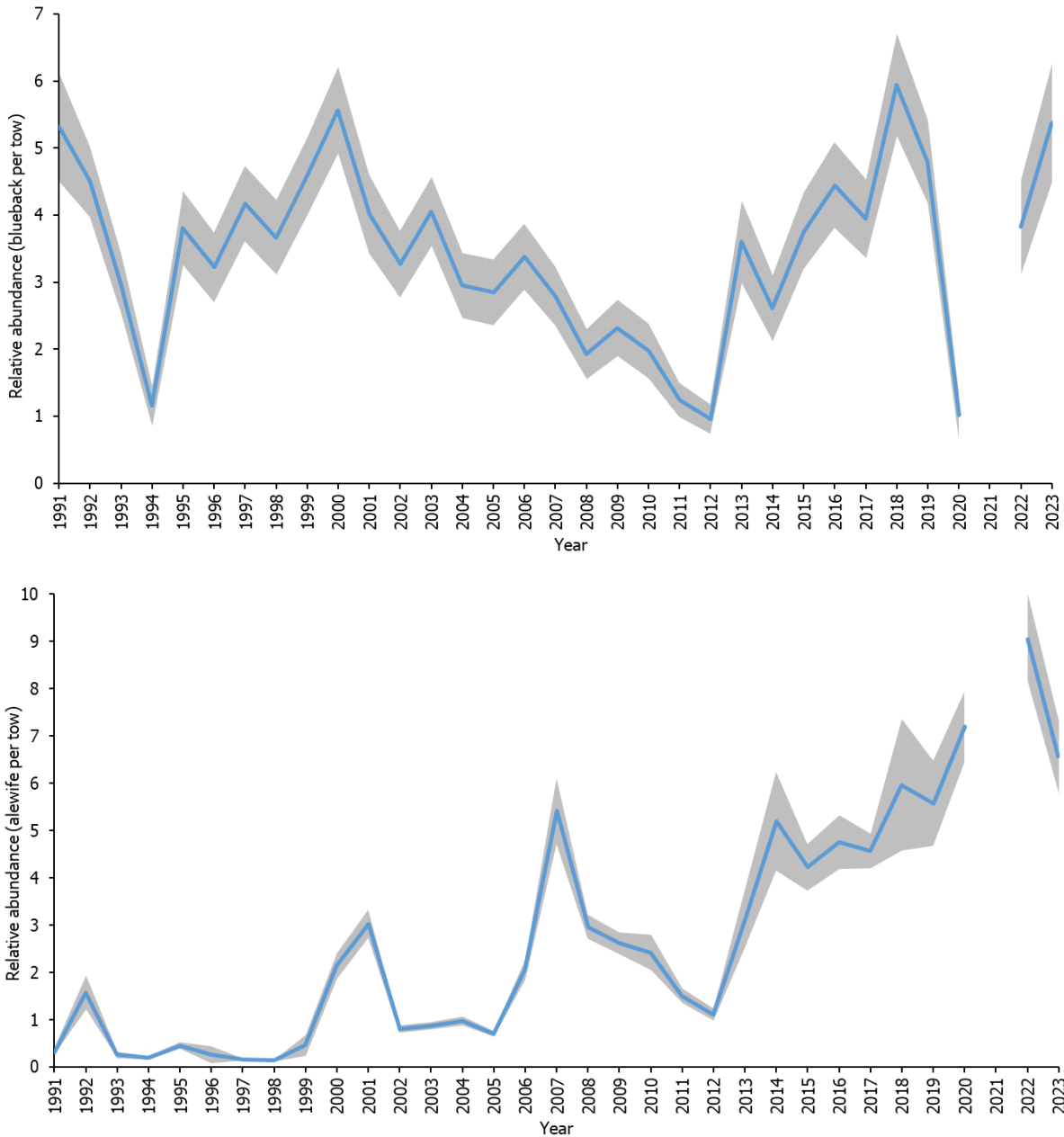


Figure 8. Relative abundance index of river herring (fish per net, 2.5- and 3.0-inch stretch mesh only) collected from Program 135 in Albemarle Sound during January through May 1991–2023. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021.

Table 10 and Table 11 describe the mean, minimum and maximum length data for blueback and alewife from Program 135 for the period 1991–2023.

Table 10. Mean, minimum, and maximum lengths (fork length, inches) of blueback herring measured from Program 135, 1991–2023. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1991	9.75	6.50	13.25	2,315
1992	9.75	8.00	11.75	2,140
1993	9.75	7.50	13.25	1,334
1994	9.75	8.25	13.25	555
1995	9.50	6.50	11.25	1,324
1996	9.50	5.75	13.25	1,090
1997	9.25	5.00	12.75	1,530
1998	9.50	8.00	11.25	1,230
1999	9.50	6.50	14.50	1,918
2000	9.50	8.25	11.25	2,740
2001	9.50	6.50	11.50	1,862
2002	9.75	5.50	11.00	1,339
2003	9.50	7.75	11.75	1,924
2004	9.50	8.25	17.25	1,157
2005	9.25	5.00	15.00	1,040
2006	9.25	7.25	13.25	1,790
2007	9.25	8.00	10.75	1,202
2008	9.25	4.75	10.75	694
2009	9.25	5.25	11.00	814
2010	9.25	7.75	12.25	609
2011	9.25	7.25	13.75	439
2012	9.50	8.00	10.75	295
2013	9.00	7.75	14.25	1,163
2014	9.25	7.75	13.00	797
2015	9.25	8.00	13.50	1,203
2016	9.50	4.25	17.00	1,555
2017	9.50	8.00	14.25	1,431
2018	9.50	8.00	11.25	1,764
2019	9.50	7.75	17.75	1,689
2020*	9.50	8.50	10.75	92
2021*				
2022*	9.50	7.75	11.50	711
2023*	9.25	8.25	13.75	715

Table 11. Mean, minimum, and maximum lengths (fork length, inches) of alewife measured from Program 135, 1991–2023. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1991	10.00	5.75	12.00	235
1992	10.00	8.50	13.75	860
1993	9.50	8.00	13.25	143
1994	9.25	8.50	11.00	99
1995	9.50	6.75	15.00	212
1996	9.75	4.50	13.50	102
1997	10.00	8.25	14.25	65
1998	9.75	7.75	11.50	64
1999	9.00	8.00	15.25	228
2000	9.25	8.25	15.75	1,437
2001	9.75	5.25	17.75	1,934
2002	10.00	8.00	11.00	477
2003	9.75	7.75	14.50	553
2004	9.75	8.00	14.00	388
2005	9.50	5.75	17.00	275
2006	9.25	8.00	14.25	1,008
2007	9.25	4.50	15.50	2,344
2008	9.50	6.25	12.00	1,218
2009	9.50	5.75	14.25	995
2010	9.75	8.00	13.75	1,035
2011	10.00	8.00	11.75	491
2012	10.25	7.75	12.00	359
2013	9.25	7.75	13.50	1,004
2014	9.50	8.00	13.75	1,929
2015	9.75	4.50	12.50	1,780
2016	9.75	7.75	14.75	2,043
2017	9.75	7.75	12.75	1,529
2018	9.25	7.75	12.00	1,950
2019	9.50	7.75	11.75	2,063
2020*	9.75	8.25	11.50	749
2021*				
2022*	10.00	8.25	11.50	1,673
2023*	9.75	8.00	13.50	881

Variation in modal, minimum, and maximum ages throughout Program 135 is described in Table 12 for blueback herring and Table 13 for alewife, with little variation since aging began in 2004.

Table 12. Modal age, minimum age, maximum age, and number aged for blueback herring collected from Program 135, 1999–2022. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021. **Age data are unavailable for 2023.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged
1999	5	3	7	241
2000				0
2001				0
2002				0
2003				0
2004	4	3	6	98
2005	4	2	7	174
2006	4,5	3	7	213
2007	5	3	7	173
2008	4,5	4	7	45
2009	4,5	4	7	72
2010	4	3	5	45
2011	4	3	6	100
2012	4	3	8	80
2013	3	2	7	107
2014	3	2	5	40
2015	4	3	6	139
2016	5,6	3	7	157
2017	5	3	7	176
2018	4	3	7	228
2019	4	3	7	211
2020*	5	3	7	59
2021*				
2022*	3	3	7	208
2023**				

Table 13. Modal age, minimum age, maximum age, and number aged for alewife collected from Program 135, 1999–2022. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021. **Age data are unavailable for 2023.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged
1999	5	4	7	18
2000	4	3	7	190
2001	5	3	6	289
2002	6	4	7	81
2003	4	4	7	127
2004	4	3	6	106
2005	5	3	7	148
2006	4,5	3	7	283
2007	4	3	8	266
2008	5	4	7	96
2009	5	2	7	125
2010	6	4	7	122
2011	5	3	8	137
2012	6	3	8	129
2013	4	2	6	168
2014	4	3	6	110
2015	5	3	7	263
2016	5	3	7	173
2017	5	3	8	249
2018	4	3	8	331
2019	4	3	8	239
2020*	5	4	7	18
2021*				
2022*	4	3	8	300
2023**				

Figure 9 and Figure 10 illustrate the overall length at age (mean, minimum, and maximum) for blueback herring and alewife from all age samples collected at any given age from Program 135 for the period 1999–2022. Age data for 2023 is not available for this update and will be included in the 2024 update.

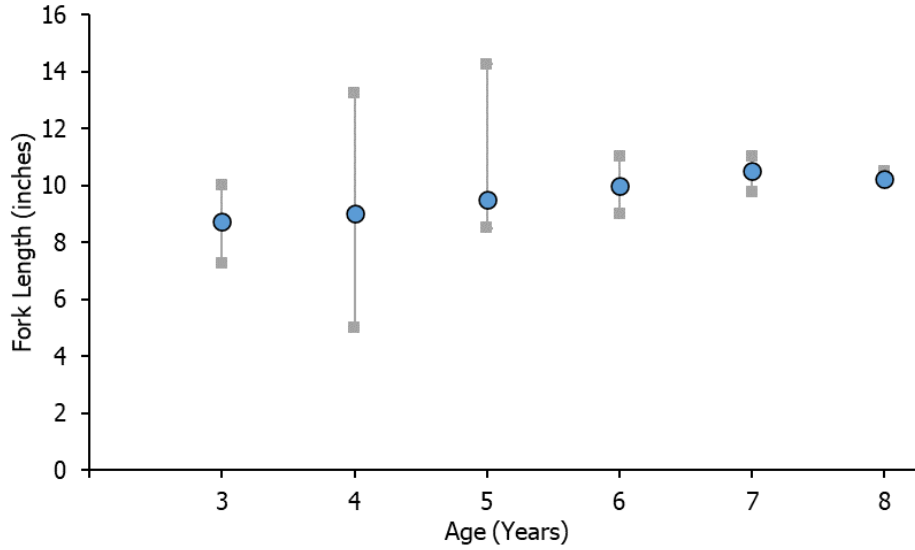


Figure 9. Blueback herring length at age from all age samples collected from Program 135 in the Albemarle Sound, 1972–2022. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021. Age data from 2023 is unavailable.

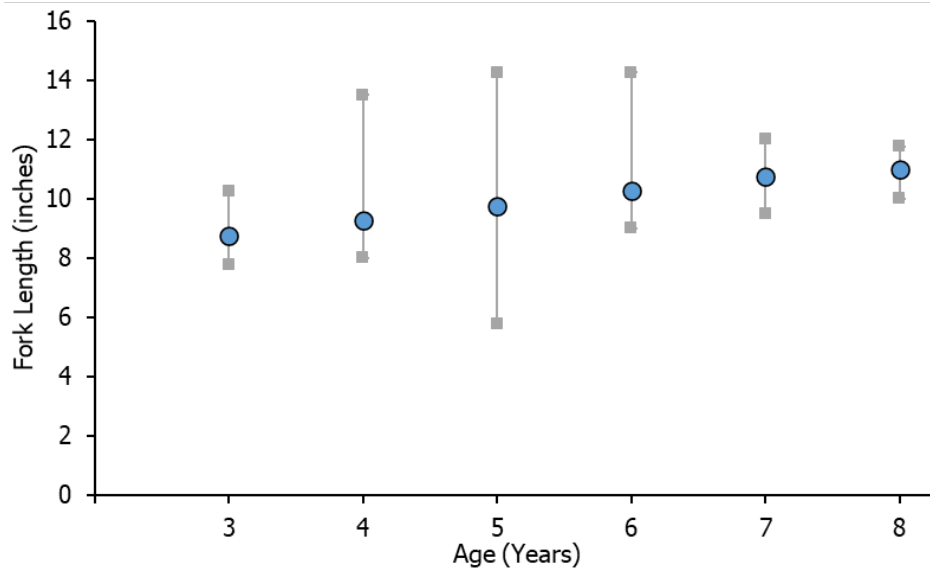


Figure 10. Alewife length at age from all age samples collected from Program 135 in the Albemarle Sound, 1972–2022. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age. *Survey suspended February 20, 2020, and did not resume until fall 2021. Age data from 2023 is unavailable.

RESEARCH NEEDS

On an annual basis the ASMFC publishes a prioritized list of short term and long-term research needs for American shad and river herring in the Review of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Fishery Management Plan for Shad and River Herring (ASMFC 2020).

For more information on research needs for River herring please see: https://asmfc.org/uploads/file/64010087Approved_SRH_FMP_Report_FY_2021_2.2.23.pdf

MANAGEMENT

Amendment 1 to the North Carolina River Herring FMP implemented four stock recovery indicators to evaluate stock status. Under Amendment 2 to the North Carolina River Herring FMP, the plan development team determined that only three of the stock recovery indicators were necessary and decided that the term stock status indicator was more appropriate, using blueback herring as the indicator species. The three stock status indicators were adopted by the North Carolina River Herring FMP plan development team, each based on a three-year moving average. The plan development team recommended using the first two stock status indicators (juvenile abundance and repeat spawners) as a trigger for doing a stock assessment earlier than 10 years. If a three-year moving average of each of the indicators was above the threshold, it would trigger the need for a new stock assessment, which would determine the third stock status indicator. The third stock status indicator sets the threshold that determines when the river herring fishery will re-open.

- Catch per unit effort (CPUE) of 60 young-of-the-year per haul in the Albemarle Sound juvenile abundance survey.
- Ten percent repeat spawners observed in fishery-dependent pound net samples.
- Spawning stock biomass (SSB) of 30% unfished SSB, estimated in stock assessment model.

Collectively, these indices represent minimal stock rebuilding goals for the recovery of river herring stocks in the Albemarle Sound and Chowan River. In the 2012 stock assessment, ASMFC recommended a ten-year interval between stock assessments (ASMFC 2012).

The stock status indicator for percent repeat spawners of blueback herring has exceeded the target of 10% since 2011, except for 2017. The increase in the percent repeat spawners is a positive sign, which means that the current management strategy is working. Juvenile abundance has remained well below the threshold since the early 1990s. Spawning stock biomass will need to continue to increase enough to see results in the juvenile index before the fishery could reopen. The estimate for spawning stock biomass will be updated with data through 2021 during the next ASMFC coastwide stock assessment for river herring, scheduled for completion in August of 2024.

The MFC implemented a series of management strategies under North Carolina River Herring FMP Amendment 2. These management strategies and their implementation status are listed in Table 14.

Table 14. Summary of the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission management strategies and their implementation status for Amendment 2 of the River Herring Fishery Management Plan.

Management Strategy	Implementation Status
Eliminate the discretionary river herring harvest season and permit	Existing proclamation authority
Moving the Albemarle Sound/Chowan River Herring Management Areas to correct boundary reference for the Cashie River Anadromous Fish Spawning Area	15A NCAC 03R .0202
Remove alewife and blueback herring from the Mutilated Finfish Rule	15A NCAC 03M .0101
Prohibit possession of alewife and blueback herring greater than six inches aboard a vessel or while engaged in fishing from the shore or a pier.	15A NCAC 03M .0513

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN SCHEDULE RECOMMENDATIONS

Amendment 2 to the North Carolina River Herring FMP was adopted by the Marine Fisheries Commission in 2015. An Atlantic coastwide stock assessment update for river herring was completed in August 2017, with data through 2015, by the ASMFC. Results indicate that river herring remain depleted and at near historic lows on a coastwide basis (ASMFC 2017). The 5-year FMP review that was scheduled for 2020 was postponed through 2021. The 2021 FMP update was adopted by the MFC as the 5-year review at the August 2022 business meeting.

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