

Hunting & Fishing

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Blue claw crabs

As if the cobia situation is not enough, new blue claw crab harvest and pot regulations are coming out as well. DMF Proclamation M-11-2016 suspends several existing blue crab harvest rules and implements new rules. Effective Monday, June 6, 2016, blue crabs in possession must still be a minimum of 5 inches tip to tip. Added rules include no harvest of immature female crabs (these are crabs with belly aprons that are shaped like a pyramid), and no brown or black sponge crabs may be harvested between April 1 and April 30.

I not only agree with this sponge crab rule, but would encourage making it a rule for orange sponge crabs as well. Sponge crabs are mated female crabs that have fertilized egg masses maturing out of their large semicircle belly aprons. A six-inch sook (female) may have as many as eight million eggs in that egg mass and the maturation and egg depositing time frame is less than two weeks. (See photo accompanying this article.) The eggs first emerge with an orange color and look like a sponge. They turn brown, and then black, as they mature to the point of being able to be laid. The brown and black coloration comes from the eyes of the crab embryos.

In my youth, my father and grandfather taught me to release these obviously pregnant females as a reasonable and responsible conservation and management action. It has always made a lot of sense to me to promote the release of one crab with the potential of generating eight million offspring at one laying.

In addition to these rules there are new rules regarding dredging limits, culling and separation container requirements, and the number of crab pot escape rings going from two to three per pot with placement requirements. As you can imagine, there are many who are pushing back against this flurry of rules. It will be interesting to see if all the rules survive and become part of the official Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan.



Brown sponge female blue crab—Photo by Richard Seale

Conservation (and safety) first

To me, recreational fishing should be fun and so many rules take away a lot of that enjoyment, particularly for the youth. We all need to not be wasteful, release fish we do not intend to consume, and generally keep conservation in our minds and actions. Bending barbs down on hooks not only is a good idea for safer fishing with kids, but it allows for much less damage being done to the fish we hook, land and can release. Hooks with bent down barbs can be removed much more easily from anything.



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Debbie Fisher-President
5309 Highway 70 West
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Jackie M. Jaloszynski, AuD
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