

Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament
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Anglers Earn Over 5000 Citations in 2009 Record Marks Set for White Marlin, Blueline Tilefish and Sailfish

Anglers registered 5,191 trophy-size fish for Citation awards during the 52nd Annual Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament, which ran from January 1st through December 31st. This was the tenth year in a row anglers registered at least 5,000 Citations since the Tournament began in 1958.

For the first time in Tournament history, speckled trout accounted for the largest number of Citations among the 35 eligible species. The 849 speckled trout registered last year represented 16% of all Citations awarded and was the second most ever for the species. Released speckled trout composed 28 % of the species total. Among the speckled trout Citations registered for weight, seven speckled trout topped the magic 10-pound mark while 45 fish weighed 8 pounds or more.

Offshore anglers found white marlin willing targets in 2009, as bluewater anglers set an all-time mark of 775 whites, accounting for 15% of all Citations. The previous best was in 1978 when 728 of these acrobatic fish were registered in the Tournament. White marlin are only eligible for release so all of these beautiful billfish were released. The season's first white marlin was caught June 26 but the fishing did not become consistent until mid-July. All of August and early September produced substantial catches of whites. What stood out about the 2009 season was some of the very best action occurred the last two weeks of September! Catches would have been much higher if the summer fishing fleet had been in place.

Only slightly behind white marlin and in third place for 2009, striped bass Citations totaled 761. Of the total number of qualifying striped bass, 30% (226) were for released fish, meeting or exceeding the 44-inch requirement, and 70 % (535) were for kept fish, meeting or exceeding the 40-

pound weight requirement. Catches of trophy striped bass were down from 2006, 2007 and 2008 levels. Some of the decline from the prior three years can be attributed to rapidly dropping water temperatures beginning the second week in December (since the resurgence of striped bass December has produced the highest number of striped bass Citations in most years) and the large number of unfishable days the month of December. Still, the 2009 total was the seventh highest total for this species in Tournament history. A total of 59 striped bass weighed 50 pounds or more, 20 fish weighed 55 pounds or more and 7 stripers topped the 60-pound mark.

Red drum accounted for the fourth highest number of Citations in 2009, representing 10% of the year's total number of Citations. The 510 Citation red drum was the ninth highest number of Citations issued for the species in the program's history. Red drum are only eligible for release so all of these spot-tail bass were released to fight another day. The period of 2003 through 2009 includes seven of the ten most lucrative years for red drum anglers fishing in the waters of the Commonwealth. True to form, first red drum of the season were caught the last week of April on the shoals surrounding Fisherman Island. Consistent catches were recorded all summer in this vicinity but the late September early October run that Little Island Pier anglers and boaters have come to expect off Sandbridge failed to materialize in 2009.

Rounding out the top five in number of awards, anglers registered 428 blueline tilefish for Citation awards in 2009, representing 8% of all awards. A total of 73 tilefish topped 15 pounds, 23 fish weighed 18 pounds or more and 7 weighed 20 or more pounds. Blueline tilefish was added to the Program's list of eligible species in 2007 and 164 citations were recorded. In 2008, 137 blueline tilefish met the minimum qualifying weight of 10 pounds.

Several species deserve honorable mention in the 2009 review. Sailfish easily made their best showing in Tournament history in 2009, as 95 sailfish releases were registered off the Virginia Coast. The next highest number of sails registered is just 34 and occurred in 2002. Amberjack releases were at their highest level since 2003, as 174 of these back-breaking brutes were registered last season. Cobia made their best showing since 2006, as 292 of these brown-suited fish were registered for awards in 2009. Even more impressive, eleven of the cobia weight Citations were for fish of 90 pounds or more and two topped 100 pounds. Sheepshead numbers were up significantly over 2007 and 2008 levels, as 114 were registered in 2009.

As the tide rose for several species in 2009, others saw their numbers ebb. The number of spadefish registered in 2009 was the lowest total since this species was added to the Citation program in 1995, as just 57 Citations were registered (even though a new State record was set). Never abundant in overall Citation numbers, after an impressive showing the prior two years, big king mackerel all but failed to make a showing in 2009 with just one citation king registered in 2009. Flounder Citation numbers dropped for the fifth year in a row, to just 364 fish. Still flounder accounted for the sixth highest number of awards and truly trophy flatfish were available, as 31 fish weighing 10 pounds or more and 5 flounder in excess of 12 pounds were registered. Spot Citation numbers took an inexplicable nose-dive in 2007, and remained low in 2008 and again in 2009, as only 8 Citation fish were registered throughout the year. Gray trout Citations tied their previous low, recorded in 1991, and again in 1994, as none of these once abundant fish were registered in 2009.

Two new State records were established in 2009. On January 1, 2009 the blueline tilefish record stood at 19 pounds 14 ounces. This record was broken by David Akridge with 20-pound, 4-ounce blueline March 19. Akridge's record stood slightly over 3 months before Kenneth Bowe landed a 20-pound, 10-ounce blueline June 28. Then, just six days later, on July 4, Michael Adkins landed a 23-pound, 5-ounce blueline tilefish. The other State record broken in 2009 was for spadefish. On June 13 Roland E. Murphy landed a 14-pound 14-ounce spadefish at The Cell. Murphy's catch erased Virginia's only tied state record. Austin Edwards of Powhatan, VA had set the state record bar at 14 pounds on June 17, 2006 while fishing at The Cell and Mark Ottarson of North, VA matched that on June 7, 2007 while fishing at Wolf Trap Light.

The Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament is operated by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission with funding provided by the Virginia Saltwater Recreational Fishing License. Awards are made to anglers catching fish meeting established weight criteria in 25 species while an additional 10 species meeting established length criteria are only available for release awards for a total of 35 species eligible for Citation recognition.

Citation awards are full color certificates delivered at the recipient's choice as a plaque or in a plastic album page. Special awards are presented to anglers meeting the eligibility requirements of the Master Angler and Expert Angler programs. The Program also administers the very popular Virginia Junior Angler award program, where any angler 15 years of age and younger can earn a special Virginia Junior Angler Award certificate by catching and releasing 6 different species of saltwater fish in Virginia during a calendar year.

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