

It's a Short!

How to return that summer flounder back to the water alive for the next angler.

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Have you ever been on a party boat just to hear the mate say “it’s a short” or on a jetty surrounded by inquisitive people just to tell them “it’s a short.” It something anglers say and hear all too often these days. With summer flounder regulations what they are, many more shorts are being caught and released than ever before...but are those fish surviving to be caught another day? The answer is no! Not all summer flounder caught survive being released, but there are ways to improve their chance of survival.



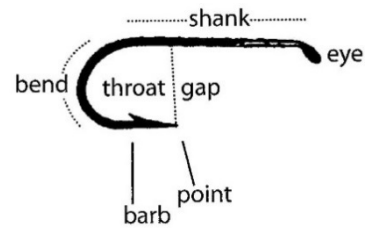
(Courtesy Chesapeake Bay Program)

Summer flounder (*Paralichthys dentatus*), also known as fluke, are common throughout New Jersey’s estuarine and coastal waters from late spring to late fall. They can grow to more than 30 inches and weigh in excess of 20 pounds, but 1 to 3-pound fish are more common with an 8-pound fish being considered large. The [New Jersey State Record](#) was landed in 1953 and weighed 19 pounds, 12 ounces.

Not all summer flounder are keepers, in fact, most fish caught during the season are released. During the season the short-to-keeper ratio can reach 40:1 in some New Jersey locations, but with various hooks, baits, approaches, and release methods New Jersey’s favorite flatfish can be released alive and have a chance to be caught again.

Hooks and Baits

Hook technology has greatly improved in the past few years with different styles, colors, and angles being created yearly. A hook has five different aspects that vary depending on the style of the hook including an eye, shank, bend, gap, and point. There are dozens of hooks anglers use to target summer flounder, but three common hooks are the **J hook**, **wide gap hook**, and **circle hook**.



(photo courtesy Doug Stewart)

The **J hook** is the most common hook that can be used for almost every species of fish and is what people think of when they picture a hook. J hooks work well when fishing artificial lures or drifting and allow the angler to feel the bite of the fish and excitement of setting the hook. The negative aspect of a J hook is that an angler must pay attention, for there is an increased chance of a fish “swallowing the hook” and becoming gut hooked. Due to the summer flounder’s large mouth and aggressive nature, 4/0 to 6/0 sized-hooks work well and reduce the risk of gut hooking a fish.



Wide gap hooks are most often associated and most popular with summer flounder anglers. At retailers, these hooks are often called fluke hooks. The wide gap hook is like the J hook but the bend is longer creating a wide gap between the shank and the point. This versatile hook works well while fishing with bait when drifting from a boat or casting from shore and has good results when fished with artificial bait. Like the J hook and the angler feels the bite and hooks the fish, but due to the fact of the wider gap in the hook, gut hooking is possible but not as common. Common wide gap hook size used by anglers is 2/0 to 4/0.

Circle hooks are increasing in popularity with anglers that are targeting summer flounder. This unique hook looks like a wide gap hook with the main difference being the point bent back towards the shank. Many anglers prefer to use circle hooks since once a fish is hooked it normally stays hooked. A circle hook works differently than the previously mentioned hooks; the fish hooks itself. The angler does not need to set the hook. This way of fishing can be frustrating to an angler new to this approach, but once mastered some anglers fish only circle hooks. Circle hooks work well when fished with bait from a boat or from shore. Common sizes of circle hooks for



fluke fishing are 4/0 to 6/0.

Studies from the New York and Virginia Sea Grant program sampled 461 summer flounder by hook and line. The study used sproat hooks (type of J hook), wide gap hooks, and circle hooks to follow fish that were hooked properly and fish that were hooked internally. The summer flounder that were hooked properly had an average mortality rate of 7.5% between the three hooks. The hooks had similar rates of fish mortality. When hooked internally the sproat hook led to a fish mortality of 80%, wide gap

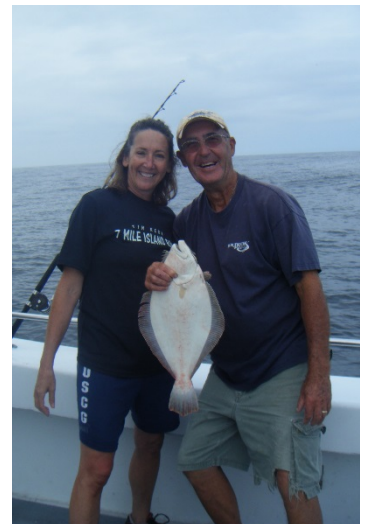
hook mortality was 60%, and circle hook mortality was 56.5%. Interesting to note is that most fluke caught in this hook and line study were caught using circle hooks.

Fluke are aggressive predatory fish and will consume many different species of fish and crustaceans as well as artificial offerings. When fishing with a big bait, use a bigger hook. For example, fishing a peanut bunker or snapper bluefish with the same hook that an angler would use for a clam or squid strip is only encouraging a summer flounder to become gut hooked. If fishing with a smaller bait like a silverside or mummichog try fishing a circle hook to decrease short fish mortality.

Approaches and Release Methods

The most exciting part of summer flounder fishing is anticipating and receiving that first “hit” of the day. An approach to make sure the angler feels that hit is as simple as being in contact with the fishing pole. With advances in sensitivity technology with fishing line types like monofilament and braid, an angler with a finger on line can feel every bump, crevasse, or fish hit while fishing. All too often anglers leave a fishing rod in the water unattended. This is known as dead-sticking. As soon as the angler walks away a fish will hit and without an angler to set the hook, the fish will swallow the hook, and become gut hooked, leading to increased fish mortality. If you must leave or take a break, ask a friend to “watch the rod” or just simply just reel up.

After feeling that hit and catching a short summer flounder what should you do next? The simple answer is return the fish to the water as soon as possible, but there is much more the angler can do to decrease fish mortality. Summer flounders have a slimy layer that is a frontline protection from bacteria. A break in a fish’s slime is like a cut on a human’s skin. The best way to protect the fish is the “less is more” method. The less the fish is touched the more of a chance the fish will survive. At the water surface the fish should be netted, then if not being kept a rag dipped in salt water should be used to hold the fish and a pair of pliers used to release the hook from the fish. If the fish is gut hooked it is recommended that the line be cut as close to the hook as possible. Fish mortality is greater if an angler attempts to “rip” a hook out of the fish damaging the important gills. A hook that’s cut off will eventually rust and will reduce fish mortality. A summer flounder should never touch a deck, jetty, beach, bulkhead, sod bank, or pavement unless the fish is going to be dinner.



Fish for the Future

Ethical angling goes beyond summer flounder fishing. All New Jersey’s marine fish can benefit from proper release methods. Decide on what species of fish you will be targeting and know the minimum size before fishing. Mates on party and charter boats will have a wealth of knowledge in regards to minimum size, but if fishing from the shore or jetty download the New Jersey Fish and Wildlife App for updated minimum lengths. Also, at many of the inlets throughout the state there are signs that have the up-to-date minimum fish lengths.

Tackle that is heavy enough to reel a fish in quickly is beneficial to the fish. An exhausted fish can lead to increased fish mortality. One of the best parts of fishing is fighting the fish, with the thrill of landing it. Many fish are never landed. Anglers that do not use the correct line, terminal tackle, and rod are guaranteed to lose more fish than they catch. Always know your fish. An angler would not want to use an ultra-lite rod while targeting 40-pound striped bass. Anglers that have questions or are not sure on which tackle to use should visit one of the many tackle shops around the state.

While preparing for that big hit when soaking a clam or casting a popper plug there are techniques to decrease fish mortality of a hooked fish. If bait fishing use a circle hook, but step it up a notch and try a **non-offset circle hook**. If using a popping plug for bluefish, try reducing the number of hooks on the plug. Most plugs will come with three treble hooks. Try reducing the number of treble hooks to just one or replace all three treble hooks with one J hook.



The bluefish will not know the difference and neither will the angler. The three treble hooks tend to get in the way when the angler lands the fish and the hooks always find their way into either the fish or the angler's hand. When using a J hook as part of a jig head when trying to land that tide runner weakfish, cut off the barb. It will make releasing the fish a lot easier. When a fish swallows the hook, and it will happen if a person fishes enough, cut the line as close to the hook as possible and use non-stainless steel hooks that will rust over time.

Dehooking, handling, and reviving fish properly can make the difference between life and death for the fish. Having dehooking tools like pliers or a multi-tool can be beneficial for a quick return into the water. A pair of pliers in a surf bag or bucket in an easy to reach location can quickly return a striper or sea robin to the surf. Pliers in a sheath that attach to a belt allows anglers to help mates out on a boat when the fish start hitting with a fury. Pliers and multi-tools can range in price from a few dollars to several hundred dollars.

When handling, that big catch use a wet towel or at least wet hands to protect the fish's slime coat. If taking a picture with the fish, hold it horizontally with both hands underneath it to support the fish's weight to decrease the chance of internal damage. Avoid holding the fish by the gills, eyes, and tail. Use a plastic holding device that grips the lips.

After all the excitement is over and pictures are taken, it's time to release that fish. From the surf to deep sea, various techniques can be used to decrease fish mortality. If fishing from surf or kayak and the fish doesn't swim away immediately keep the fish in the water with one hand in the mouth or

tail and the other hand on the belly of the fish. Allow the fish to recover for a couple of minutes. Oxygen in the water will travel over the gills and when healthy enough the fish will swim away.

Fishing for tautog or black sea bass at depths greater than 50 feet can cause the fish to have barotrauma. Barotrauma is when the reduction in atmospheric pressure causes the swim bladder to expand. Signs of barotrauma include the fish's stomach protruding from the mouth, bulging eyes, distended intestines, or a bloated stomach. The best away to reduce barotrauma is to reel in the fish slowly so it can adjust to the pressure changes, but anglers know that sometimes that is not always possible with structure or predators. The best way to release a fish with a barotrauma is to release it at depth. This allows the fish to take advantage of the increased pressure, allowing the swim bladder to decompress. These release methods are cheap and can help lead to decreased fish mortality. A weighted milk crate or a weighted spring attached to a piece of rope will work and cost about 20 dollars and can save hundreds of fish a year.



Try it yourself

This summer while fishing for summer flounder or any fish species stop by your local tackle shop and pick up more fish-friendly products. Try using different hooks and sizes and record your fishing trips. Write down what fishing outfit was used, terminal tackle, bait, size of the fish, whether the fish was kept or released, if the fish swallowed the hook, fish health when released, and any other information that would be useful to you. Take the challenge and you might be surprised that new fish-friendly products might out fish the older products. Regardless of your success or lack of success, fill out a trip report for the [voluntary Recreational Angler Survey](https://www.monmouth.edu/uploadedFiles/Resources/Urban_Coast_Institute/CircleHookDefinitionReport.pdf) on the Division's website. Your input is important to fisheries management.

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