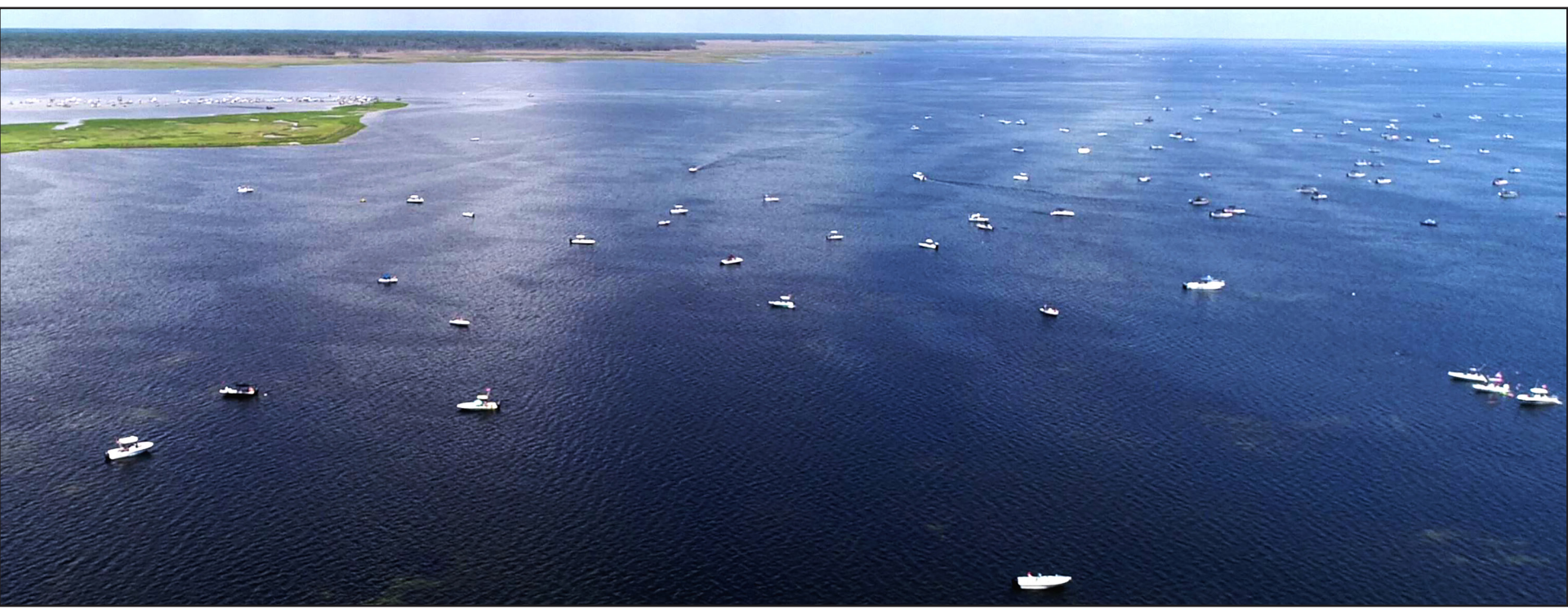


Dozens of boats filled with masked and snorkel-wearing divers took to local waters in search of bay scallops as the 2019 scallop season kicked off this past week. The 2019 recreatonal bay scallop season for much of Taylor County and all of Dixie county will remain open through Sept. 10. This includes all state waters from the Suwannee River to the Fenholloway River. (Photo courtesy of Valena Driggers of Air & Opportunity.)

Scallop 'down cycle' nears end, rebound expected soon

While it may still be too early to tell how the 2019 scallop season will turn out, Florida's top scallop expert believes the Big Bend area is nearing the end of a normal "down" portion of a regular abundance cycle.

Dr. Steve Geiger, a research biologist with the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) section of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), has worked for the state since 1988, in the Molluscan Fisheries group since 2001 and led that group since 2009.

Geiger shared some of his scallop research, as well as the local and statewide scallop population pre-season counts, at a "Scallop Seminar" held in Steinhatchee last week just prior to the opening of scallop season.

Over the past several weeks, Geiger and his team based out of St. Petersburg have conducted the state's annual scallop census, which began in 1992 and has given researchers a way to track the cyclical nature of the species.

Historically, bay scallops occurred in Florida from West Palm Beach on the Atlantic coast to Pensacola in the state's northwest corner.

In recent decades, however, their range has decreased considerably.

Today, Florida's bay scallops occur in isolated populations scattered along the west (Gulf) coast, and the majority are found in nearshore seagrass beds from Tarpon Springs in Pinellas County to Port St. Joe in Gulf County.

As a result, there are only eight counties surveyed within the open harvest area: Gulf, Franklin, Wakulla, Taylor, Dixie, Citrus, Hernando and Pasco.

To determine the average scallop population in each region, all scallops in a pre-determined number of 200-square meter "stations" (approximately 240 square yards) are counted.

Scallop survey data indicate local populations are down from last year (2018), but Taylor County's scallop numbers are still by far the highest of the four areas surveyed thus far.

Taylor County's average scallop count per 200 square meter survey area was 12 (down from 19.5 last year), but is approximately three to four times higher than Dixie (3.2) and Citrus (4.3), while significantly higher than Wakulla (0.9).

Researchers are careful to emphasize that their scallop census numbers are simply "snapshots" of a particular area, adding that scallopers in each area may find far more or far less than the researchers counted during their survey.

Morgan Davis spent the first weekend of the 2019 scallop season diving down to the shallow seagrass in search of "nature's treasure" -- bay scallops. (Photo courtesy of Valena Driggers of Air & Opportunity.)

Scientists classify bay scallop abundances into categories based on the average number of scallops per 200 square meters (200m2)

"Collapsed" populations average anything less than 2 scallops per 200m2,

"Vulnerable" or "transitional" populations average between 2 and 20 scallops per 200m2,

"Stable" populations average between 20 and 200 scallops per 200m2,

In most years, populations within the open harvest area have been "stable" or "vulnerable" and only occasionally rank as "collapsed."

Researchers believe that scallop communities have two- to three-year population cycles, but admit that weather, water quality and other factors can alter the length of each part of the cycle.

Normally, statewide population collapses can be attributed to major environmental events such as an El Niño (1998), hurricanes (2004) or tropical storms (2010).

This year, Geiger personally surveyed Citrus County (which also had lower population numbers than last year), while another team surveyed the Dixie-Taylor coast.

"From our seagrass monitoring teams, it seems the rivers -- especially Suwannee --were quite wet. I doubt that's the sole cause, but south of Steinhatchee the density was lower than north, and again north of Keaton Beach was lower," Geiger said.

"One of the projects I've been focusing on is just describing our data – collected since 1992-97 -- depending on site. It is apparent that the Big Bend has a cycle, which is fairly independent of the Citrus/Hernando area. St. Joe also has it's own pattern. That being said, I don't think there's any one cause," Geiger added.

"As we move forward, we'll examine things like weather events, coastal development, loss of habitat (seagrass), human population/harvest and red tide outbreaks.

Geiger's current work focuses on shellfish monitoring and restoration, primarily scallops, oysters and hard clams.

Ongoing projects include bay scallop restoration in the Florida Panhandle and why many do not survive to spawn a second time.

"We have another team looking at that aspect. It's too early to say if the effect is large or small, relative to natural mortality."

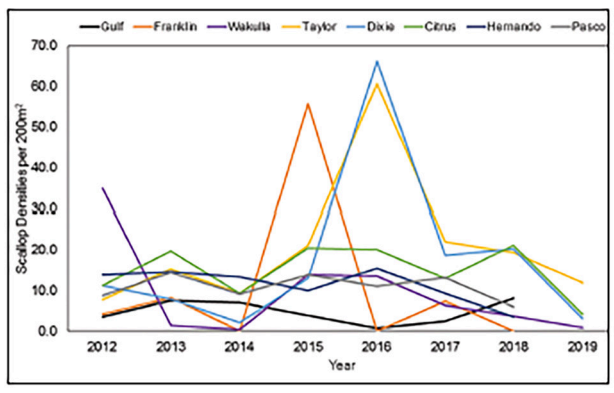
"Based on historic resiliency in the population, we'd expect either one more down year or a small rebound next year, with another really good year coming sometime two to four years in the future," Geiger predicted.

Taylor County scallop census numbers have declined since hitting a high of 63 per 200m2 in 2016, falling to 20.6 (2017), 19.5 (2018) and 12 (2019).

In the four-year period prior to the peak in 2016, Taylor's scallop census numbers hovered around the current level, with 17.3 counted in 2015, 6.0 in 2014, 12.1 in 2013 and 9.4 in 2012.

The previous peak year was 2011, when the scallop census counted 45.4 scallops per 200m2, compared to 18.2 in 2010, 23.0 in 2009 and 46.7 in 2008.

Geiger believes scallop populations are influenced by a variety of factors, including: changes in water quality, extreme wet



Note: Surveys for Hernando, Pasco, Gulf and Franklin counties are planned and will be added as they are completed.

Scallop Count
in Taylor County

Year	Count*
2019	12.0
2018	19.5
2017	20.6
2016	63.0
2015	17.3
2014	6.0
2013	12.1
2012	9.4
2011	45.4
2010	18.2
2009	23.0
2008	46.7
2007	12.3
2006	3.7
2005	7.6
2004	6.3
2003	20.4
2002	46.2

** Count based on average number of scallops observed per 200-square-meter area.*

Interesting bay scallop facts:

- Bay scallops used to be so abundant that they supported both thriving commercial and recreational fisheries before the Gulf Coast scallop population crashed in the mid-1960's.
- Scallops feed by opening their shells and filtering small particles of algae and organic matter from the water. Scallops also open their shells when breathing, using their gills to pull oxygen out of the water. Scallops close their shells to protect themselves from predators and to prevent silt from clogging their delicate gills, which would result in suffocation.
- Scallops are asexual (both male and female) and produce both eggs and sperm. In the final stages of development, scallops use all their energy for reproduction. This leaves little energy for movement, making the scallop vulnerable to predation. This may be why many do not survive to spawn a second time.
- Rapid changes in water temperature generally trigger bay scallops to spawn. In Florida, most spawning occurs in the fall when the temperature drops.
- A single scallop is capable of producing millions of eggs at once, but only one egg out of 12 million is likely to reach adulthood.
- Bay scallops can live up to two years, however in Florida they rarely live longer than one year, typically dying after spawning in the fall.
- It takes approximately 36 hours for fertilized eggs to develop into a swimming larval stage known as a veliger.
- Larval scallops drift in the water column for 10 to 14 days. While drifting, larvae develop into juvenile scallops, commonly called spat, eventually settling out of the water column and attaching to seagrass blades.
- Approximately 90 percent of spat die within six weeks of settlement. Those that survive eventually detach from the seagrass and fall to the bottom, where they remain for the rest of their lives.
- Most scallop larvae settle near where they were spawned, but some travel with the current and tide before settling in other areas.
- Scallops are also believed to die when the salinity level drops below 20 parts per thousand.

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(continued from page 11)

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