

A gull trying to steal menhaden from an Osprey.



ATLANTIC MENHADEN AND SEABIRDS

MENHADEN'S CRITICAL IMPORTANCE TO SEABIRDS AND OTHER WILDLIFE ALONG THE ATLANTIC COAST

Atlantic menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*), often called “**the most important fish in the sea**,” is a species of forage fish in the herring family and critical to the health of estuary ecosystems along the Atlantic Seaboard. **Menhaden are the key forage fish** for many predators in the marine food web including **coastal and marine birds** such as brown pelicans, bald eagles, ospreys, terns, gannets, loons, cormorants, and gulls; game fish like tuna, bluefish, striped bass, and cod; and marine mammals, including whales, dolphins and harbor seals.

Historic Changes to Atlantic Menhaden Populations

The Atlantic menhaden fishery is managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), a multi-state agency chartered by Congress. After decades of population decline and **unregulated commercial fishing**, abundance of Atlantic menhaden was near **historic lows**. In response, ASMFC initiated management measures for Atlantic menhaden, setting the first ever coastwide protections in 2012 to reduce the total coastwide catch. In the years since, **menhaden population levels have rebounded**.

ASMFC's Amendment 3 and Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management

Now, the ASMFC is on the verge of another monumental decision. The ASMFC Menhaden Management Board is currently developing **Amendment 3 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan** (FMP) to consider the management of Atlantic menhaden to balance its ecological role as a prey species with the needs of all user groups. The current management scheme is known as “single species” management, which makes decisions based solely on data on Atlantic menhaden populations. ASMFC is committed to developing **menhaden specific ecological reference points (ERPs)**, which would account for the importance of menhaden in the marine food web, the health of its predators as well as other managed fisheries. Unfortunately, menhaden-specific ERPs will not be ready until 2022-23 and there needs to be an interim solution.

Audubon and our partners are advocating for **Option E in section 2.6** of Amendment 3, which would direct ASMFC to move immediately to interim ERPs while menhaden-specific ERPs are developed. This option will ensure **ecosystem-based management** by aiming to leave **75% of menhaden pre-fishing biomass unfished**, and ensure the population never drops below 40%. The final vote on Amendment 3 will take place on November 13/14. Audubon and our partners need your support to ensure that enough Atlantic menhaden are left in the ocean as prey for birds and other wildlife.

MANY COASTAL BIRDS DEPEND ON MENHADEN:

Bald Eagle:

In the Chesapeake Bay area, Atlantic menhaden are one of four most important fish species during the non-breeding season. Additionally, changes in Atlantic menhaden levels influence Bald Eagle distribution and abundance.

Priority Bird. Climate Endangered.

Osprey:

Along the Atlantic coast, Osprey's primary food source (75-82%) is Atlantic menhaden. During June and July, Osprey diets are 95-100% Atlantic menhaden.

Climate Endangered.

Brown Pelican:

Along Atlantic and Gulf coasts, Atlantic menhaden are the predominant prey of Brown Pelicans.

Priority Bird. Climate Endangered.

Black Skimmer:

In Florida, Atlantic menhaden were among six species regurgitated by Black Skimmer chicks.

Priority Bird. Climate Endangered.

Other important birds that prey on Atlantic menhaden:

Least Tern, Manx Shearwater, Great Black-backed Gulls, Great Egret, Roseate Tern, Snowy Egret, & Sandwich Tern

Royal Tern:

From Virginia to North Carolina, Atlantic menhaden is a main species found in Royal Tern chick diets.

Priority Bird. Climate Endangered.

Double-crested Cormorant:

In Maine, Double-Crested Cormorants depend on menhaden.

Climate Threatened.

Black-crowned Night-Heron:

In South Carolina, 21% of Black-crowned Night Heron chick regurgitations were Atlantic menhaden.

Climate Endangered.

Herring Gull:

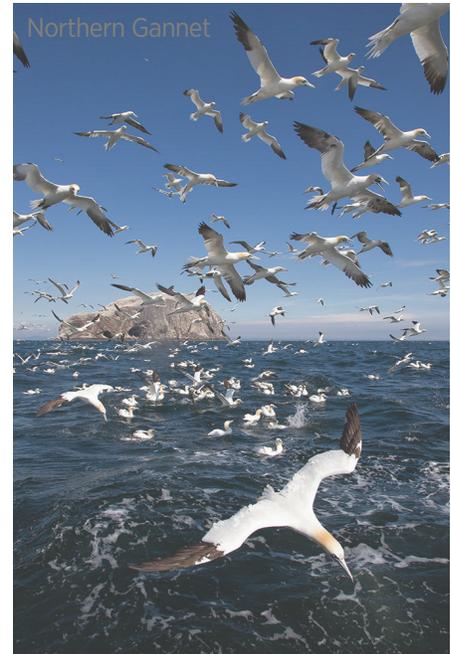
Atlantic menhaden are an important prey for this species, especially during nesting season.

Climate Endangered.

Common Loon:

Common Loon migration from Lake Ontario to Chesapeake Bay coincides with the influx of Atlantic Menhaden, their favored prey.

Priority Bird. Climate Endangered.



Northern Gannet:

Along North Carolina's Outer Banks, thousands of Northern Gannets can be spotted taking advantage of the abundance of Atlantic Menhaden.

Climate Endangered.

DEFINITIONS:

Priority Bird: species of significant conservation need, for which Audubon's actions, over time, can lead to measurable improvements in status. **Climate Endangered:** species that are projected to lose more than 50% of their current range at the current global warming trajectory by 2050. **Climate Threatened:** species that are projected to lose more than 50% of their current range at the current global warming trajectory by 2080.

HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED:

Your voice matters. Please submit public comment and provide testimony at hearings in your state in support of Option E in the reference point section (2.6). Option E is backed by sound science and overwhelming public support, and ensures enough menhaden is left in the ocean for birds and other wildlife. Public comment on Draft Amendment 3 will be accepted until **5:00 PM (EST) on October 20, 2017**. Please send your comment letters to Charlotte Runzel at crunzel@audubon.org, who will then submit comments as a package to ASMFC.

Mark your calendars. Public hearings will take place in September and October and more information on specific hearings can be found at: www.asmfc.org/species/atlantic-menhaden. Final action on the Amendment 3 is scheduled to occur on November 13/14 at the BWI Airport Marriott, 1743 West Nursery Road, Linthicum, MD. Please contact Charlotte Runzel (see below) if you plan on attending this monumental decision or any hearings in your state.

For more information contact:
Charlotte Runzel, Policy Associate
crunzel@audubon.org 202.600.7968

National Audubon Society
1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036
202.861.2242
audubon.org