

Ugu Lwethu - Our Coast. A profile of coastal KwaZulu-Natal

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5.4 Game Fish Migrations

The coast of KZN is situated in a unique sub-tropical environment falling between the tropical Delagoa bioregion to the north of Cape Vidal and the warm temperate Agulhas bioregion to the south in the Eastern Cape. In summer, migratory or nomadic game fish species arrive from the tropical waters in the north, and in winter, warm temperate species move up from the cooler Cape waters in the south. Coastal communities eagerly await the arrival of these migrant species and benefit through tourism and the associated sale of fishing related goods and services.

The migratory species arriving in KZN are either pelagic, travelling in the water column or near the surface of the ocean; or demersal, moving along close to the seabed. Species such as shad or elf move up the coast close to shore and are important to shore-fishers, while others such as geelbek remain deeper offshore, often caught by ski-boat anglers. The strength of migrations is not constant and the number of migrating fish that arrive in KZN waters varies from year to year.

In winter, when the sea temperature off KZN is cooler, warm temperate species including shad, garrick, dusky kob, geelbek and seventy-four move up from the Cape to spawn

in KZN waters. These are either endemic species, occurring nowhere else in the world (e.g. seventy-four) or are isolated populations of more widely distributed species (e.g. dusky kob, shad, garrick and geelbek).

During the summer, the Agulhas Current brings warm water down from the tropics. Tropical game-fish use this opportunity to migrate or extend their range down the coast towards KZN, sometimes moving as far south as the Eastern Cape. King mackerel, queen mackerel, dorado and yellowfin tuna are some of the main species that undertake this migration. In contrast to the winter migrants, summer migrants are all pelagic species that are widely distributed throughout the South West Indian Ocean.

Summer migrants are also generally not reproductively active while in KZN waters. Their presence is more likely to be a range extension of nomadic species rather than a true migration.¹ As such, seasonality in summer migrants is not as obvious as in the winter migrants. For example, large king mackerel will often remain in KZN waters until early winter, possibly delaying their northward return migration until the arrival of the rich bounty of sardines from the south, discussed in Section 5.2.

Shad/elf: a small migratory gamefish species commonly caught along the KZN coast during winter.



Photo: Jade Maggs

