

What the Spring 2021 Gill Net Surveys Might Mean

A young man who works for TP&W recently told me the early results from this spring's gill net surveys in the Upper Laguna Madre and Baffin Bay indicate the numbers of trout are up. He told me this at the Bird Island boat ramp, while we were discussing the current state of affairs with regard to the fishery in the wake of February's freeze.

If what he says turns out to be true, and TP&W announces they have finished the 2021 sampling and believe the numbers of speckled trout in the ULM and Baffin are above the normal average, and up from 2020, only **THREE** possibilities exist.

One—the gill nets give us useless data. The idea behind using gill nets to obtain a number every year is to get a grasp on the trends in populations. The data doesn't indicate any specific number for the total population, but it allegedly allows for tracking the population well enough to determine whether it's stable, rising or declining.

If this year's survey doesn't indicate we have fewer trout out there than last year, it isn't worth doing. We could all see dead trout floating about all over the place after the freeze. Unless the number of dead trout was statistically insignificant as a percentage of the total, a useful gill net survey done just a few months after the freeze would show a reduced number of fish. TP&W's own estimate of the number of dead trout in the LLM was in the hundreds of thousands. I didn't see a specific estimate in the ULM and Baffin, but our eyes told us it was a similar amount. Doesn't seem possible such total numbers of dead fish could possibly amount to an insignificant portion of the total biomass.

Two—the dead trout were somehow replaced with an equal or larger number of live ones since the freeze. Such a statement doesn't comport with reality. Let's say you're one of these people who want to believe large numbers of trout fled to the Gulf to escape the chilling effects of the freeze, while they still could. Those fish, you assert, could have survived and returned now. Problem is, we saw all the dead ones, which didn't flee and survive. Even if a whole bunch of trout went to the Gulf and have now returned, a useful gill net survey would still reflect a lower number than the recent historical average.

Unless, of course, you want to stretch your fantasy to include some kind of unusual surplus of extra trout coming in from the Gulf after the freeze. Perhaps they heard about some new opportunities for homesteading in the bays from the trout they met near the passes shortly after the freeze? This, folks, is a silly kind of magical thinking. No reputable research indicates anything of the sort is possible, to say the least.

Three—TP&W is lying about the numbers of trout in the nets. I doubt this. At least I doubt the young man who told me about his own personal observations of the early work he'd done with his colleagues was lying. I don't trust every message that comes from a state or federal official or agency, to be sure, but I just don't think that guy was intentionally lying to mislead me. Nor do I really think TP&W would do it in the end.

Essentially, we're left with the real possibility that the first possible answer is the correct one. I haven't done extensive research on the specific methods used by those running the gill nets every year, but it does seem possible to me they are getting skewed data, either because of where they put the nets or when they deploy them, or both. Regardless of whether I can explain why the nets give useless numbers, I would have to say they do, if they indicate a rise in numbers of trout this year.

Otherwise, we're left to believe that hundreds of thousands of dead trout represent but a thin layer of icing on a monumentally tall cake, in magic fish doing fabulous things, or that the state agency paid to manage the trout resource is blatantly corrupt.