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Tini a Tangaroa

Recreational harvest of southern bluefin tuna in New Zealand, 2024–25

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PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

In this report we estimate the annual recreational catch of southern bluefin tuna in New Zealand for the 2024–25 October fishing year. This information helps meet the obligation to report all of New Zealand's catch of this species to the Commission for Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna each year.

Tuna numbers and weights are collected from a number of sources including:

- sportfishing club weigh station records;
- a monthly telephone survey of South Island fishers;
- catch records from online reporting on the fishcatch.co.nz web page;
- catch records from recreational charter boats;
- records of recreational catch taken from commercial vessels for personal use; and
- boat ramp interviews at Waihou Bay in the eastern Bay of Plenty (where most of the recreational catch is landed).

The estimated 2025 recreational harvest of southern bluefin tuna is 1415 individual fish, which is more than in 2024 (992 fish) but the average weight of about 50 kg is lower than in 2024.

The estimated total landed weight for the recreational fishery in 2024–25 is between 69 and 71.5 tonnes with a mid-point of 70.3 tonnes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Holdsworth, J.C.¹ (2025). Recreational harvest of southern bluefin tuna in New Zealand, 2024–25.

New Zealand Fisheries Assessment Report 2025/52. 24 p.

This report describes the New Zealand recreational catch of southern bluefin tuna in the 2024–25 October fishing year. The species code for southern bluefin tuna (*Thunnus maccoyii*) used for catch reporting in the New Zealand commercial fishery is STN. However, in this report, the code SBT is used for consistency with the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna.

Starting in the 1970s the recreational SBT fishery consisted of an occasional summer catch of juvenile SBT from Fiordland, but it was assumed that SBT were out of range of most recreational fishers, in offshore areas where the surface longline vessels fished. However a North Island fishery developed rapidly in June and July of 2017 when large SBT were caught by trolling lures off Cape Runaway. Since then, there have been two distinct recreational fisheries for southern bluefin tuna in New Zealand. One off the west coast of the South Island from January to August and a target fishery that started in 2017 off the east coast of the North Island, mainly in June to August.

The North Island recreational catch is predominantly taken by trailer boats launching from the Waihou Bay boat ramp in the eastern Bay of Plenty. Trailer counts for all days during the season are used as a measure of fishing effort. An adaptive sampling strategy has been used since 2018 to initiate Waihou Bay survey days when ten or more trailers for offshore capable boats are present at 11:00 am. An on-site (creel) survey collects detailed catch and effort information from returning fishers. Catch records were obtained from 11 other North Island sport fishing clubs.

In 2025 the survey at Waihou Bay recorded 1423 trailers over the 93 day fishing season and 523 boat crews were interviewed. The total survey estimate of landed catch at Waihou Bay was 785 SBT (CV 0.077). The average weight was 45.3 kg (s.d. 18.65) with a survey harvest estimate of 35.5 t.

There were 353 individual boat names recorded from the Waihou Bay survey interviews. Some fishers also donated SBT heads and 8 otolith pairs were extracted for ageing. SBT fork lengths were collected along with the length from the same fish from the anal fin to the tip of the lower jaw to help determine a conversion factor for commercial SBT processed catch where tail fork length cannot be measured.

A further 52 SBT were recorded by other North Island sport fishing clubs with an average weight of 46.3 kg (s.d. 21.90) and harvest weight of 2.41 t. North Island catch was similar to that recorded in 2024, but average fish size decreased.

A respondent-driven off-site telephone survey estimated SBT harvest from private vessels off the South Island. The contact list of fishers included 74 boat owners in 2025; this list is still expanding. There were 95 SBT reported landed from December to August with an overall average weight of 36.4 kg (s.d. 24.79) and a total harvest estimate of 3.7 t.

Landed SBT catch reported by Amateur Fishing Charter Vessels increased in 2025, as did estimates of catch from Greymouth where large SBT were caught by private fishers in August. The harvest reported from commercial vessels under section 111 of the Fisheries Act 1996 as recreational catch for personal use in 2025 totalled 2.1 t, which is included in recreational harvest estimates.

¹ Blue Water Marine Research, New Zealand.

The total landed recreational harvest estimate for 2024–25 is 1287 SBT weighing 63.9 t. Allowing an additional 10% to 15% for unaccounted landed catch by private vessels gives a range of 69.0 t to 71.5 t and a central point estimate of 70.3 t.

1. INTRODUCTION

Southern bluefin tuna (SBT, *Thunnus maccoyii*) is a single stock, primarily distributed between 30° S and 45° S, with one confirmed spawning area in the Indian Ocean between Java and Western Australia (Farley & Davis 1998, Patterson et al. 2008). Initial growth is rapid, with juveniles reaching 50 cm at one year old. Southern bluefin tuna up to five years old undertake annual cyclical migrations in which they generally spend austral summers in the Great Australian Bight and move east as far as New Zealand or west into the Indian Ocean as far as South Africa during the winter (Bestley et al. 2010, Basson & Farley 2014). Adults are broadly distributed in the South Atlantic, Indian, and western South Pacific oceans, especially in temperate latitudes, whereas juveniles occur along the continental shelf of Western and South Australia and in high seas areas of the Indian Ocean. Southern bluefin tuna caught in the New Zealand EEZ appear to represent the easternmost extent of a stock whose centre is in the Indian Ocean. SBT can live to 30 years or older, reaching maturity at 8 to 15 years of age and a maximum size of around 190 cm fork length and 140 kg by 20 years old (Fisheries New Zealand 2025).

1.1 Description of the commercial fishery

Japanese surface longline vessels began fishing in the New Zealand region in the late 1950s targeting southern bluefin tuna. Following the declaration of New Zealand's EEZ in 1979, some of the fleet, along with vessels from Korea, took up licences to fish part of the year in New Zealand waters. The New Zealand domestic surface longline fishery expanded rapidly during the 1990s, targeting southern bluefin tuna, swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*), and bigeye tuna (*Thunnus obesus*) (Fisheries New Zealand 2025).

New Zealand is a founding member of the Commission for Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT), an intergovernmental organisation responsible for the conservation and management of SBT. Member countries receive an allocation from the global total allowable catch and must report all sources of SBT fishing mortality each year, including recreational catch.

The SBT catch limit for New Zealand was 420 tonnes (t) in the early 1990s. On introduction to the Quota Management System (QMS) in 2004, the Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) was set at 413 t, with a recreational allowance of 4 t, a customary allowance at 1 t, and other sources of fishing-related mortality at 2 t. The Total Allowable Catch (TAC) in subsequent fishing years was raised several times in line with international allocation decisions by the CCSBT.

In 2023 the CCSBT scientific committee meeting found that the stock status had steadily improved since a low point in 2009, and that the results of the agreed management procedure allowed an increase of 3000 tonnes in the 2024–2026 global TAC. As a result of this, New Zealand's national allocation increased to 1288 t. A subsequent review of sustainability measures in 2024 set the TACC at 1197 t for the fishing year beginning 1 October 2024. The highest domestic SBT commercial catch was 1097 t in 2022–23, and in 2024–25 it was 680 t (Fisheries New Zealand 2025).

1.2 Description of the recreational fishery for southern bluefin tuna

There has been a recreational fishery off the South Island west coast, mainly from Fiordland over summer, since the 1970s. The Fiordland Game Fishing Club was formed and was a member of the New Zealand Sport Fishing Council (NZSFC) until the late 1980s. Modest numbers of SBT were caught with most being less than 30 kg and caught on 10 kg line (Marquand 1978). The highest catch recorded by the club was 33 SBT in 1979. A recreational fishery for Pacific bluefin tuna (*Thunnus orientalis*) developed in 2005 off the west coast of the South Island with charter boats fishing from Greymouth and Hokitika. Occasionally southern bluefin tuna were caught in this fishery during August and September.

A North Island recreational SBT fishery rapidly emerged in June and July 2017 off Cape Runaway and eastern Bay of Plenty. Social media posts by commercial fishers, along with good catch rates and favourable weather, attracted hundreds of anglers to the eastern Bay of Plenty at short notice. Most fishing was from trailer boats launched at Waihou Bay. Fish were caught by trolling lures using the same tackle as the summer billfish fishery. Members of the Waihou Bay Sport Fishing Club operated a weigh station adjacent to the boat ramp, weighing and recording most of the catch that year. In addition, some fish were taken back to home clubs and weighed there.

NZSFC clubs recorded 266 landed SBT in 2017, mostly during late June and July. These North Island tuna were often over 60 kg, and the average weight was 72 kg. The total landed weight of SBT recorded by clubs in 2017 was 19.4 tonnes. Over 90% of the North Island catch was landed at the Waihou Bay boat ramp that year.

Six charter vessels in the South Island fishery recorded a recreational landed catch in 2017 of 47 SBT with an estimated weight of 1.9 t. Therefore, the average weight of these fish was 40.6 kg. South Island sport fishing clubs recorded a further eight landed SBT in 2017. It is not known if these fish were taken from charter boats, but a number of private boats were active in this fishery at the time.

Fisheries New Zealand have contracted annual research projects since 2018 to estimate the national amateur harvest of SBT. The on-site boat ramp surveys at Waihou Bay covered the main access point for the east coast fishery. Sport fishing club weigh station records provided additional information on catch and the weight of individual fish. Charter boats are required to register and report fishing activity and weights for each SBT caught. Since 2020 a telephone survey has been conducted to improve estimates of recreational landed catch from private boats in the South Island.

Recreational and commercial fishers encountered a run of small SBT off the west coast of the North Island (from Manukau to Cook Strait) from January to March 2022. They were caught from inshore boats fishing with baits and also from boats trolling for albacore (*Thunnus alalunga*). This was the first time that SBT were seen and caught in numbers from this area and it appears that this was a one-off or rare event. Some North Island west coast fishing clubs had prizes for SBT caught in the area in 2023 and 2024, but none have been recorded since 2022.

The estimated national recreational harvest from this project in 2022–23 was 69.3 t with a range of 65.4 t to 73.2 t (Holdsworth 2024). The allowance for recreational fishing interests was increased from 34 t to 69 t in 2024 following the increase in New Zealand's national allocation. In 2023–24 the harvest estimate had a range of 65.5 t to 73.5 t and a central point estimate of 69.5 t (Holdsworth 2025).

1.3 Objectives

This report summarises the results for the third year of the Fisheries New Zealand project STN2021-02 for the 2024–25 New Zealand fishing year (1 October 2024 to 30 September 2025), which has the following Objective:

1. To improve the estimates of the recreational catch and size composition of southern bluefin tuna (*Thunnus maccoyii*) in New Zealand fisheries waters.

The Specific Objectives are:

1. To update and undertake an on-site survey to estimate amateur harvest of southern bluefin tuna in the eastern Bay of Plenty.
2. To design and undertake a survey to estimate the amateur harvest of southern bluefin tuna off the west coast South Island.
3. To estimate the amateur southern bluefin tuna harvest for the 2025 southern bluefin tuna fishing season using the method developed in Specific Objectives 1 and 2, data from the

amateur charter vessels, section 111 landings, sport fishing club records, and any other appropriate reporting methods.

4. To characterise the biological and temporal nature of the marine amateur harvest of southern bluefin tuna.
5. To collect otoliths from southern bluefin tuna caught by recreational fishing vessels fishing in the eastern Bay of Plenty.

2. DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

2.1 North Island survey

A primary component of this survey was to collect information from New Zealand's largest recreational fishery for SBT, off Cape Runaway to East Cape, accessed from the Waihou Bay boat ramp. An adaptive survey approach used daily trailer counts at Waihou Bay during the SBT season as a measure of fishing effort, with survey days initiated when the trailer count was above a pre-determined level (Moore et al. 2015). The remote location, weather conditions suitable for fishing from small boats, and reported fishing success influences fisher interest. Trailer counts of zero can be followed by days with counts of over 150 per day in a suitable two- or three-day weather window. Onsite interviews at the boat ramp have been undertaken from June to August since 2018, with support from the Waihou Bay community and Waihou Bay Sport Fishing Club.

The 2025 Waihou Bay on-site survey design was based around the following elements:

1. A survey period from 31 May to 31 August 2025 when SBT were most likely to be in the area.
2. Daily trailer counts at Waihou Bay at 11:00 am to estimate daily fishing effort for 93 days.
3. An adaptive survey approach with a decision rule that a survey is initiated if 10 or more boat trailers (for boats over 5 m long) are counted at 11:00 am. The threshold was raised to 15 boats during the 2025 survey to help spread survey effort across the main part of the season.
4. The interviewer intercepts crews returning to the boat ramp during daylight hours.
5. Vessel and angler names are collected to match with club records and website entries to avoid double counting.
6. Interviews record the number of fishers per boat, fishing method(s), hours fished, individual catch retained or released.
7. A record of all weights (weighed or estimated) to calculate average SBT weight.
8. SBT fork length for weighed fish and where possible length measurements from anterior of the anal fin to tip of the lower jaw (straight line) were recorded for use in the calculation of a conversion factor.
9. Collection of heads, primarily from large SBT, and extraction of otoliths.

Data were collected on paper forms developed in 2018 (Holdsworth 2019). The boat ramp was busy at times, and most of the interviews were initiated while the boat was being loaded onto the trailer. Where possible, SBT were measured (fork length) and accurate weights were recorded when available from the club weigh station located next to the boat ramp. The number of SBT landed and their estimated weights were recorded for fish that were not weighed. Many of the smaller fish are processed and iced at sea and estimated weights need to be included in calculation of overall SBT average weight. Fish that were gilled and gutted when weighed were not included in average weight calculations. Estimated weights were recorded for fish landed but not weighed as well as those reported as released. Since 2020, interview sessions have been extended to include boats that returned in the morning and early afternoon because a number of fishers were returning to the ramp as soon as one SBT was caught. Boat ramp interview sessions ended before dark, in line with the health and safety policy.

The Waihou Bay Sport Fishing Club also provided collection bins for fish heads. To use this system of otolith collection, fish were measured by the boat ramp interviewer, and a numbered cattle ear tag with the date and fish length written on it was attached to the head. The fish could then be processed,

and the head with a label attached left in the collection bin. Heads were taken from the bin and processed on a rural property for otolith removal.

2.2 Expanded survey catch at Waihou Bay

The observed total catch includes the number of SBT intercepted by the on-site survey plus the number of non-survey SBT weighed by the Waihou Bay Sport Fishing Club. On busy days some boats are hauled out after dark. Interviewers do not work on the boat ramps after dark, although the club can weigh fish on request into the evening. Some boats with fish return after the weigh station closes. The catch observed during the survey will therefore be an incomplete record of all Waihou Bay landed catch.

Trailer counts at 11:00 every day during the survey period provided an estimate of the total number of fishing trips on that day. The creel survey collected information on the number of boats intercepted and the number of SBT landed on days when there were ten or more trailers for boats capable of fishing offshore. As the season progressed the threshold for initiating a survey day was increased to 15 trailers due to increased fishing effort. Boat trip was used as the unit of fishing effort because it could be applied to both interview data and trailer counts. The availability of SBT within the range of recreational vessels can vary daily. For survey days, the mean landed catch per trip from survey interviews was multiplied by the trailer count for that day. For non-survey days with trailers, the overall survey catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE, ratio of means) was multiplied by the sum of trailer counts for those days.

The variance associated with the landed catch was estimated by resampling catch per boat trip with replacement on each survey day for all vessels based on the trailer count for that day. For days not surveyed, CPUE from all survey days was resampled with replacement for the number of trailers counted for all non-survey days. The variance associated with total landed catch was estimated by adding the bootstrap estimates from survey days and non-survey days to give 1000 estimates of total landed catch at Waihou Bay and generate the standard error and coefficient of variation (CV).

2.3 Sport fishing club records

New Zealand Sport Fishing Council clubs from the Bay of Plenty, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay, Auckland, and Northland provided detailed catch records from weigh stations with certified scales. Clubs weigh and record fish caught by affiliated club members and generally for non-members on request. Club records include the date, species, boat and angler names, fish weight, and usually the location of capture. If the fish is weighed on behalf of another club, this is identified as a 'courtesy weigh'. Sport fishing clubs traditionally target yellowfin tuna (*Thunnus albacares*) and billfish over the summer months (December to May). The recreational SBT fishery usually starts in Fiordland in January and finishes in the North and South Island in September.

All available club catch records are compiled into a spreadsheet and sorted by date, vessel, weight, and angler so that fish that have been entered by two clubs — the club that weighs the fish and the club that the angler belongs to — are not double counted. Landed fish recorded in the ramp survey are also matched with club records using date, vessel, and angler to ensure that these fish are not double counted.

2.4 South Island survey

The South Island fishery has operated out of Fiordland since the 1970s. The Fiordland Sport Fishing Club recorded 18 to 36 SBT per year in the late 1970s. Most of these SBT were small and caught during the NZSFC Nationals tournament in February. This club disbanded around 1990. Reports from members of other South Island fishing clubs in 2019 indicate that a few dedicated fishers target SBT out of the fiords and occasionally Jackson Bay.

Prior to 2020, recreational harvest estimates for SBT for the South Island comprised data from the amateur fishing charter vessel reporting system, reports on commercial fishing catch and effort returns of SBT catch by recreational methods for personal use under section 111 of the Fisheries Act 1996, as well as anecdotal reports from well-connected people on the catch by private fishers.

In 2019–20, a survey was initiated to estimate the amateur harvest of southern bluefin tuna off the west coast of the South Island. The focus of the design was to estimate the number and weight of SBT caught by amateur fishers on private boats. The primary platform in this fishery is trailer boats launched from a limited number of access points in Fiordland and Jackson Bay. Some good contacts were made, but fishing was hampered by a road closure to Milford Sound after a February storm and then by Covid-19 restrictions. Recreational fishers were not allowed on the water between 25 March and 12 May 2020. In April 2021, Blue Water Marine Research created a catch-reporting web page www.fishcatch.co.nz for fishers to self-report SBT and other gamefish catch.

One advantage of contacting a group of committed SBT fishers is that they tend to know who else has been fishing because they share information amongst themselves. A register of South Island boat owners who target SBT was therefore generated from sport fishing clubs and known contacts. This kind of Respondent Driven Sampling (i.e., ‘Snowballing’) is a survey technique used to recruit hard-to-reach components of populations. Studies in Australia and New Zealand have investigated the potential of this approach for assessing recreational catch and found problems with its ability to determine the harvest of particular species (Heinemann & Gray 2010, Griffiths 2012). Most of these relate to potential biases coming from the individuals used in the initial sample and the non-random selection of survey respondents from their network of contacts, so using average catch from this type of survey to scale up to a wider group of fishers was not recommended by the Highly Migratory Species Working Group (HMS WG) in 2019.

In the South Island SBT fishery, we have assumed that there is a limited number of boats actively engaged in the fishery, and we have recruited the more active fishers to respond to a monthly SMS and phone survey during the fishing season, similar to the national panel survey (e.g., Wynne-Jones et al. 2014). This provides data to characterise the fishery and estimate catch and effort for the core fleet. Data from respondents in this survey are summed but are not scaled. Southern bluefin tuna are suitable for this approach because the species is easily identified, catches are memorable, and management restrictions are not likely to cause anglers to under-report catch (Pollock et al. 1994).

A fishing weekend out of Greymouth for bluefin tuna fishers was organised by a Christchurch based tackle shop in 2024. One of the organisers estimated that 70 large SBT were caught including some fish tagged or just released. The success of this event led to increased interest in 2025. A member of the Greymouth Sport Fishing Club was asked to record daily trailer counts during August at the Cobden boat ramp to assist with this project in 2025. Data from a temporary weigh station and some telephone survey participants was used to estimate the catch rate per trip and average fish weight. It was assumed that 10% of the trailer counts were for inshore fishing trips, not targeting SBT. A separate harvest estimate was generated from the sum of trailers assumed to be targeting SBT, the average catch rate per day, and the averaged weight from available data.

2.5 Amateur fishing charter boat records

An extract of the amateur fishing charter vessel (AFCV) records from events where southern bluefin and Pacific bluefin tuna were targeted or caught was obtained from Fisheries New Zealand (replot 16233). A review of the AFCV database undertaken in 2019 identified a range of potential errors to check for (Hartill et al. 2020). The extract received was checked for missing or out-of-range entries.

The AFCV records were matched with fishing club records, and duplicate entries were removed from the club records used in the harvest estimates. Catch by trailered charter boats fishing out of Waihou Bay during the survey period were removed from the charter records to avoid double counting catch

when calculating national harvest estimates. This is because trailer counts on non-survey days, and boats that return after dark, will include charter boat trailers. SBT estimated weights for landed catch was summed to provide total AFVC landed catch for the North and South Islands.

2.6 Section 111 landings

Southern bluefin tuna caught by commercial fishers using recreational fishing gear may be retained for personal use under section 111 of the Fisheries Act 1996. The weight of these fish must be reported with the destination code 'F'. The Fisheries New Zealand Data Management team provided the number of records and sum of estimated weights for section 111 landings.

2.7 Allowance for unaccounted catch

Some fishers process SBT onboard, and these fish are not included in club weigh station records. While some clubs will record estimated weights, the overall number of fish landed is underestimated. The telephone survey coverage of South Island skippers fishing out of Fiordland and Jackson Bay is not complete. In 2018, a factor of 15% to 30% was added to the national SBT catch recorded by private boat recreational fishers as an estimate of unaccounted catch. AFCV data and s111 reports were assumed to be relatively well recorded and no adjustment for unaccounted catch was added for these components of the harvest estimate.

In 2025 the winter SBT fishery that has developed over the last two years was monitored using trailer counts at the Cobden boat ramp and weights from a temporary weigh station at the Cobden boat ramp with the assistance of the Greymouth Sport Fishing Club and the Fisherman's Loft New Zealand. The skippers collaborate and generally fish two days, including overnight, on the Hokitika Trench during suitable weather windows.

For the 2024–25 project, the HMS WG revised the likely range of unaccounted catch to 10% to 15% of landed catch by private fishers. The midpoint of this range was used as the best available estimate. The WG considered this to be appropriate since survey coverage has increased since 2018, including the current Greymouth catch, and in 2025 a high proportion of North Island catch was captured by the Waihou Bay onsite survey and the AFCV Activity Catch Returns.

2.8 Biological data

Sport fishing club weigh stations maintain catch records, including weights from certified scales, date, and location data. Fishers are asked during the survey interview or at the weigh station whether they would donate the head of their tuna for otolith extraction and ageing.

In New Zealand otoliths are also collected from SBT landed to commercial fishing companies which mainly sample small fish. Therefore the survey interviewers were asked to target otolith collection from large SBT in 2025. Our interviewers also collected SBT weights, fork lengths and straight line lengths from the anterior of the anal fin to the tip of the lower jaw to help determine a reliable conversion factor for processed fish without a tail or fork length.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Landed catch from the 2025 Waihou Bay survey

Blue Water Marine Research has had an established presence during the SBT fishing season at Waihou Bay since 2018. Trailer counts started on Saturday, 31 May 2025 following the relatively early start to the season in 2024 (Figure 1). In 2025 most boats in early June were fishing for inshore species and the first survey was undertaken on 18 June. The sea surface temperature of Cape Runaway was over 18° C and a few yellowfin tuna were being caught in June and July. The main fishing effort in 2025 was between 6 July and 16 August (Figure 1).

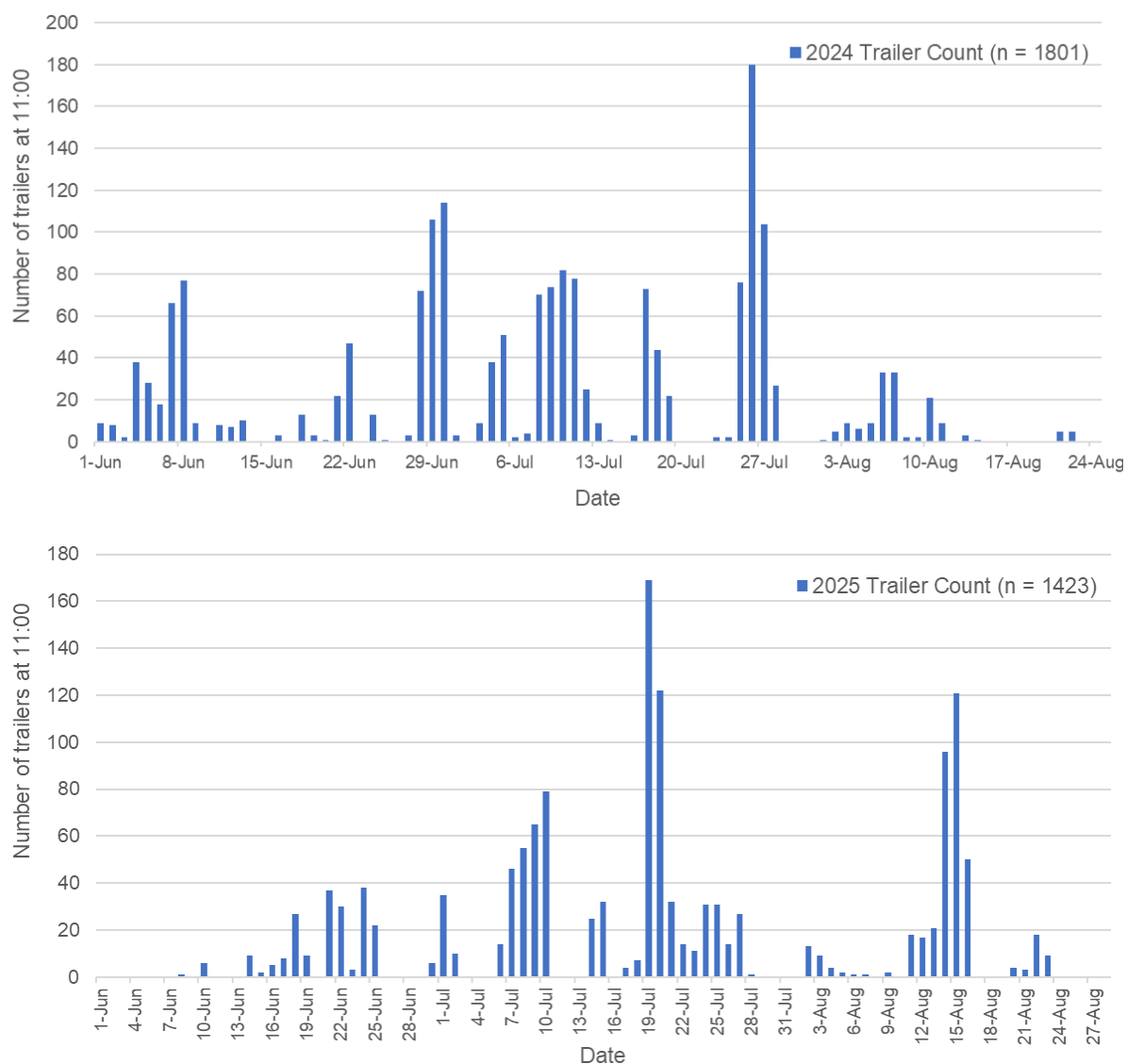


Figure 1: Waihou Bay trailer counts in 2024 (top) and 2025 (bottom) by day.

A survey total of 1423 boat trailers were counted over 93 days (Table 1). Fifteen survey days were completed with 523 boat crews interviewed on the boat ramp (Table A1 in Appendix 1). Across all survey days 75% of the trailer count were interviewed. Overall, 37% of the total trailer count from all days in the survey period were interviewed. Fishing crews were cooperative during the survey, even when they were tired, and the ramp was busy. No interview refusals were recorded. A few high effort

days in July were not surveyed to allow the allocated survey days to cover a later than usual fishing season which extended well into August (Figure 2).

A total of 292 landed SBT were reported to the interviewer at the ramp. Of these, 226 SBT were processed at sea or not weighed at Waihou Bay. The average weight of landed SBT, weighed or estimated, was 45.3 kg (s.d. 18.65), which is the lowest for the surveys to date (Table 1). A further 41 SBT were in the Waihou Bay Sport Fishing Club weigh station records only (Figure 3). These fish were caught on days without surveys or landed after dark on survey days.

The number of SBT caught per survey day was highest on fishable days during July and August, with four days during this period when more than 30 SBT were landed at Waihou Bay. One of these was 20 July where 64 SBT were recorded from 101 interviews (Figure 3).

An average of 0.65 SBT (s.d. 0.468) were caught per boat day from surveys in 2025. The highest daily catch rate in 2025 was 1.71 SBT landed or released per trip on 13 August (Figure 4).

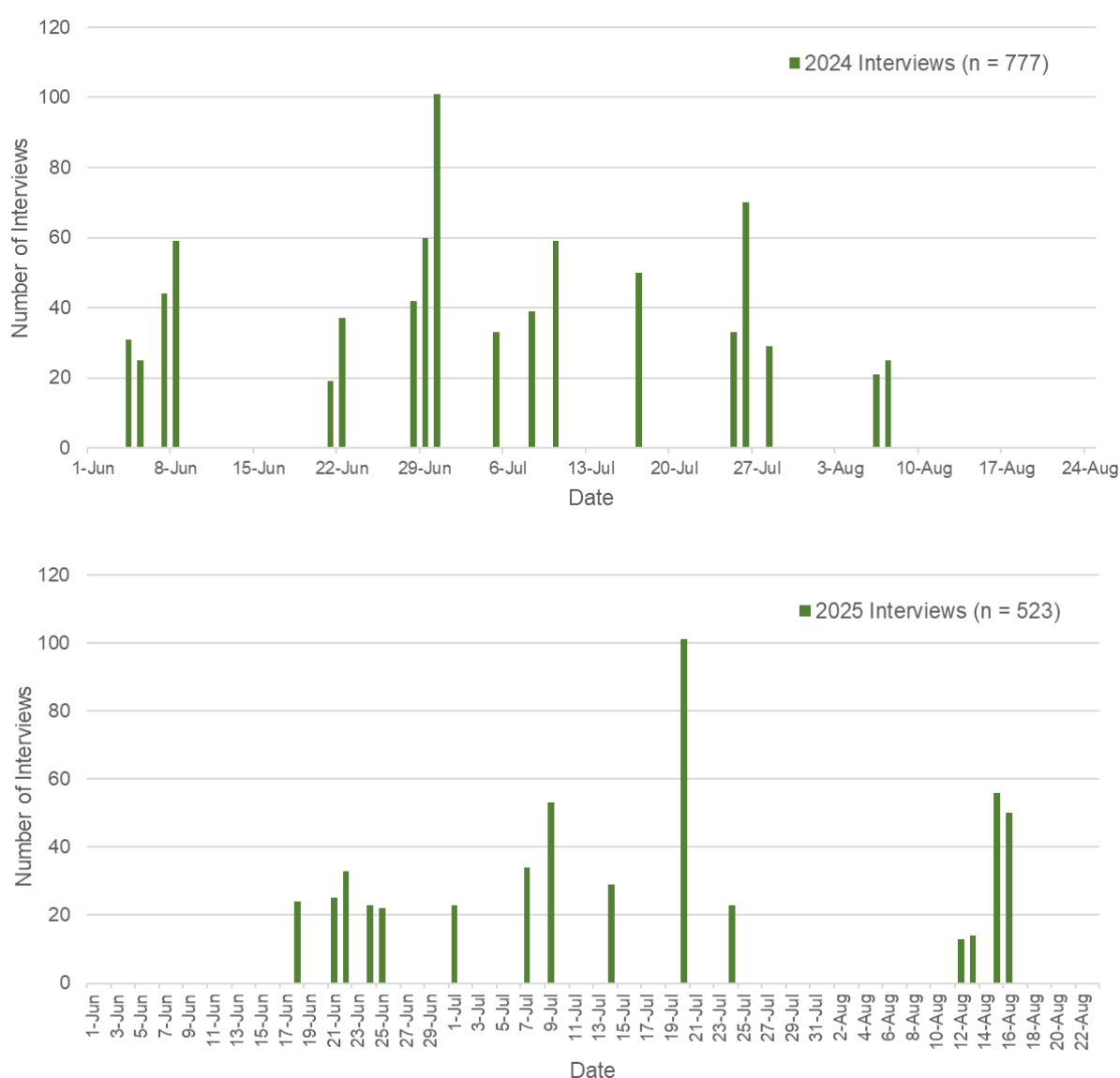


Figure 2: The number of interviews on survey days in 2024 (top) and 2025 (bottom) at Waihou Bay.

Table 1: Waihou Bay survey trailer counts, number of interviews, the number and average weight of SBT landed, and the number of otoliths collected, by year.

Year	Trailer count	Survey interviews	Landed SBT survey	Mean weight from interviews (kg)	Otolith samples collected
2018	678	336	34	78.3	32
2019	852	537	118	72.3	80
2020	891	715	267	71.2	90
2021	1 037	699	305	76.1	45
2022	896	595	313	70.2	91
2023	1 204	815	653	46.9	49
2024	1 801	777	341	54.5	15
2025	1423	523	292	45.3	8

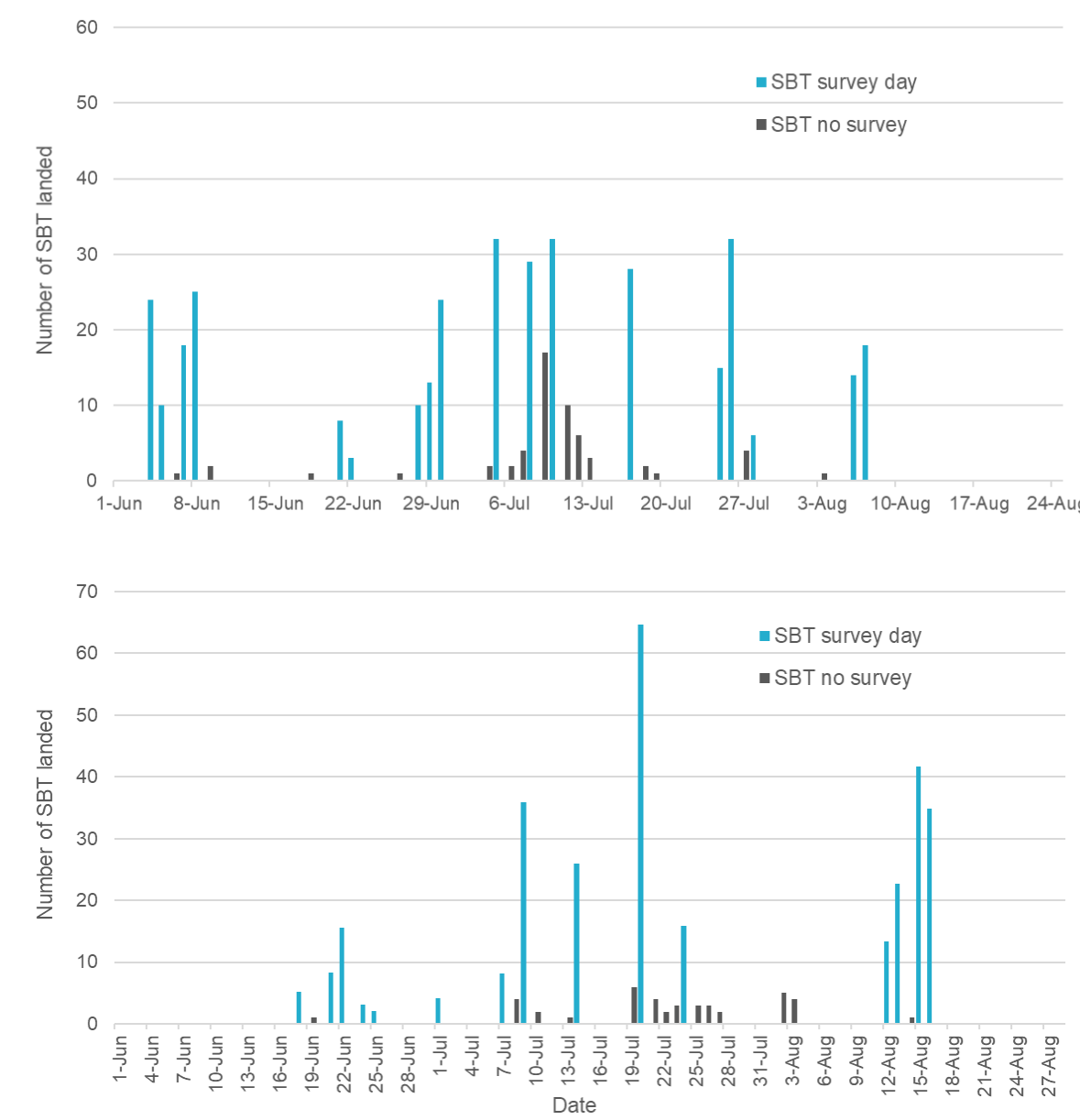


Figure 3: The daily number of landed SBT from survey interviews plus club weigh station observations on non-survey days at Waihou Bay in 2024 (top) and 2025 (bottom).

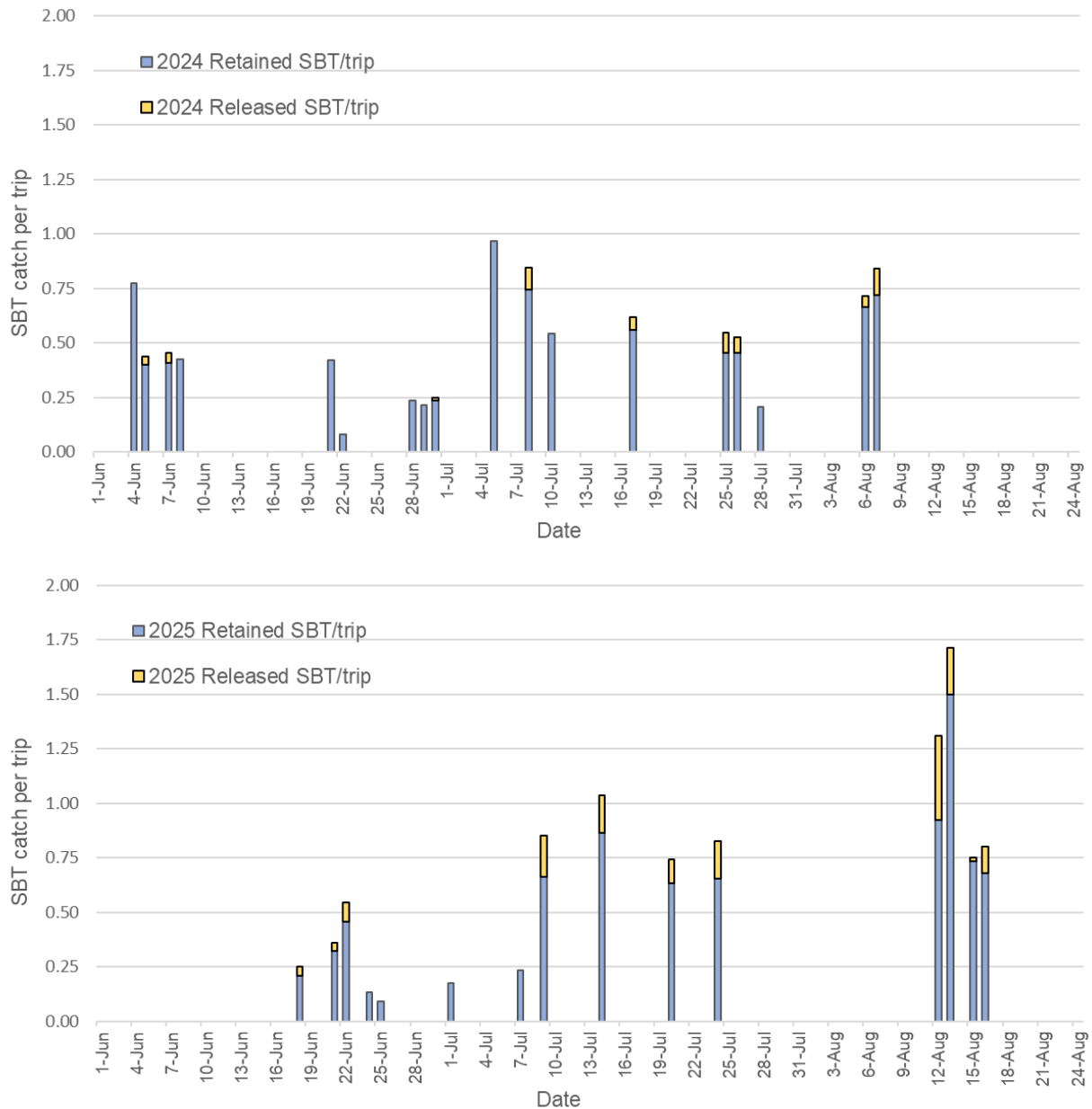


Figure 4: The daily catch rate of landed SBT per trip from the Waihou Bay survey interviews in 2024 (top) and 2025 (bottom).

The weight distribution in the 2025 Waihou Bay survey weight frequencies had a higher proportion of SBT in the 40 to 59 kg weight range and a lower proportion of SBT in the 70 kg to 139 kg weight range than recent seasons (Figures 5 & 6). The cumulative proportion of weights over the last five years shows an overall shift to smaller size classes, except for 2024 which is in the middle of the range (Figure 6). A high proportion of small SBT landed at Waihou Bay only had fisher estimated weights (Figure 7). Many of these were rounded to 5 kg or 10 kg increments.

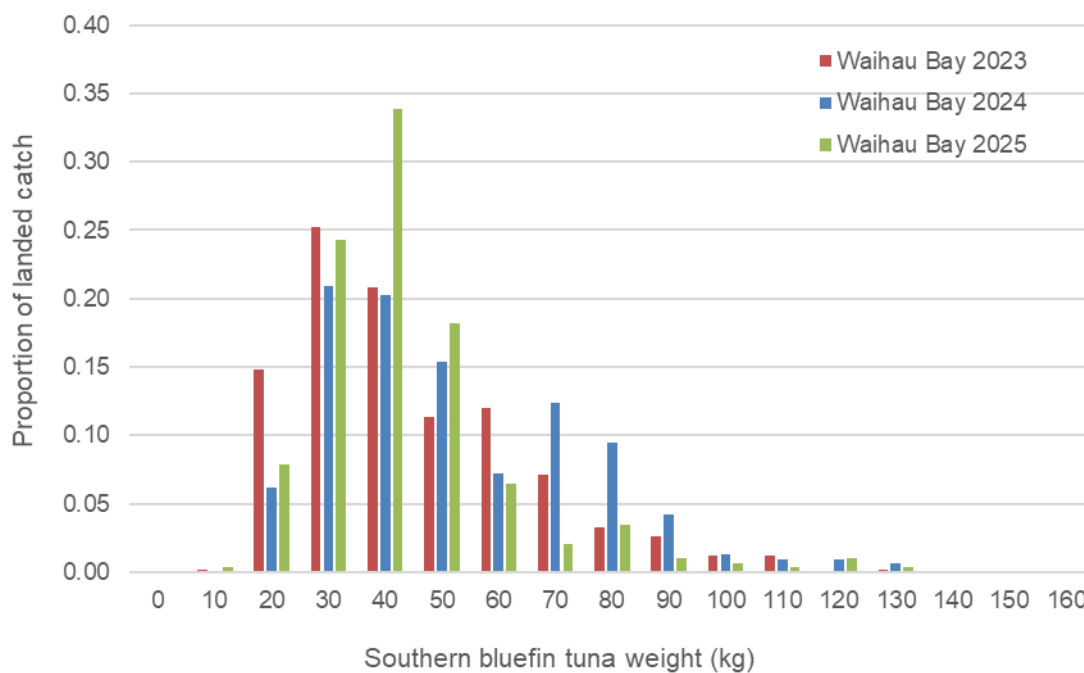


Figure 5: The weight distribution of landed SBT in 2023 to 2025 from Waihou Bay survey interviews.

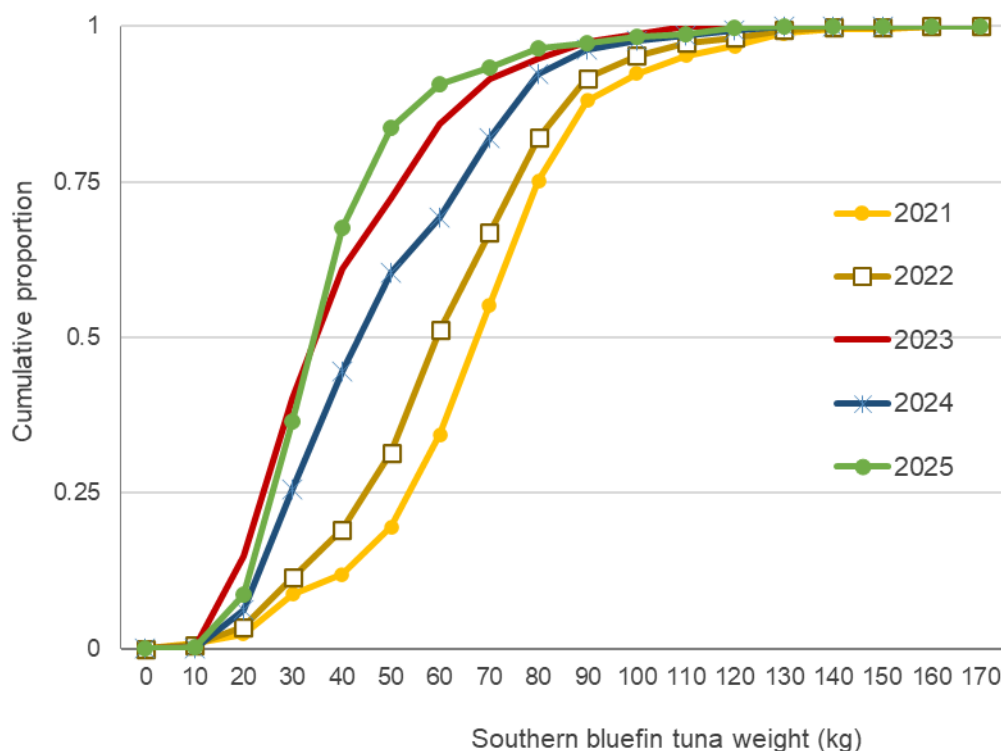


Figure 6: The cumulative proportion of landed SBT weights in 2021 to 2025 from Waihou Bay survey interviews by year.

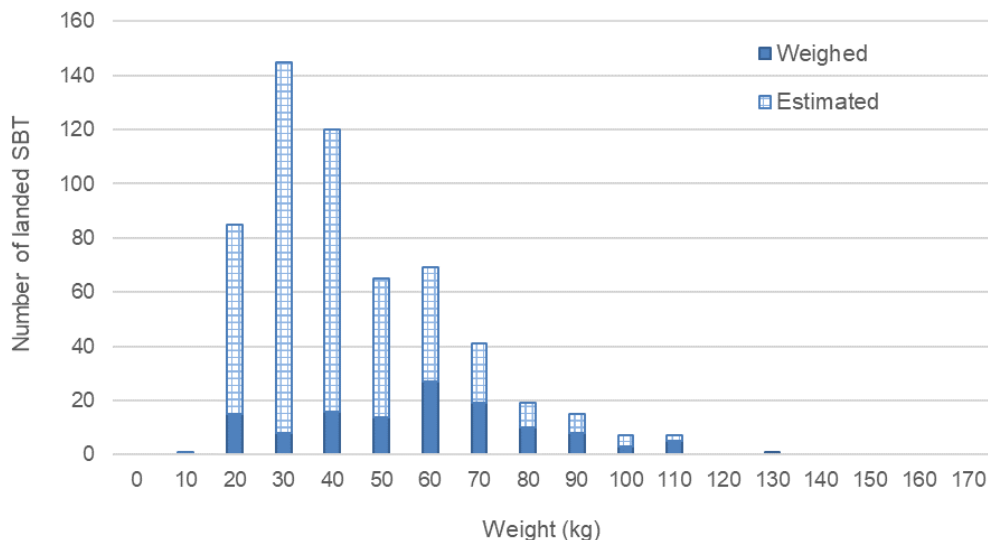


Figure 7: The number of landed SBT by weight from Waihou Bay survey interviews in 2025 that were estimated or weighed.

The on-site survey collected information on the number of SBT landed per trip and the number of unsuccessful trips. In 2025, 67% of crews interviewed at Waihou Bay landed no SBT (Figure 8). This is about the survey average from the previous five years. The average weight of landed SBT decreases from over 70 kg to about 47 kg in 2023 and a similar season in 2025 with an average weight of about 45 kg (Table 2). There were 353 individual boat names recorded from the Waihou Bay survey interviews.

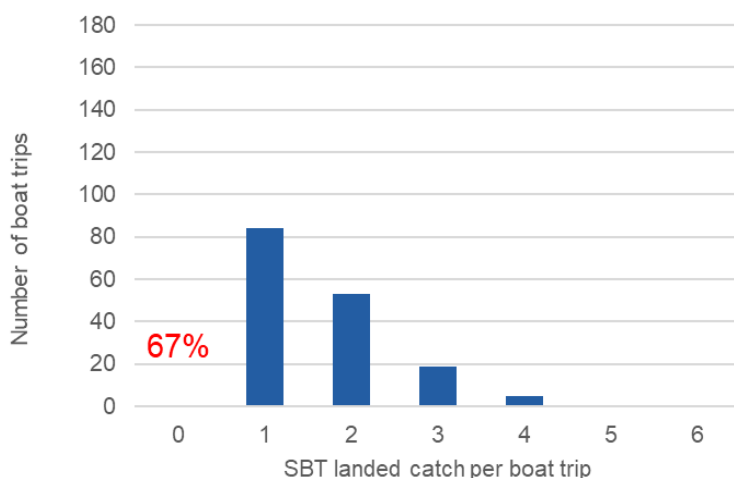


Figure 8: The number of SBT landed per private boat trip (day) in 2025 and the proportion of trips with zero catch (red) from Waihou Bay on-site survey interviews.

The total number of SBT landed at Waihou Bay was estimated using survey CPUE and trailer counts to expand the survey data. This assumes that all fishers accurately reported their landed catch when interviewed and that boats returning after dark or on non-survey days had the same average CPUE as surveyed boats. The expanded survey estimate of the landed catch from Waihou Bay in 2025 is 785 SBT (CV 0.077), with an average weight of 45.1 kg (s.d. 18.24). The highest survey number landed was in 2023 as more small fish were caught than in previous years (Figure 5, Table 2).

Table 2: Waihou Bay fishing success, average catch from all survey interviews, the expanded number of SBT landed at Waihou Bay, and their mean weight by year.

Year	Percentage of trips with no SBT	Average landed SBT per trip	Expanded number of landed SBT	CV	Mean weight	SD
2018	90%	0.10	69	0.106	78.3	19.13
2019	74%	0.22	192	0.075	72.3	20.49
2020	71%	0.37	304	0.015	71.2	23.26
2021	68%	0.44	445	0.023	76.1	24.19
2022	63%	0.53	486	0.045	70.2	21.17
2023	55%	0.80	940	0.031	46.9	20.87
2024	71%	0.44	701	0.057	54.5	24.32
2025	67%	0.56	785	0.077	45.3	18.24

3.2 Sport fishing club records

In 2024–25 a total of 52 SBT were recorded landed by sport fishing clubs other than those in the Waihou Bay survey or were reported in online catch reports on the fishcatch.co.nz webpage. Most of these fish were caught in the Bay of Plenty. The average weight for these fish was 46.3 kg (s.d. 21.90). When fishers first started catching SBT most people wanted to weigh and record their catch. In recent years there has been an increased focus on processing and icing the fish and only the largest fish are weighed whole. Where there is an overlap between club records and charter vessel records, the number of fish is counted for charter vessels only.

3.3 Survey of South Island fishers

The South Island off-site telephone survey database expanded from 17 boat owners in 2020 to 74 active SBT fishers in 2025 using a variety of sources, including referrals from other fishers. The SBT fishery started in December, earlier than usual, and finished in August with some large fish caught off Hokitika. There were 95 SBT reported landed, with a weight range of 15 to 130 kg and an average of 36.36 kg (s.d. 24.785). Excluding telephone survey catch reported from Greymouth in August the harvest estimate for the telephone survey in 2025 was 3.46 t.

A fishing weekend out of Greymouth was organised for bluefin tuna fishers in 2024. One of the organisers estimated that 70 SBT were caught including some fish tagged or just released. Data from phone interviews and some weighed fish provided an estimated average weight of 100 kg (s.d. 17.32) that year for landed fish. The organisers estimated average weight for landed fish of 100 kg.

In 2025 a member of the Greymouth Sport Fishing Club conducted daily trailer counts at the Cobden boat ramp to assist with this project. During August a total of 204 trailers were counted, ranging from zero to 38 per day. A proportion of boats would have been targeting inshore species and many of the crews targeting SBT fished overnight and were at sea for 2 days per trip. There was anecdotal information on catch rates per day and some overlap with telephone diarist data. Fishing was less successful than in August 2024 and an estimated catch rate of 0.5 SBT per boat day was assumed. A temporary weigh station was made available at the boat ramp. All fish were weighed gilled and gutted with tail and fins on (GGO) and the Fisheries New Zealand conversion factor for commercial landings of 1.1 was used. Weight estimates from telephone interviews and weighed fish in 2025 provided an estimated average weight for Greymouth SBT of 99.09 kg (s.d. 36.496). The harvest estimate from Greymouth in 2025 was 9.12 t.

3.4 Amateur fishing charter boat records

An extract of SBT catch from amateur fishing charter vessel records from events where southern bluefin tuna were targeted or caught was provided by Fisheries New Zealand (Table 3). This year the extract provided the sum of landed weight per event, not individual fish weights.

The South Island charter vessels reported retaining 47 SBT in 2024–25 with an average weight of retained SBT of 24.21 kg. Catch of SBT was spread from January to August, with most fish caught from February to May.

The charter fishing effort in 2024–25 off the North Island started in mid-June off East Cape and Ranfurly Bank and then shifted to Cape Runaway and the eastern Bay of Plenty. Catches were relatively consistent through July and early August (Figure 9). In total, 216 SBT were caught and kept, off the North Island, and average weight was 47.13 kg. AFCVs released 116 SBT which was 35% of the number caught (Figure 9). The 2024–25 AFCV catch and estimated landed weight for New Zealand was the highest recorded to date (Table 3).

The average duration of North Island charter fishing events targeting SBT in 2024–25 was 7.4 hours (s.d. 5.09). The retained catch for successful days ranged from 1 to 10 SBT, with an average of 4.3 SBT per day which is higher than previous years. The average duration of South Island charter events was 1.3 hours (s.d. 1.38), which is similar to the previous two years.

Table 3: Southern bluefin tuna effort and catch from amateur fishing charter vessel logbooks by year for all of New Zealand (including trailer boats fishing from Waihou Bay).

October Fishing Year	Days with SBT target	Number of SBT caught	Number of SBT retained	Estimated landed weight (kg)
2010–11	1	6	4	397
2011–12	4	6	4	131
2012–13	7	12	12	550
2013–14	0	0	–	–
2014–15	16	6	2	95
2015–16	33	38	37	1 267
2016–17	53	54	52	2 274
2017–18	37	12	12	597
2018–19	63	47	42	1 821
2019–20	125	225	153	10 884
2020–21	102	208	149	9 079
2021–22	150	331	249	5 917
2022–23	70	151	108	4 361
2023–24	44	72	63	3 093
2024–25	89	388	263	11 318

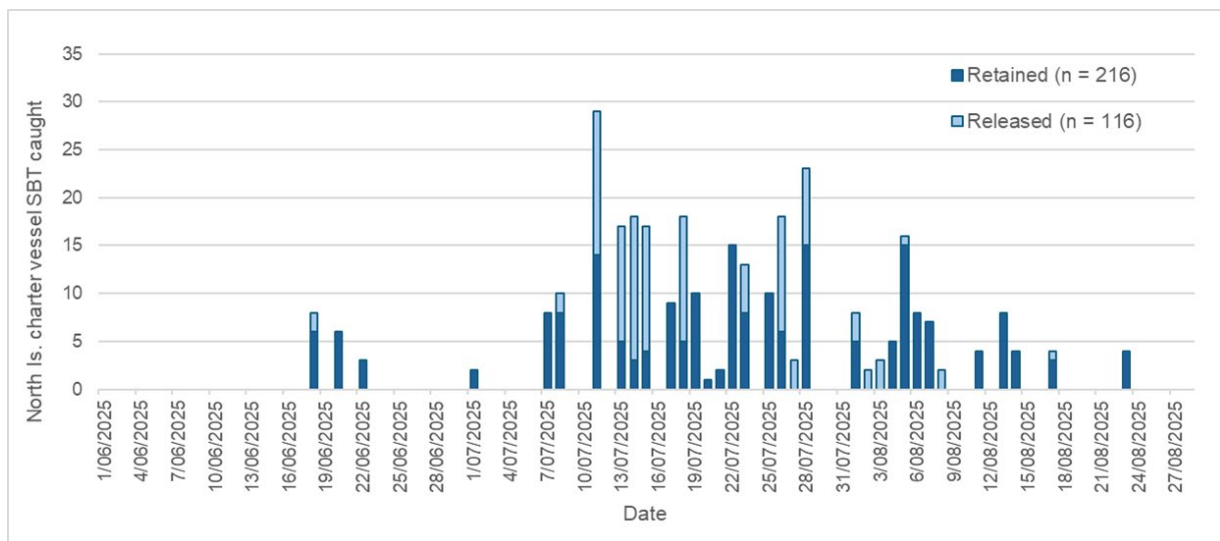


Figure 9: The number of SBT retained or released from charter vessels by day in the North Island.

3.5 Section 111 landings

Southern bluefin tuna caught by commercial fishers and retained as recreational catch under section 111 of the Fisheries Act are recorded on statutory reporting forms. In the 2024–25 October fishing year, the section 111 landings totalled 2.10 t from 50 reporting events (Table 4).

Table 4: Recreational catch retained by fishers on commercial vessels under a section 111 approval.

Fishing year	Greenweight kg	Fishing year	Greenweight kg
2014–15	672	2020–21	879
2015–16	661	2021–22	2 709
2016–17	1 038	2022–23	1 099
2017–18	507	2023–24	1 646
2018–19	454	2024–25	2 103
2019–20	671		

3.6 Recreational harvest estimate for southern bluefin tuna in 2024–25

The total landed catch from the on-site survey at Waihou Bay, the sum of actual weights recorded by other North Island clubs, the number and average estimated weight from charter vessel logbooks, the sum of the weights from the South Island survey, plus the non-commercial catch on commercial vessels sum to a national estimate of recreational SBT catch in 2024–25 of 63.9 t (Table 5).

In addition, an allowance is made for unaccounted landed catch, which is mostly fish not landed at Waihou Bay and not weighed at a club on return to port. As was the case in previous years, an allowance for unaccounted landed catch is made. When this survey was initiated in 2018 there was no South Island survey, and large tuna were being caught in the western Bay of Plenty but not being weighed or captured in fishing club records. The HMS WG recommended in 2018 that a factor of 15% to 30% be added to the national SBT catch recorded by private boat recreational fishers, but not to the catch from statutory reporting from AFCVs and private catch from commercial vessels. This allowance was revised to 10% to 15% in 2025 by the HMS WG due to increased survey coverage and

the high proportion of North Island catch recorded by AFCVs and from the Waihou Bay access point survey. The SBT recreational harvest estimate for 2025 has a range of 69.0 t to 71.5 t of SBT and a point estimate of recreational SBT harvest in 2024–25 of 70.3 t (Table 5).

Typically, no recreational SBT catch is reported between 1 October and 31 December each year. Information in this report is therefore effectively the same as for the 2025 calendar year. Annual harvest estimates increased every survey year from 2017–18 to 2024–25 (Table 6).

Table 5: Recreational harvest estimates for 2024–25 from available sources with an allowance for estimated unaccounted catch of 12.5% and range of 10% to 15% added to the harvest estimates from private fishing vessels.

Source	Harvest #	Mean wt (kg)	Harvest wt (t)
North Island			
Waihou Bay Survey	785 (CV 0.077)	45.272	35.54
Other club catch	52	46.313	2.41
Charter vessel	216	47.13	10.18
South Island			
Phone survey	95	36.37	3.46
Charter vessel	47	24.21	1.14
Greymouth data	92	99.09	9.12
National			
section 111	?		2.10
Total	1287		63.94
Plus unaccounted catch			
Low estimate 10%	1389		69.0
High estimate 15%	1441		71.5
Point estimate	1415		70.3

Table 6: Annual recreational harvest estimates from fishing club data in 2016–17 and survey and other available project data sources since 2017–18.

Year	Number retained	Point estimate of harvest weight (t)	Harvest range with allowance for unaccounted catch (t)
2016–17	266	Club data only 19.4	
2017–18	202	12.3	11.4 – 13.4
2018–19	349	21.2	24.4 – 27.5
2019–20	587	42.6	46.6 – 51.3
2020–21	589	48.7	54.1 – 60.3
2021–22	905	50.5	56.7 – 62.9
2022–23	1496	69.3	65.4 – 73.2
2023–24	1426	69.5	65.8 – 74.1
2024–25	1415	70.3	69.0 – 71.5

3.7 Biological data

A total of 8 usable otolith pairs were extracted from southern bluefin tuna intercepted during the Waihou Bay survey in 2025. The weight range of these fish was 35.2 kg to 124.2 kg with fork lengths ranging from 127 to 192 cm. Measurements were made with the fish on top of a measuring mat or with the fish hanging at the club weigh station.

Interviewers collected 17 paired measurements of tail fork to the end of the lower jaw (fork length) and anal fin to end of the lower jaw (anal length, straight line). The resulting linear regressions will assist in updating the current conversion factor for SBT that are landed without a tail by commercial fishers (Figure 10, Appendix 2), once more data are available.

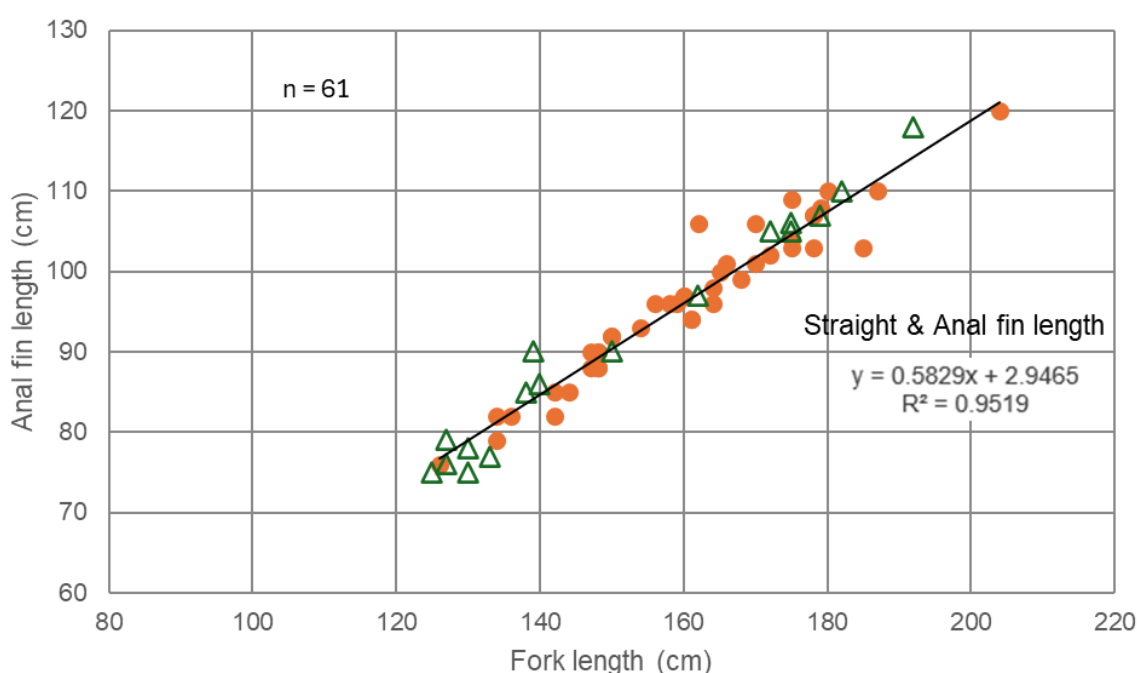


Figure 10: Southern bluefin tuna straight line anal fin to end of the lower jaw by fork length. 44 data points from 2024 (orange circles) and 17 from 2025 (triangles).

4. DISCUSSION.

This is the eighth dedicated project to estimate the annual recreational harvest of southern bluefin tuna in New Zealand. Starting in the 1970s the recreational SBT fishery consisted of the occasional summer catch of juvenile SBT from Fiordland, but it was assumed that SBT were out of range of most recreational fishers, in offshore areas where the surface longline vessels fished. The North Island recreational fishery developed rapidly in June and July of 2017 after tip-offs from commercial skippers of good fishing off Cape Runaway. That year fishing clubs weighed 266 SBT with most over 50 kg and 26 over 100 kg. This was a novel fishery that attracted a lot of attention and was within range of trailer boats launched from Waihou Bay. A high proportion of SBT catch was weighed by fishers who wanted a record of their catch.

The first access point survey at Waihou Bay in 2018 recorded 34 landed SBT with an average catch rate of 0.10 per boat day. There was a sense that the availability of SBT within range of recreational fishers would be variable from year to year based on the variation in the presence of forage species, and migratory pathways. Since then, there has been a steady increase in annual recreational harvest estimates until reaching about 69 tonnes in 2023 (Table 6). That year, catch rates of SBT per vessel day increased but the size decreased with a mode at 30 to 40 kg (Holdsworth 2024).

In 2024 catch rates were relatively good in June indicating an early start to the fishing season out of Waihou Bay, but fishing was harder when trolling lures during the day. Boats were staying out later with reports of higher catch rates of SBT off Cape Runaway made by fishers dropping knife jigs down to depths where fish were feeding at night. This resulted in more crews fishing at night and returning after dark or the next morning towards the end of the 2024 season.

The water remained over 18° C off Cape Runaway for much of June 2025 and fishers were still catching yellowfin and skipjack tuna. Long range charter boats were reporting good catches in cooler water further east in July and were able to fish a wider range of sea conditions. The North Island charter catch increased in numbers caught and estimated landed weight in 2025.

The Whakatane Sport Fishing Club started a SBT fishing tournament in 2025 with large cash prizes. The fishing dates were flexible to target suitable weather windows and landed fish had to be weighed at the Whakatane club to qualify for prizes. At Waihou Bay this led to some days with higher than usual peak fishing effort, fewer fish weighed on site and large fish that could be candidates for otolith collection being taken back to Whakatane. Fish caught at Waihou Bay will be included in the survey catch and effort data, so are not included in the catch records from fishing clubs. There were few SBT caught in the western Bay of Plenty in 2025.

The South Island off-site telephone survey continues to have a good response from participants and is slowly expanding. The 2024 and 2025 phone survey and social media posts recorded SBT catches off Otago, Kaikōura and Greymouth as well as Fiordland. Information on the increased fishing effort and good catch rates of SBT on the Hokitika Trench in August 2024 was included in last year's harvest estimate. Thanks to members of the Greymouth Sport Fishing Club there were day trailer counts at the Cobden Boat Ramp during August. There were large SBT seen and caught but some were lure or bait shy in 2025. Catch rates were lower but average weight was about 100 kg so the catch estimates contribute about 15% to the annual harvest estimate.

In April 2021 a catch reporting web page was added to the gamefish tagging site www.fishcatch.co.nz. The availability of this option for reporting landed or released SBT was included in a number of posts online, but uptake remains modest, with 12 reports received in 2024 and 8 in 2025 that were not included in other data sources.

The Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) funds the stock assessments for SBT and sets management targets, an international TAC, and annual country allocations for much of the international catch. In 2023, the CCSBT increased the international TAC for 2024 based on the results of their management procedure. Overall, SBT abundance is predicted to increase to 30% of Total Reproductive Output by 2035 (Anon 2023). The increase in the numbers of juvenile SBT caught in New Zealand in the last three years could indicate a period of good recruitment and that the availability of SBT to recreational fishers is likely to continue to increase. An updated CCSBT stock assessment for SBT will be undertaken in 2026.

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7. APPENDIX 1

Table A1: Waihau Bay creel survey trailer counts, number of interviews, and SBT landed by day in 2025.

Date	Trailer count	Survey interviews	Landed SBT survey	Date	Trailer count	Survey interviews	Landed SBT survey
31/05/2025	0			13/07/2025	25		
1/06/2025	0			14/07/2025	32	29	25
2/06/2025	0			15/07/2025	1		
3/06/2025	0			16/07/2025	0		
4/06/2025	0			17/07/2025	4		
5/06/2025	0			18/07/2025	7		
6/06/2025	0			19/07/2025	169		
7/06/2025	0			20/07/2025	122	101	64
8/06/2025	1			21/07/2025	32		
9/06/2025	0			22/07/2025	14		
10/06/2025	6			23/07/2025	11		
11/06/2025	0			24/07/2025	31	23	15
12/06/2025	0			25/07/2025	31		
13/06/2025	0			26/07/2025	14		
14/06/2025	9			27/07/2025	27		
15/06/2025	2			28/07/2025	1		
16/06/2025	5			29/07/2025	0		
17/06/2025	8			30/07/2025	0		
18/06/2025	27	24	5	31/07/2025	0		
19/06/2025	9			1/08/2025	0		
20/06/2025	0			2/08/2025	13		
21/06/2025	37	25	8	3/08/2025	9		
22/06/2025	30	33	15	4/08/2025	4		
23/06/2025	3			5/08/2025	2		
24/06/2025	38	23	3	6/08/2025	1		
25/06/2025	22	22	2	7/08/2025	1		
26/06/2025	0			8/08/2025	0		
27/06/2025	0			9/08/2025	2		
28/06/2025	0			10/08/2025	0		
29/06/2025	0			11/08/2025	18		
30/06/2025	6			12/08/2025	17	13	12
1/07/2025	35	23	4	13/08/2025	21	14	21
2/07/2025	10			14/08/2025	96		
3/07/2025	0			15/08/2025	121	56	41
4/07/2025	0			16/08/2025	50	50	34
5/07/2025	0			17/08/2025	0		
6/07/2025	14			18/08/2025	0		
7/07/2025	46	34	8	19/08/2025	0		
8/07/2025	55			20/08/2025	4		
9/07/2025	65	53	35	21/08/2025	3		
10/07/2025	79			22/08/2025	18		
11/07/2025	0			23/08/2025	9		
12/07/2025	0			24/08/2025	1		
				Total	1 423	523	292

8. APPENDIX 2

Table A2: Southern Bluefin tuna length and weight data including anal fin to lower jaw measurements.

Year	Straight fork length (cm)	Straight anal fin length (cm)	Weight (kg)	Year	Straight fork length (cm)	Straight anal fin length (cm)	Weight (kg)
2024	126	76	30.2	2024	179	108	
2024	134	82	44	2024	180	110	79.6
2024	134	79	46.6	2024	185	103	115.2
2024	136	82	45.2	2024	187	110	104.4
2024	142	82	50	2024	204	120	138
2024	142	85	49.8	2025	192	118	124.20
2024	144	85	54	2025	182	110	97.00
2024	147	88	55.6	2025	179	107	119.80
2024	147	90		2025	175	106	107.80
2024	148	88	64	2025	175	105	87.20
2024	148	90		2025	172	105	88.60
2024	148	90	58.2	2025	162	97	77.00
2024	148	88	64	2025	139	90	37.80
2024	150	92	54.6	2025	150	90	56.60
2024	150	92	54.4	2025	140	86	43.00
2024	154	93	59.8	2025	138	85	52.40
2024	156	96	61	2025	127	79	35.00
2024	158	96	59.8	2025	130	78	37.00
2024	159	96	78.4	2025	133	77	35.60
2024	160	97	60.4	2025	127	76	35.40
2024	160	97	80.4	2025	125	75	31.40
2024	160	97	80.6	2025	130	75	36.80
2024	161	94	71.6				
2024	161	94	84.6				
2024	162	106	75.4				
2024	164	98	80				
2024	164	96	77.6				
2024	165	100	80.8				
2024	166	101	93				
2024	168	99	90.6				
2024	170	106	87.6				
2024	170	101	81.2				
2024	172	102					
2024	175	103	96.2				
2024	175	109	81.2				
2024	175	104	103				
2024	178	107	97				
2024	178	103	87.4				
2024	178	107	119.2				