

2023 Skillful Angler Program Winners

This year marks the 41st anniversary of the New Jersey Fish and Wildlife's Skillful Angler Program. For four decades Fish and Wildlife has been recognizing anglers who catch fish of "not quite record" size but large enough to have tested the angler's skill and be worthy of recognition in each of the freshwater and marine species categories.

The **Skillful Angler Program** is designed to supplement the New Jersey State Record Fish Program. Significant changes were made in January of 2015. Although the program's three divisions remained the same (Adult, Junior, and Catch and Release), there are now categories creating more opportunities for qualifying fish to earn the angler a series of personalized certificates:

- **Specialist Angler** – catch five qualifying fish of the same species within one calendar year
- **Master Angler** – catch five qualifying fish of five different species (saltwater and/or freshwater) within one calendar year
- **Elite Angler** – catch ten or more qualifying fish (saltwater and/or freshwater) within one calendar year
- **First Fish** – catch your first fish ever of any species

Three additional categories (the **Slam Series**) include:

Freshwater

- **Trout Slam** – catch one each of a qualifying Rainbow, Brook, and Brown Trout within one calendar year
- **Bass Slam** – catch one each of a qualifying Smallmouth and Largemouth Bass within one calendar year
- **Panfish Slam** – catch one each of a qualifying Sunfish, Crappie, and Yellow Perch within one calendar year

Saltwater

- **Inshore Slam I** – catch one each of a qualifying Striped Bass, Bluefish, and Fluke within one calendar year
- **Inshore Slam II** – catch one each of a qualifying Black Sea Bass, Tautog, and Weakfish within one calendar year
- **Offshore Pelagic Slam** – catch one each of a qualifying Bluefin Tuna, Bigeye Tuna, Yellowfin Tuna, and Dolphin within one calendar year
- **Marlin Slam** – catch one each of a qualifying White and Blue Marlin within one calendar year

In 1983, the program began with 31 applicants and in 2023, 279 applications representing 21 different species from 101 individuals were officially processed. Since the program's modest beginning, Fish and Wildlife has granted Skillful Angler status to 4,605 anglers.

Skillful Angler Summary/Facts

The total number of applications received in 2023 was 279 applications which is a 58.52% increase from 2022 which had 176 applications. The most frequently entered species by skillful anglers in 2023 (junior, adult, and catch and release categories combined) were Crappie with 39 applications, followed by Chain Pickerel with 30 applications. Christopher Pereira led anglers with 27 applications submitted followed by Katherine McGrath with 18 applications submitted. Christopher Pereira led anglers with 8 different species submitted followed by Frank Ruczynski submitting 7 different species.

The following is a breakdown of applications received per species (by categories):

Freshwater

Adult

Hybrid Striped Bass (1), Rainbow Trout (2)

Catch and Release

Atlantic Landlocked Salmon (13), Bowfin (1), Brown Trout (1), Bullhead Catfish (27), Carp (4), Chain Pickerel (30), Channel Catfish (6), Crappie (39), Hybrid Striped Bass (13), Largemouth Bass (18), Muskellunge (1), Northern Pike (2), Rainbow Trout (4), Smallmouth Bass (27), Sunfish (27), Walleye (10), White Perch (1), Yellow Perch (26)

Saltwater

Catch and Release

Bluefish (2), Kingfish (1), Striped Bass (14)

The Catch and Release Category (both Freshwater and Saltwater) had the greatest number of entries with 250 applications, followed by the Adult Category with 3 applications. Freshwater applications remain the most popular with 253 applications while Saltwater only received 17 applications.

Specialist Angler: Brian Faber (Sunfish), Michael Ferralasco (Sunfish), Edward Guth Jr. (Chain Pickerel), Mike Hermann (Yellow Perch), Rick Hess (Chain Pickerel), George Horvath (Bullhead Catfish), Katherine McGrath (Crappie and Smallmouth Bass), Christopher Pereira (Crappie and Striped Bass), Frank Ruczynski (Chain Pickerel), Joseph Santiago (Crappie and Sunfish)

Master Angler: Duane Chapman, Katherine McGrath, Christopher Pereira, Frank Ruczynski, Joseph Santiago, Katie Skolsky

Elite Angler: Brian Faber, George Horvath, Katherine McGrath, Christopher Pereira, Frank Ruczynski, Joseph Santiago

Bass Slam: Christine Chapman, Katherine McGrath

Panfish Slam: Joe Bergen, Frank Ruczynski, Joseph Santiago

The 2023 Skillful Angler Winners are as follows:

Freshwater

Adult Category

Rainbow Trout: 6lbs 15oz. caught by Dave D'Orio of Bridgeton, New Jersey on March 15th. Dave was fishing Giampietro Park Pond from shore when he landed the fish at 7:30 AM. Six-pound test was used with a St. Croix spinning rod paired with a Pflueger spinning reel. The trout measured 25.25 inches in length with a girth of 16 inches.

Hybrid Striped Bass: 17lbs 12oz. caught by Jim Piascik of Randolph, New Jersey on May 24th. Jim was night fishing Monksville Reservoir from his boat when he landed the fish at 1:00 AM. Twenty-pound test was used with a Fenwick rod paired with a Daiwa reel while using a Storm Thunderstick. The fish measured 31.50 inches in length with a girth of 23.75 inches.

Catch and Release Category

Bowfin: 25.75 inches in length caught by Sandi Kennedy of Mount Ephraim, New Jersey on June 30th. Sandi was fishing Raccoon Creek from shore when she landed the fish at 6:00 PM. Twenty-pound test braid was used with a medium heavy spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while fishing with a swim jig.

Brown Trout: 27 inches in length caught by Christopher Pereira of Lebanon, New Jersey on December 30th. Chris was fishing the South Branch of the Raritan River from shore when he landed the fish at 4:00 PM. Six-pound test was used with a St. Croix rod paired with a Pflueger reel.

Bullhead Catfish: 16 inches in length caught by Cliff Kearns of Columbus, New Jersey on September 20th. Cliff was fishing Assunpink Lake from his boat when he landed the fish at 6:45 AM. Ten-pound monofilament test was used while fishing with a night crawler as bait.

AND

Bullhead Catfish: 16 inches in length caught by Katherine McGrath of Lebanon, New Jersey on August 16th. Katherine was fishing Merrill Creek Reservoir from her boat when she landed the fish at 5:04PM. Six-pound test was used with a Shimano rod paired with an Abu Garcia reel with a herring as bait.

AND

Bullhead Catfish: 16 inches in length caught by Christopher Pereira of Lebanon, New Jersey on August 11th. Chris was fishing Merrill Creek Reservoir from his boat when he landed the fish at 1:56PM. Ten-pound test was used with a Fitzgerald rod paired with a Pflueger reel while using a jig.

Carp: 39 inches in length caught by Aiden Schumacher of Manville, New Jersey on June 16th. Aiden was fishing South Bound Brook from shore when he landed the fish at 10:30AM. Twenty-pound braided line was used with a 7ft medium action spinning rod paired with a spinning reel using corn as bait.

Chain Pickerel: 28.125 inches in length caught by Everett Gutsick of Glen Gardner, New Jersey on August 2nd. Everett was fishing Merrill Creek Reservoir from a boat when he landed the fish at 8:30 AM. Eight-pound test was used with a conventional rod paired with a conventional reel while fishing with a Rapala lure.

Channel Catfish: 31 inches in length caught by Kevin Meininger of Millington, New Jersey on October 18th. Kevin was fishing Lake Parsippany from shore when he landed the fish at 6:50 PM. Twenty four-pound braid was used with a Fenwick spinning rod paired with a baitrunner spinning reel while fishing with nightcrawlers as bait.

Crappie: 16.75 inches in length caught by Joe Bergen of Randolph, New Jersey on April 15th. Joe was fishing Eggberts Lake (Rockaway) from shore when he landed the fish at 2:30 PM. Four-pound test was used with a 5'6" graphite spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while fishing with a 2" swimbait.

Largemouth Bass: 23.75 inches in length caught by Frank Ruczynski of Bridgeton, New Jersey on March 17th. Frank was fishing Cedarville Lake from his Wilderness Systems Kayak when he landed the fish at 9:30 AM. Eight-pound test was used with a Shimano Zodiuss spinning rod paired with a Shimano spinning reel while fishing with a 6th Sense Provoke jerkbait.

Muskellunge: 48 inches in length caught by Dan Pryor of Belvidere, New Jersey on April 17th. Dan was fishing Oxford Furnace Lake from shore when he landed the fish at 5:00 PM. Twenty-pound test was used with a Rhino spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while fishing with a Rapala Subwalk.

Northern Pike: 36 inches in length caught by Rob Jasek of Nutley, New Jersey on August 6th. Rob was fishing the Passaic River from his boat when he landed the fish at 10:50 AM. Ten-pound Power Pro braid was used with a St. Croix spinning rod paired with a Quantum spinning reel while fishing with a jerkbait.

Rainbow Trout: 24.5 inches in length caught by Frank Ruczynski of Bridgeton, New Jersey on April 10th. Frank was fishing Giampietro Park Pond from shore when he landed the fish at 7:00 AM. Eight-pound test was used with a Shimano spinning rod paired with a Shimano spinning reel while fishing with PowerBait.

Salmon, Atlantic Landlocked: 24.75 inches in length caught by James Connelly of Ringoes, New Jersey on April 20th. James was fishing Merrill Creek Reservoir from a boat when he landed the fish at 10:00 AM. Eight-pound test was used with a conventional rod paired with a conventional reel while fishing with a Rapala.

AND

Salmon, Atlantic Landlocked: 24.5 inches in length caught by James Worthington of Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania on August 5th. James was fishing Merrill Creek Reservoir from his boat when he landed the fish at 2:00 PM. Six-pound test was used with a 7'2" Toadfish spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while using shiners as bait.

Smallmouth Bass: 22.5 inches in length caught by Duane Chapman of Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey on June 3rd. Duane was fishing Merrill Creek Reservoir from his boat when he landed the fish at 3:10 PM. Fifteen-pound test was used with a Shimano rod paired with a Pflueger reel while fishing with a drop-shot.

Striped Bass Hybrid: 26 inches in length caught by Joseph Santiago of Moonachie, New Jersey on May 26th. Joseph was night fishing Spruce Run Reservoir from his boat when he landed the fish at 2:00 AM. Ten-pound test was used with a St. Croix rod paired with a Shimano reel while fishing with a Zara Spook.

Sunfish: 10.5 inches in length caught by Joe Bergen of Randolph, New Jersey on April 27th. Joes was fishing Triple Lake from shore when he landed the fish at 3:38 PM. Four-pound test was used with a spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while fishing with a 2" grub/swimbait rigged on a 1/16th oz jig head.

Walleye: 28 inches in length caught by Matt Califano of Stockholm, New Jersey on November 15th. Matt was fishing Greenwood Lake from his boat when he landed the fish at 10:50 AM. Ten-pound test was used with a TFO Professional spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while fishing with a 3/8 oz silver blade bait.

White Perch: 14.25 inches caught by Frank Ruczynski of Bridgeton, New Jersey on October 24th. Frank was fishing Cedarville Lake from his kayak when he landed the fish at 1:15 PM. Eight-pound test was used with a Shimano spinning rod paired with a Shimano spinning reel while fishing with a spinnerbait.

Yellow Perch: 15.75 inches in length caught by Joe Bergen of Randolph, New Jersey on April 24th. Joe was fishing Horseshoe Lake in Roxbury Township from shore when he landed the fish at 1:00 PM. Four-pound test was used with a spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while fishing with a 2inch swimbait.

Saltwater

Catch and Release Category

Bluefish: 33.5 inches in length caught by James Worthington of Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania on October 13th. James was night fishing the Manasquan River from shore when he landed the fish at 3:00 AM. Fifty-pound test was used with a Penn spinning rod paired with a Penn spinning reel while fishing with a SP Minnow.

Kingfish: 13.5 inches in length caught by George Horvath of Bordentown, New Jersey on April 20th. George was fishing Manasquan Inlet from shore when he landed the fish at 3:45 PM. Fourteen-pound braid was used with a spinning rod paired with a spinning reel while fishing with a A-17 Ava diamond jig.

Striped Bass: 53 inches in length caught by Ryan Kaplan of Holmdel, New Jersey on May 16th. Ryan was fishing the Raritan River Inlet from his boat. He was fishing with Live Bunker as bait.

Congratulations to all our winners!