

**Fisheries Ecosystem Assessment Division
December 2025**

Larval Striped Bass Feeding Study – Staff continued laboratory work identifying larvae and processing Striped Bass and White Perch larval gut contents collected during spring midwater trawl sampling in the Choptank River. Of the 53 total samples and subsamples, 48 have been completed, and only 2 remain to start processing. Thus far, a total of 3,478 Striped Bass larvae and 13,661 White Perch larvae have been identified; an additional 6,269 larvae or early juvenile stage fish were identified as either Striped Bass or White Perch (i.e., *Morone* spp.), but were too large to identify to the species level. Other species identified in the samples include larval and early juvenile stage Yellow Perch, larval Herring or Shad species, a larval Gizzard Shad, adult Bay Anchovies, juvenile Atlantic Menhaden, and juveniles of the invasive Blue Catfish.

Striped Bass Stomach Content Analysis – Staff continued winter work with FABS Fish Health staff at the Cooperative Oxford Laboratory (COL) to collect Striped Bass stomachs for forage analysis. Striped Bass were caught via hook and line and brought back to COL. Staff cut open stomachs to determine forage species eaten by these fish. In December, the stomach contents of 48 Striped Bass were examined, resulting in a total of 238 for the season, including those caught in November. The most common prey items were Atlantic Menhaden, Blue Crab, and Bay Anchovy, with a total of ten species of fishes and invertebrates represented (and one rock).



Mantis Shrimp (*Squilla empusa*) from the stomach of a Striped Bass.

Annual Report – Data analysis has begun for the 2025 Annual Report. 2024 Annual Report is undergoing final approval.

Meetings, Webinars, etc. – Staff attended an Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission/Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program Survey Technical Committee Data Management online workshop to learn more about database management and quality control. It provided some useful information and ideas to include in the databases for the division.

Staff attended a Webinar by the American Fisheries Society on the Federal Sportfish Restoration Act. Several individuals presented the work they have done with Federal Sportfish Restoration funds.

Comprehensive Plan Review – Staff submitted comments on the Chestertown Comprehensive Plan. One of their priorities is building a new bridge and bypass north of town which will traverse the spawning area for Striped Bass and could negatively impact anadromous fish spawning habitat in Morgan Creek.

Data Requests – Staff completed a data request for summer site locations that will be used in a GIS analysis to be presented at the Shallow Water Sentinel Site program workshop in February.

Seasonal Hourly Position – Staff submitted paperwork to hire our seasonal hourly technician. We are hoping for a targeted starting date of 3/25 to help with spring fieldwork in 2026.

Publication - A paper, *Influence of feeding on zooplankton on Striped Bass postlarval mortality, growth, and year- class success in the Choptank River, Maryland, during the 1980s and 2023–2024*, authored by present and past FEAD biologists, was published in Marine and Coastal Fisheries Striped Bass themed issue:

https://academic.oup.com/mcf/article-abstract/doi/10.1093/mcfafs/vtaf047/8392953?utm_source=authortollfreelink&utm_campaign=mcf&utm_medium=email.

Looking Forward

Staff will have a spring 2026 planning meeting in January to prepare for the upcoming sampling season.