

NOAA
FISHERIES



Mission: Iconic Reefs and National Coral Reef Monitoring Program Reef Fish Analyses

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1 Introduction

Mission: [Iconic Reefs](#) is a multi-institutional initiative designed to restore ecological function and biodiversity across ‘iconic’ reef sites in the Florida Keys. Led by NOAA in collaboration with federal, state, institutional, and non-profit partners, M:IR targets nearly three million square feet of reef at seven coral reefs in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS): Carysfort (North and South), Cheeca Rocks, Eastern Dry Rocks, Horseshoe Reef, Looe Key, Newfound Harbor, and Sombrero Reef. The overarching M:IR goal is to restore coral cover and reef function to a self-sustaining state.

Monitoring changes in reef fish populations is one way to measure the success and broader ecological impacts of coral restoration interventions. To properly interpret restoration progress at M:IR reef sites, it is important to also collect data at sites from the surrounding Florida Keys reef tract. The National Coral Reef Monitoring Program (NCRMP), which conducts standardized reef assessments across the Florida Keys, provides a solid framework for comparison and to contextualize the progress at M:IR sites (Feeley et al. 2025).

Reef fish surveys at M:IR sites and at sites throughout the Florida Keys both used NCRMP’s sampling design and survey method. Non-extractive reef fish surveys occurred on shallow (<30 m), hard-bottom reef habitats using a stratified-random, one-stage sampling design within 50 m × 50 m grid cells to ensure representative sampling across depth and rugosity strata (i.e., different habitats) (CRCP 2024; Ault et al. 2021). Surveys used a stationary-point-count method modified from Bohnsack and Bannerot (1986) where a two-diver team surveyed all fish within adjacent 15-m diameter cylinders centered on each diver. Within each cylinder, fishes were identified to the species level, tallied, and fork length was estimated to the nearest centimeter (CRCP 2024).

This report shows population-level results of relative density, occurrence, and length frequency distributions for ecologically important, economically valuable, and fish species of interest to coral restoration practitioners and resource managers. This report focuses on reef fishes

within the M:IR and NCRMP sampling domains; a separate report shows results for coral population and benthic community metrics ([Krampitz et al., 2025](#)).

1.1 Map of M:IR Sites



2 Data Analyses

To allow for direct comparisons of fish populations inside the M:IR restoration areas with control, non-restored areas across the Florida Keys reefs, the NCRMP dataset was restricted to strata types and depth zones (0–12 m) found within M:IR sites (table 1). Data collected by the diver pair were averaged at the site level. Standard fish metrics, including relative density, occurrence, and length composition, were evaluated for the selected fish species (table 2). Computational formulas of standard metrics for a single-stage stratified random sampling design are modified from (Smith et al. 2011) and provided in detail in (Grove et al., 2021) and (Bryan et al. 2016). Statistical comparisons evaluated differences in density and occurrence estimates inside M:IR areas and outside of M:IR areas (i.e., NCRMP) for each survey year. Statistical significance was accepted at $p=0.05$. Fish analysis scripts are open source and available through the [NCRMP Fish R package](#) (Ganz and Blondeau 2015).

2.1 Strata

Table 1: Number of reef fish survey sites in each stratum inside M:IR reef sites and outside the restoration areas in the Florida Keys by survey year.

| PROT | STRAT | description | 2022 | 2024 |
|---------|-------|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| Outside | FK01 | Inshore reefs, all depths | 0 | 15 |
| Outside | FK02 | Mid-channel patch reefs, all depths | 101 | 100 |
| Outside | FK03 | Offshore patch, all depths | 61 | 36 |
| Outside | FK04 | Forereef, low rugosity, <12m | 95 | 105 |
| Outside | FK05 | Forereef, high rugosity, <12m | 88 | 87 |
| Inside | FK01 | Inshore reefs, all depths | 0 | 12 |
| Inside | FK02 | Mid-channel patch reefs, all depths | 12 | 13 |
| Inside | FK03 | Offshore patch, all depths | 7 | 8 |
| Inside | FK04 | Forereef, low rugosity, <12m | 5 | 15 |
| Inside | FK05 | Forereef, high rugosity, <12m | 61 | 64 |

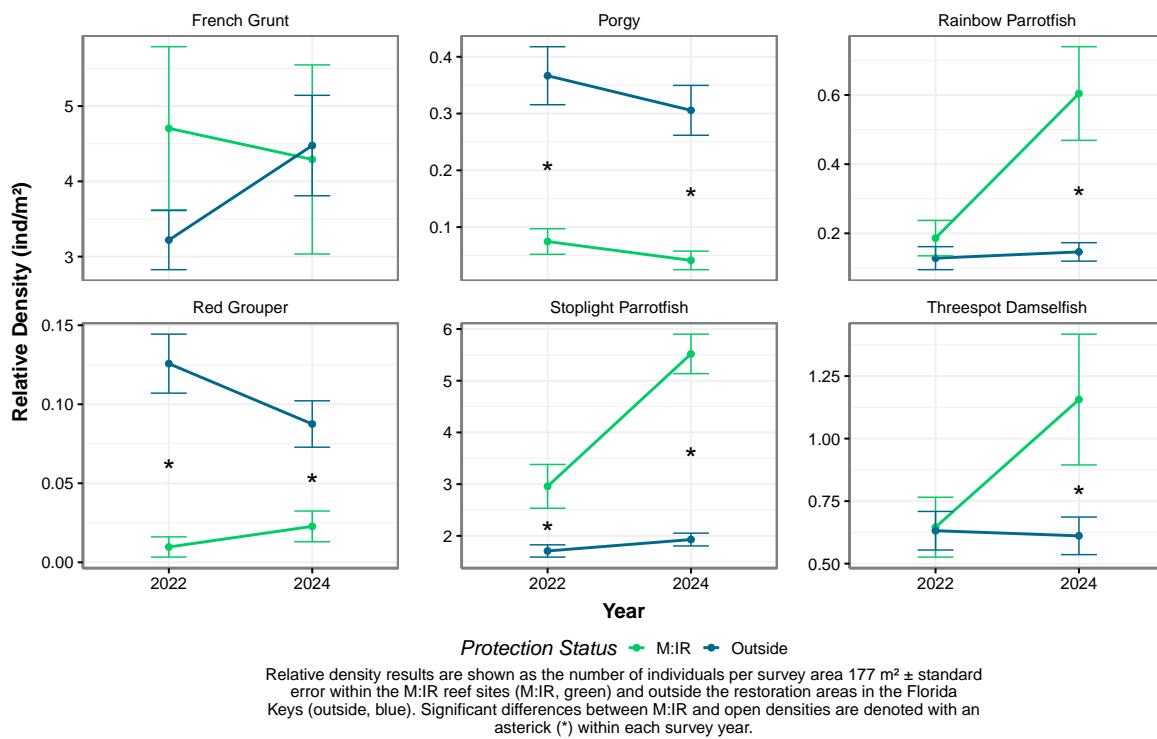
2.2 Fish Species

Table 2: Fish species with representative photos. Difficult to distinguish species were combined for analyses (e.g., saucereye and knobbed porgies)

| Species Code | Common Name | Scientific Name | Photo |
|--------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| HAE FLAV | French Grunt | <i>Haemulon flavolineatum</i> |  |
| SPA VIRI | Stoplight Parrotfish | <i>Scarisoma viride</i> |  |
| SCA GUAC | Rainbow Parrotfish | <i>Scarus guacamaia</i> |  |
| STE PLAN | Threespot Damselfish | <i>Stegastes planifrons</i> |  |
| CAL CALA | Saucereye Porgy | <i>Calamus calamus</i> |  |
| CAL NODO | Knobbed Porgy | <i>Calamus nodosus</i> |  |
| EPI MORI | Red Grouper | <i>Epinephelus morio</i> |  |

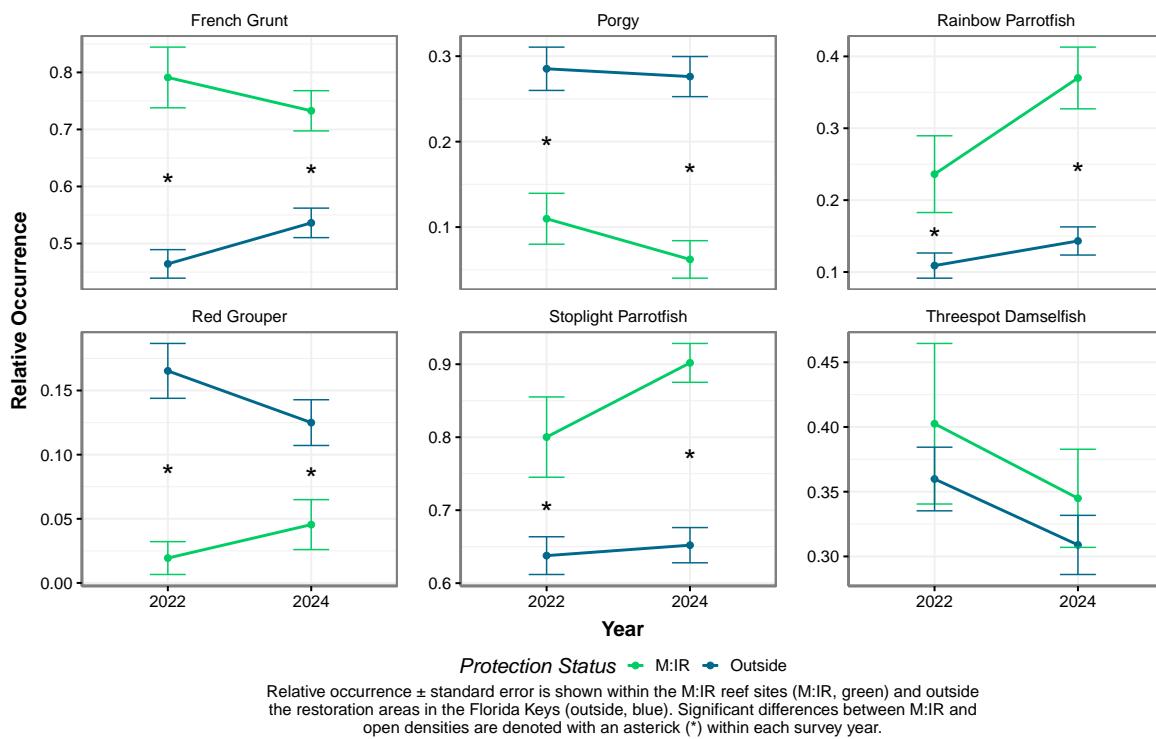
3 Density

Each survey year, M:IR and NCRMP surveys capture a snapshot of coral reef fish populations. It is common for fish populations to fluctuate annually due to a number of factors including, but not limited to, recruitment success, predator-prey dynamics, fishing pressure, and natural events (e.g., hurricanes, marine heat waves). Whenever possible, resource managers should evaluate multiple years of fish density data to inform and assess management efforts, including the success of habitat restoration. Consistently higher or increasing densities over time within restored areas suggests these areas are providing high-quality habitat for reef fishes.



4 Occurrence

Monitoring species occurrence, or how often a species is detected in surveys, offers valuable insight into its distribution. This metric provides presence data regardless of abundance, which helps to identify whether a species is widespread or rare. For resource managers, species occurrence can be used as a bioindicator of overall ecosystem health and to evaluate the success of restoration projects. A consistently higher occurrence of a fish species, especially of a rare species or an obligate coral dweller, within coral restoration areas serves as an indicator of high-quality habitat.

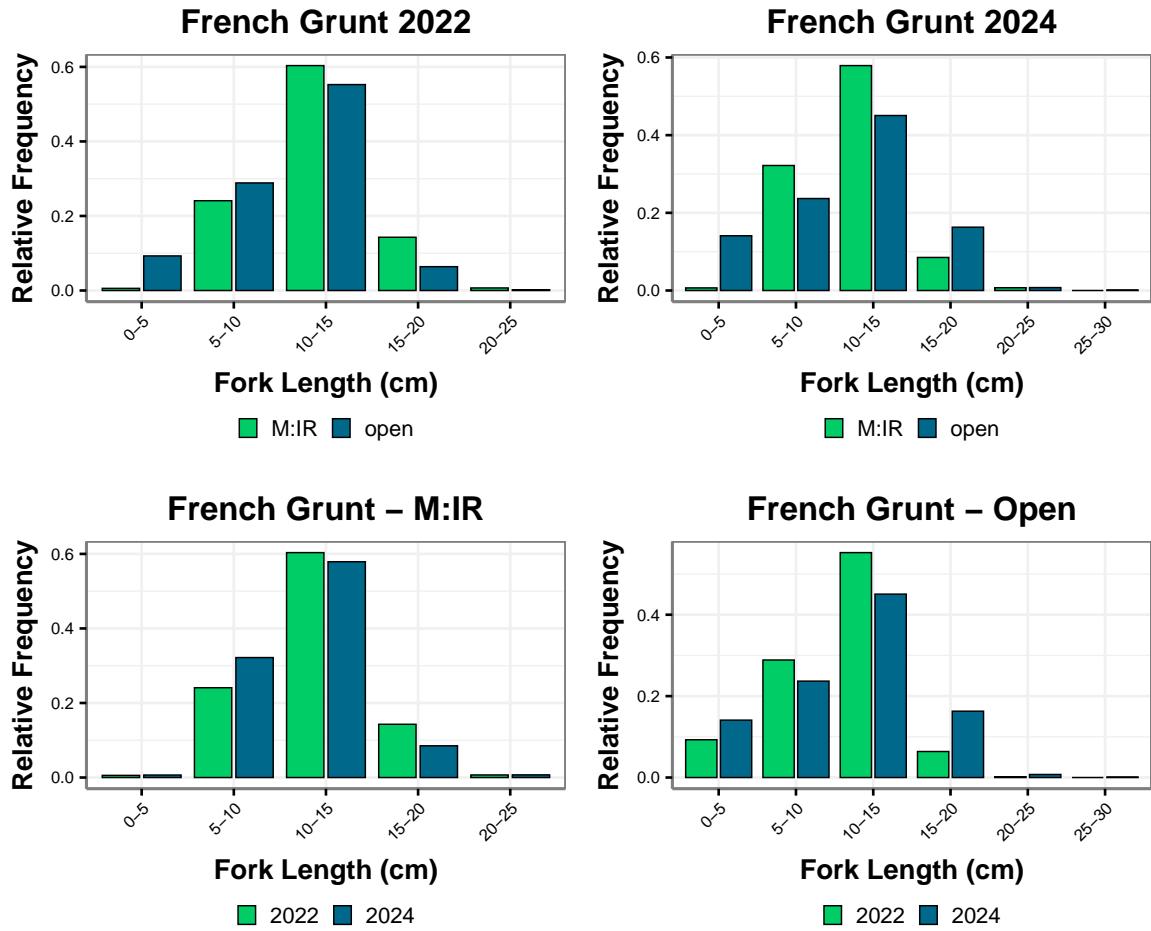


5 Length Frequency

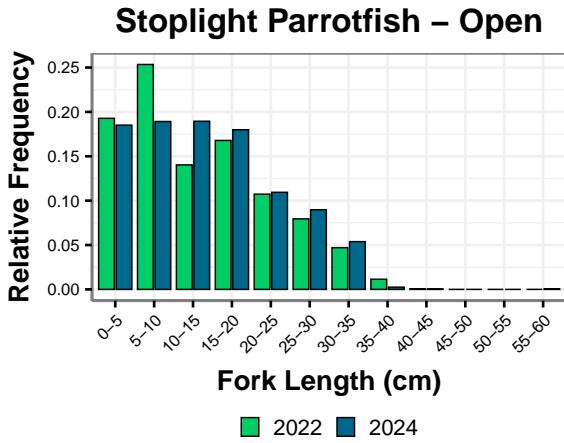
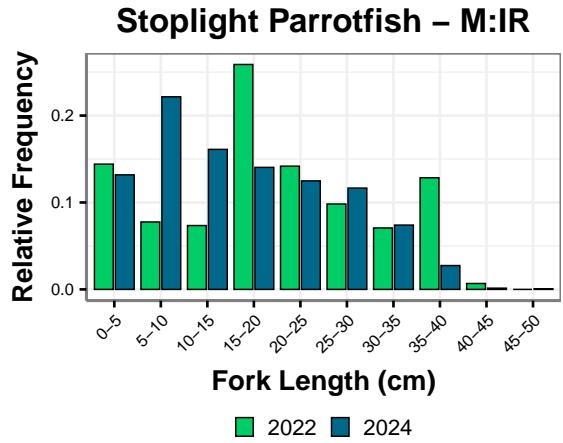
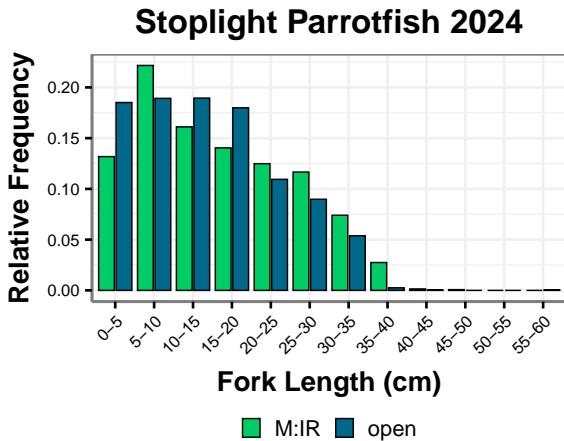
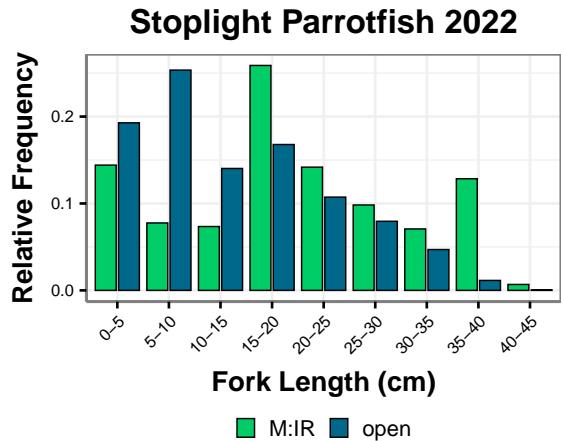
Length compositions provide a detailed description of a fish's population structure. These highly informative figures can show the length at which a species recruits to the coral reef from their nursery habitat, the length classes that are selected by local recreational and commercial fisheries, the effectiveness of fisheries management regulations, and the success of habitat restoration efforts. Successful coral restoration improves habitat quality and reef complexity, which provides structural protection for smaller size classes and foraging opportunities for larger sizes classes.

Relative length frequency by fork length (cm) bin is shown for each species within each sampling domain (i.e., M:IR restoration areas and NCRMP outside restoration areas) and between each sampling domain by survey year.

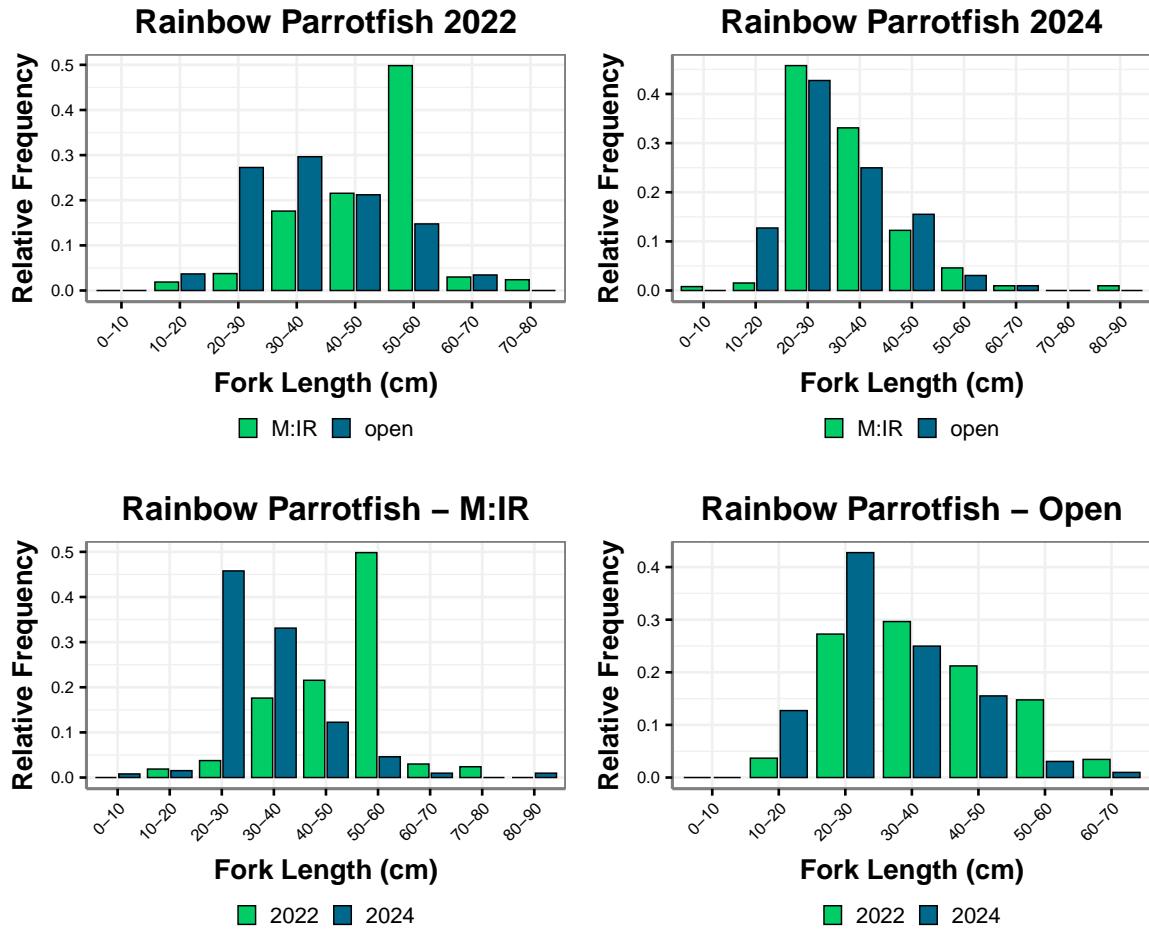
5.1 French Grunt



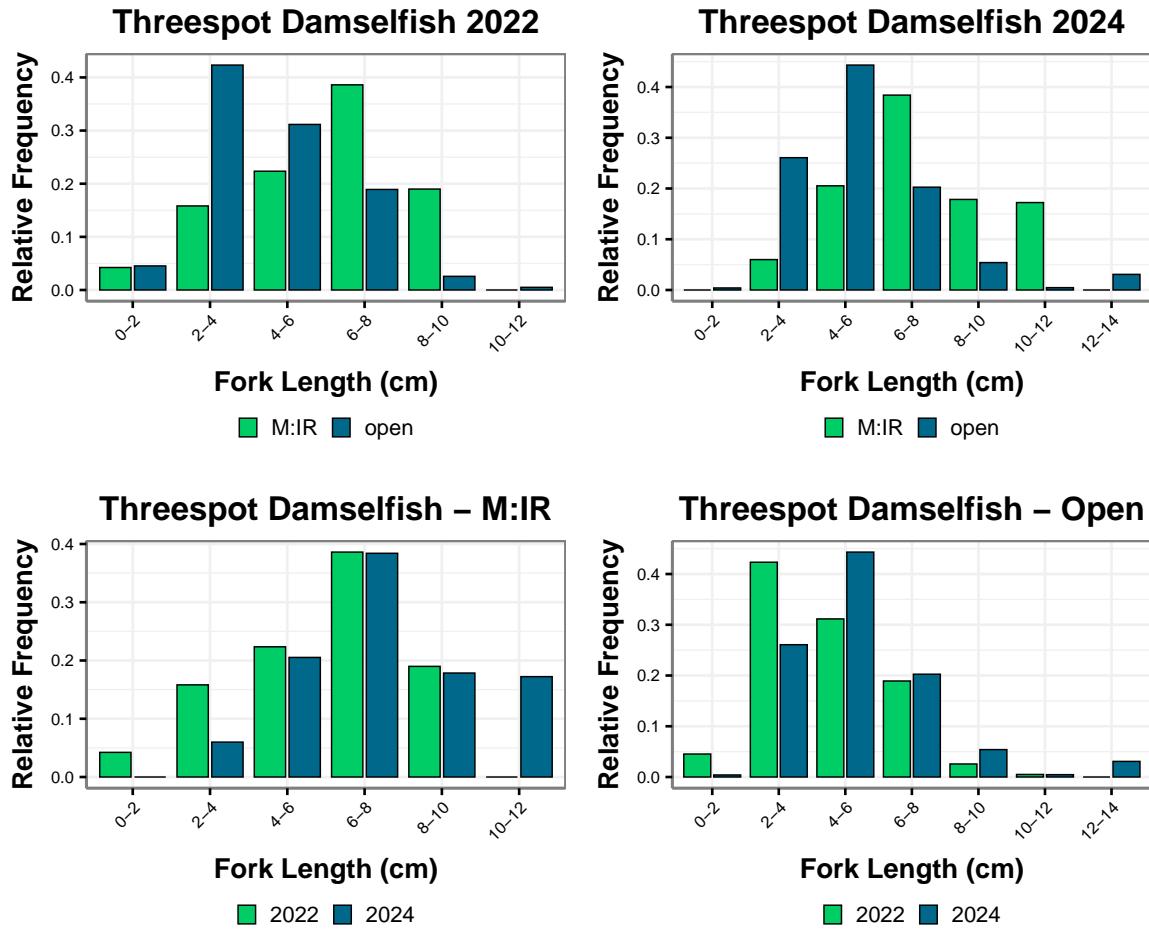
5.2 Stoplight Parrotfish



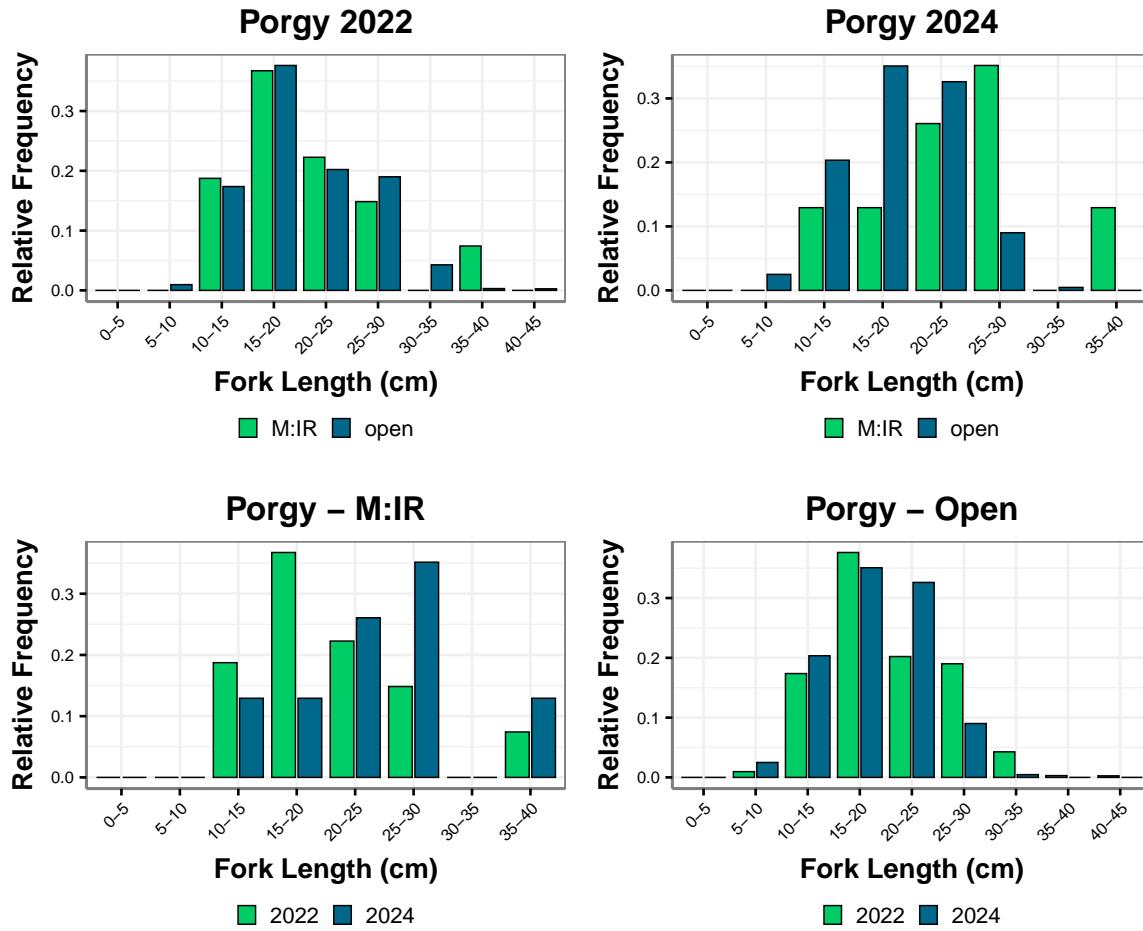
5.3 Rainbow Parrotfish



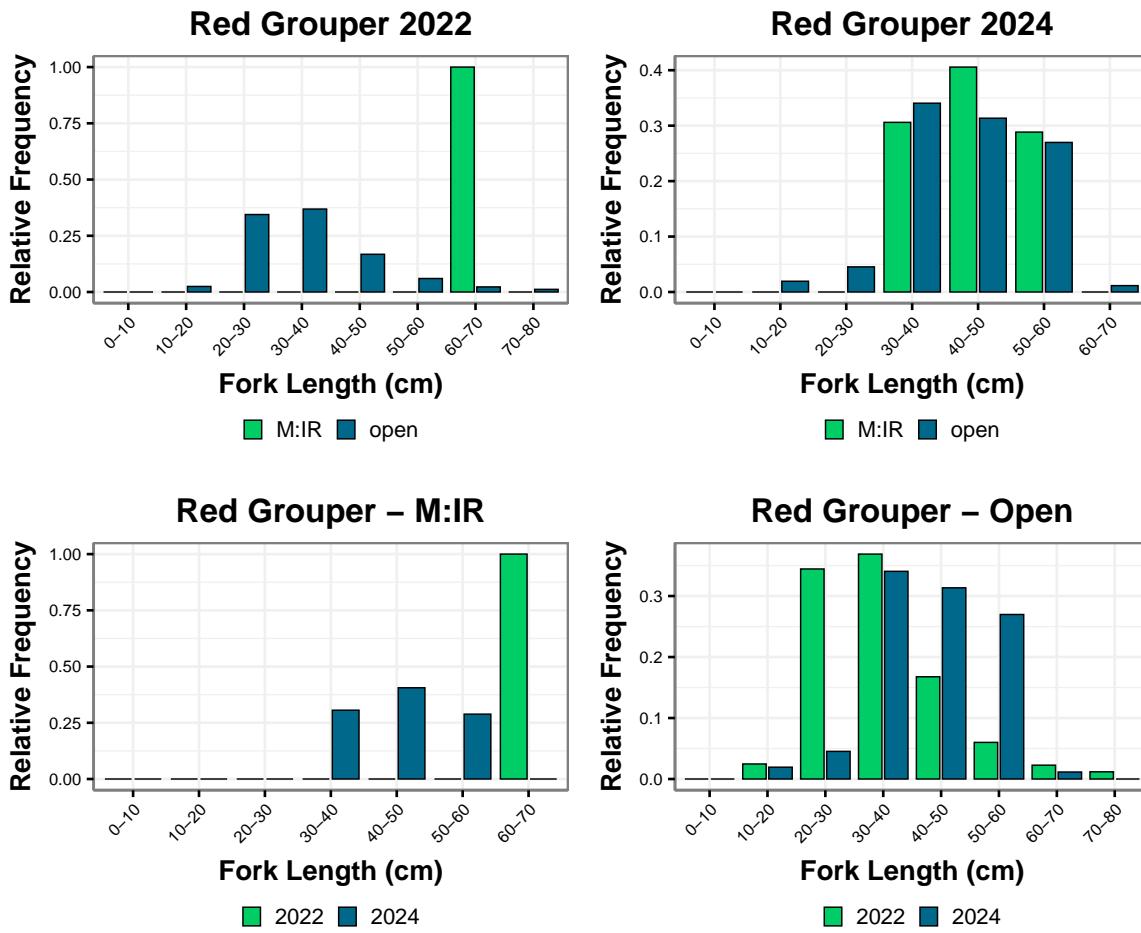
5.4 Threespot Damselfish



5.5 Porgy



5.6 Red Grouper



6 Points of Contact

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Data Sources:

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