



Western Branch Reservoir 2003

Western Branch Reservoir is the largest (1,579 acres) and the deepest (35 feet) of all five Norfolk water supply lakes. The lake takes its name from the stream on which it was impounded in 1962, i.e. western branch of Nansemond River. The lake is horseshoe shaped with Lake Prince upstream on one arm and Lake Burnt Mills upstream on the other. The City of Norfolk requires an annual boat permit that can be purchased at 410 Granby St. in Norfolk or at the Lake Whitehurst Fishing Station on Shore Dr. in Norfolk. Bank fishing is not allowed but anglers may fish from a boat (gas motors up to 9.9 horsepower are allowed) from sunrise to sunset year round. Western Branch can be accessed at two boat ramps; Route 605 in Suffolk (below Lake Prince) and Route 602 in Everets (below Burnt Mills).

Western Branch provides anglers the opportunity to catch a wide variety of species such as largemouth bass, redear sunfish, bluegill, black crappie, white perch, yellow perch, and chain pickerel. In addition to these naturally reproducing fishes, the lake is stocked with super-predator fishes (striped bass and muskellunge). Of the 22 species for which the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries issues trophy citations, 13 are found here. In 2002, Western Branch was rated 12th out of the top 25 waters for trophy fish in the Commonwealth and was 1st for citation white perch, 2nd for sunfish, and 3rd for yellow perch!

Western Branch has been stocked with stripers every year since 1975. Approximately 25 fish per acre (39,475 total) are stocked annually. Pelagic stocking is now being used to evaluate the potential for increased survival of stocked fish. Based on population sampling, the lake's striper population is the best in the district. The largest striper ever caught was 41.5 pounds (January 1995)! Anglers often use jigs, troll large lures such as Rapalas, Rebels, and Redfins, as well as with live bait such as shad. Fall and winter months are best for striper fishing and good numbers are also caught in the spring below the spillways from Lakes Prince and Burnt Mills. During the summer months, stripers are known to concentrate themselves around the aerators and in the main creek channels.

Western Branch is one of the top waters in the state for trophy sunfish (mostly redear sunfish or shellcrackers). Stocked by VDGIF in the 1970s, this sunfish has really done well and about 100 certificates are issued every year. Notable years were 1994 and 1995, when 824 and 302 certificates were issued, respectively. Redear are most frequently caught on nightcrawlers in April and May around the "sunken islands" in the lower section of the lake. In 2002, Western Branch was ranked 2nd in Virginia for sunfish citations.

Population sampling has shown that largemouth bass are abundant, especially in the 12 to 15 inch range. Angling for bass is probably best in the spring, but good

numbers can be caught year-round. Generally between 30 and 40 citations are issued for largemouth bass each year. Banner years were 1995 and 1996, with 85 and 82 bass citations, respectively.

Muskellunge have been stocked as a trophy fish since 1983. However, the stocking rate (one fish per acre) is low due to limited habitat but some muskies have grown to between 30 and 40 pounds. In 1998, one muskie was caught weighing 38 pounds and two over 30 pounds were caught in 2002 which allowed Western Branch to rank 8th in Virginia for muskie citations.

Fishing at Western Branch continues to offer anglers great opportunities to catch an abundance of different game fish. There is plenty of woody debris along the shoreline, numerous coves, underwater islands, and creek channels that allow anglers an assortment of different habitats to explore and fishing techniques to refine. Whether your preference is to catch a variety of fish, quality fish to eat, or to just enjoy yourself, Western Branch Reservoir may be the next place you want to visit in southeast Virginia.