



Western Branch Reservoir 2008

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 the 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 Owen's Self Service on Route 602 (Everets Road), Dashiell's Sporting Goods in Suffolk, Ocean's East 2 tackle shop off Northampton Blvd or directly from the City of 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 (shellcracker), 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 2007, Western Branch was rated 12th out of the top 25 waters for trophy fish in the Commonwealth and was 2nd 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 (open water versus stocking at the boat landing) 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 in January 1995 and weighed 41.5 pounds! Anglers often use jigs, troll large lures such as Rapalas, Rebels, Redfins, and Windcheaters as well as with live bait such as shad and jumbo shiners. 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. Fish the channel edges during the fall months and the deeper water during the winter. Once fish are located, vertical jigging a Silver Buddy, Zonar or similar "metal" bait along the channel edges is often a good way to catch stripers in winter. 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. Redear are most frequently caught on nightcrawlers in April and May around the sunken islands and points in the lower section of the lake by the spillway. Good redear habitat often means getting “hung up” on woody debris or other structure. These fish eat snails and other invertebrates that are often found on such debris. In 2007, Western Branch was ranked 2nd in Virginia for sunfish citations, as 25 citations for trophy fish were reported.

Population sampling has shown that largemouth bass are abundant, especially in the 12 to 15 inch range, however some lunkers are pulled out of the “Branch” each year. Angling for bass is probably best in the early spring, but good numbers can be caught year-round.

White perch are another favorite at Western Branch, as eight citations were caught in 2007 allowing the lake to place 2nd in the Commonwealth in 2007 for citation white perch. These tasty fish were never stocked in the lake, but were landlocked when the lake was impounded in the early 1970’s. White perch are caught by jiggging small jigs tipped with shiners around structure. Fishing the deeper channels or channel edges can be productive during the colder months. Fishermen will often catch white perch while fishing for crappie.

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 survived and 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 at that time.

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.

For additional information, please contact Chad Boyce, Fisheries Biologist with the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries at 757-465-6812, or for specific lake information contact David Rosenthal, Reservoir Manager with the City of Norfolk at 757-441-5678.