



2021 Tidal Blue Catfish Outlook



Large Blue Catfish can be found throughout Virginia’s tidal rivers, including these twins from Upper Chippokes Creek, tributary to the James River (left) and this 64 pounder from Fort Powhatan (right).

Background

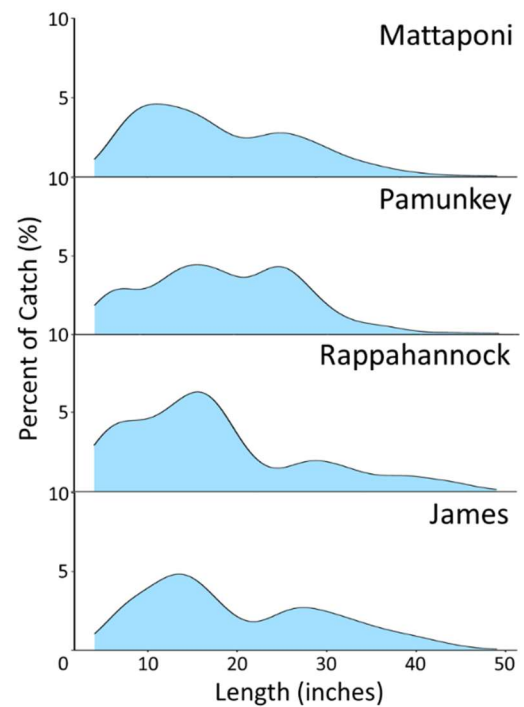
Virginia’s tidal rivers continue to provide excellent fishing opportunities for Blue Catfish. The James River in particular has been consistently recognized as a premium trophy fishery and a destination for anglers nationwide. Increased rainfall over the past few years has led to an expansion of Blue Catfish into the lower reaches of the James River; anglers have been having success catching fish in the 30-50 lb. range in these areas.

As Blue Catfish populations increase and fish compete with each other for food, the number of smaller fish have increased relative to large fish. Despite that, there are still plenty of large Blue Catfish out there for trophy anglers to target. Blue catfish start their spawning migrations into tributaries in the spring when water temperatures reach between 46 – 50° F. Fishing around creek mouths is a good option when these fish are on the move. As water temperatures increase, they form dense aggregations in deep water so look for deep holes and drop-offs, preferably with structure.

Regulations & Advisories

There is no daily limit in the James, York (including the Pamunkey and Mattaponi), and Rappahannock Rivers, and their tributaries, below the fall line, except only one fish >32” is allowed per day. In all other rivers below the fall line, there is no daily length or creel limit. For more detailed information on fishing regulations and licensing, please visit www.dwr.virginia.gov/fishing.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission regulates the Blue Catfish commercial fishery (VMRC). Any questions regarding the commercial fishery should be directed towards VMRC, contact information can be found at www.mrc.virginia.gov.



The peaks show the size distributions across tidal rivers. The James River has more fish >30 inches compared to the other rivers, with the Rappahannock a close second.

The Virginia Department of Health has issued consumption advisories for Blue Catfish in tidal rivers. In the York and Rappahannock Rivers and tributaries, it is advised to limit consumption of Blue Catfish to 2 meals per month. In the James River and its tributaries, it is advised to limit consumption to 2 meals per month and not to eat any Blue Catfish larger than 32". More information on fish consumption advisories across Virginia waters is available at www.vdh.virginia.gov/environmental-health/public-health-toxicology/fish-consumption-advisory.

Monitoring & Management

Blue Catfish are not native to Virginia and were stocked in tidal waters beginning in the 1970s. Their high salinity tolerance and opportunistic feeding has helped them spread throughout Chesapeake Bay watersheds. Ongoing research projects seek to estimate the Blue Catfish population and study the impacts of Blue Catfish on Virginia's native fishes.

DWR samples Blue Catfish in the James, Pamunkey, Mattaponi, Rappahannock, and Piankatank Rivers on a

rotating schedule using boat electrofishing. These data are used to detect trends in Blue Catfish populations and contribute to research conducted by collaborators throughout the region. An angler (creel) survey will also be starting in the James and Chickahominy Rivers in August 2021. Keep an eye out for creel clerks at boat ramps and answer a few questions to help DWR monitor the fishery if you have the time!

Be safe, wear a life jacket, and please obey fishing and boating regulations while on the water

Prepared by: Margaret Whitmore, Scott Herrmann, and Eric Brittle

For more information, please contact:
Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources
Region 1 Office
3801 John Tyler Memorial Hwy
Charles City, VA 23030
(804) 829 – 6580

Visit: www.dwr.virginia.gov