



2023 Tidal Bass Outlook

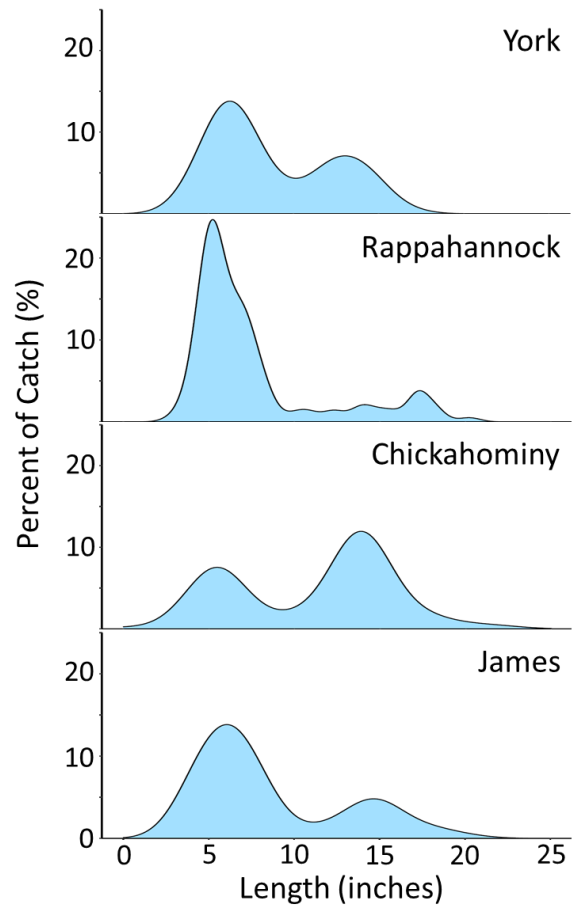


Background

Largemouth Bass fishing on tidal waters has been consistently good for the past several years. The Chickahominy River continues to be a popular destination for Bass anglers with plenty of opportunities to catch 4-5 lb. fish and the potential to land fish in the 9-10 lb. range. James River tributaries also offer excellent Bass fishing opportunities, with 8-9 lb. fish being caught in larger tributaries, such as Herring, Powell, and Upper Chippokes Creeks. The Chickahominy tends to be a more stable system than the James during big rain events, allowing anglers to find a pattern that is productive when the James is more turbid.

Hurricane Ian swept across eastern Virginia on September 30 and October 1, just two days into fall community sampling efforts. As a result, water levels increased rapidly, water temperature dropped as much as 17F in some locations, and conductivity levels spiked. Largemouth Bass retreated to deeper water or into the relatively calm tributaries, making fall bass fishing more difficult than usual in fall, when we expect to see them consistently up on structure. Despite the early setback, we were able to conduct sampling in every tidal system. The impacts of the storm made larger fish more difficult to find in every river except the Chickahominy, which was sampled later in the season when water temperatures had rebounded. High numbers of juvenile size classes show excellent recruitment across all systems.

The short-term outlook for the Largemouth Bass fishery is good. Catch rates in tidal rivers have been stable or increasing for the past several years, with few exceptions. The Chickahominy is consistently strong and, while the James has fluctuated over the past several years, fishing in the major James River tributaries has been comparable to the Chickahominy for the past three years. The York remains stable, producing consistent numbers of 2-3 lb fish in the upstream reaches of the Mattaponi and



Size distributions in all rivers show good recruitment. High water levels, high conductivities, and low water temperatures resulted in fewer sample sites and lower catches in the James, Chickahominy, and York rivers.

Pamunkey Rivers where salinity levels are lower. The Rappahannock River is a dynamic system, and the tidal bass population fluctuates with the availability of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV). Coverage of SAV has been increasing consistently since 2016 and is tied to the improved conditions in the Rappahannock over the past several years and the strong juvenile class observed

this past fall. Conditions are expected to continue improving.

In spring, when water temperatures are cooler, anglers should target fish feeding on the flats in a pre-spawn pattern. As water temperatures warm, fish will move into shoreline habitats with woody structure near channel drop-offs. Fallen trees and submerged logs and stumps are good places to target larger fish. Anglers should be aware that tides can produce strong currents in tidal rivers and tributaries. Many anglers prefer to fish during slack tide, the time around high or low tide when the current is not as strong.

Invasive Alabama Bass

Alabama Bass (*Micropterus henshalli*), continue to pose a threat to Virginia Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass fisheries. In other states where Alabama Bass have been introduced, they have outcompeted Largemouth Bass and hybridized with Smallmouth Bass causing declines in both populations. In the tidewater region, Alabama Bass have been found in Diascund Reservoir and the Chickahominy and James Rivers. We are still asking anglers who think they have caught an Alabama Bass to take a photo and a small clipping of the pelvic fin (stored in a dry envelope) and contact DWR with information on where the fish was caught. DWR continues to monitor tidal waters but help from anglers is critical.

Monitoring & Management

In 2022, DWR started a Largemouth Bass tagging project in the Rappahannock River to assess movement between tributaries and mainstem reaches around Port Royal. Anglers who catch a tagged bass, are being asked to report their catch to the phone number on the tag (804-829-6580). DWR will provide project updates via social media when they are available.

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

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