



2023 Tidal Blue Catfish Outlook



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.

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 will form dense aggregations in deep water so look for deep holes and drop-offs, preferably with structure in creek bends and main stem river.

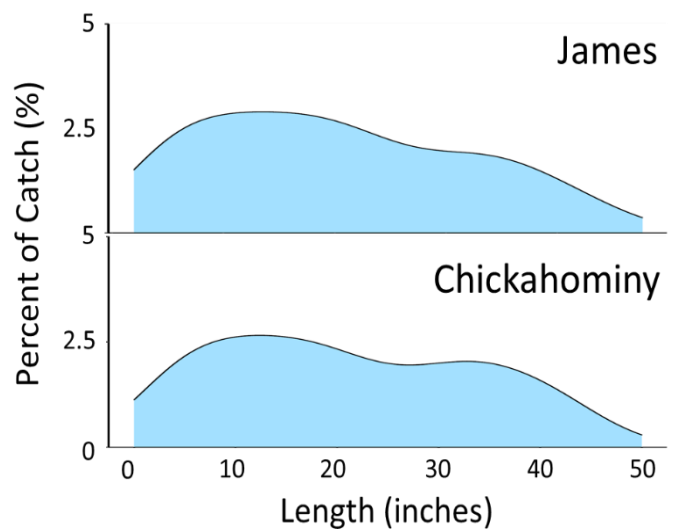
Regulations & Advisories

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 Virginia Department of Health has issued consumption advisories for Blue Catfish in tidal rivers. In



These graphs show the size distributions collected during sampling in the James and Chickahominy river systems.

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. In 2022, the James, Chickahominy, and Piankatank Rivers were sampled; the Rappahannock and York Rivers will be sampled in 2023. These data are used to detect trends in Blue Catfish populations and contribute to research conducted by collaborators throughout the region.

In fall 2021, DWR started a tracking study that aims to identify seasonal patterns of movement and aggregation areas of Blue Catfish in the James River system. DWR Biologists have surgically implanted acoustic tags into 50 Blue Catfish to date and will tag an additional 30 fish in spring 2023. Tagged Blue Catfish also received a red dart tag so anglers will be able to identify fish that are part of the study. If caught and kept, please call DWR at the number listed on the tag (804-829-6580) to report the catch and return the acoustic tag so that it may be placed in another fish.

This past year marked the first full year of the project and, while data is still being analyzed, DWR now has a full year of seasonal movement data. Most tagged fish (size range 16 – 45 inches) spent the winter months in the vicinity of Weyanoke and Coggins Points upstream or near the mouth of Upper Chippokes Creek further downstream. In summer, tagged fish tended to push upstream above Presquile, but make regular movements downstream. This was consistent, even for fish originally tagged in downstream reaches. Fish were more distributed in spring and fall months but were consistently detected from Weyanoke to Coggins Points. This is preliminary data and DWR will continue to analyze data and conduct active tracking to provide more information on the best locations and times to target Blue Catfish.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, or just want to learn more about DWR's Blue Catfish management, please contact us at the number below.

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

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