



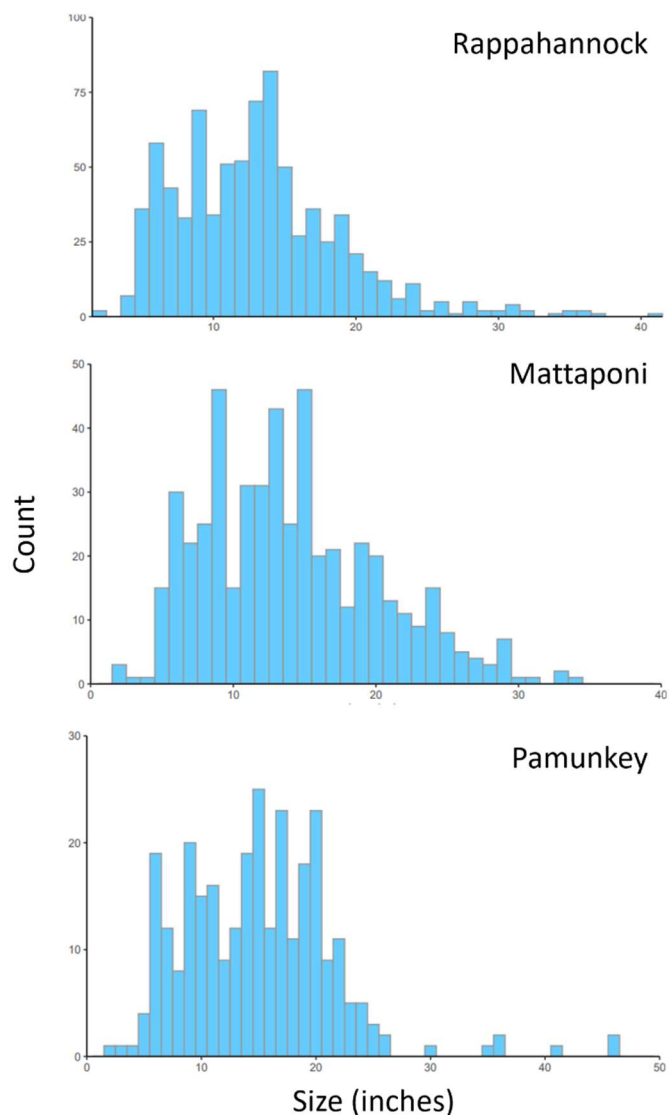
2024 Tidal Rivers Fishing Forecast



BLUE CATFISH

Virginia's tidal rivers continue to provide excellent fishing opportunities for blue catfish. The James River has been consistently recognized as a premium trophy fishery and a destination for anglers nationwide.

As blue catfish populations increased and fish were forced to compete with each other for food, the number of smaller fish increased relative to large fish. This has led to a decrease in trophy sized fish over the past 10 years. Following peak blue catfish abundance around 2011, the population has declined; as this decline continues, DWR expects trophy potential to stabilize and continue to provide excellent trophy fishing opportunities. Blue catfish start their spawning migrations 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

No changes were made to DWR regulations or VDH advisories in 2023. 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.

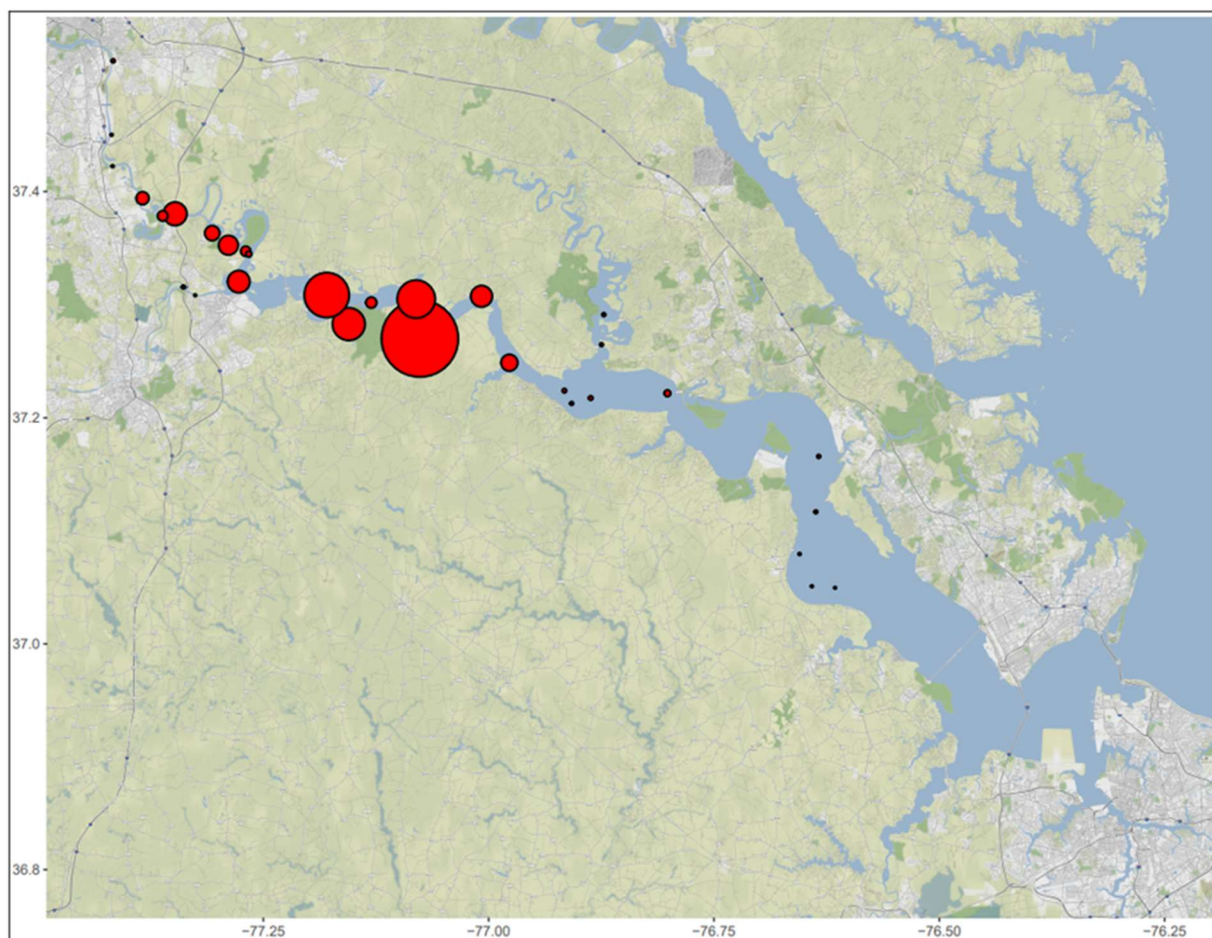
The Virginia Department of Health has issued consumption advisories for Blue Catfish in tidal rivers. In the York and Rappahannock Rivers and

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 salinity tolerance and opportunistic feeding has helped them spread throughout Chesapeake Bay watersheds. Ongoing research projects seek to assess movement and abundance and study impacts on Virginia's native fishes.

MONITORING. DWR samples blue catfish in the James, Chickahominy, York, Rappahannock, and



Piankatank Rivers on a biannual, rotating schedule using low-frequency boat electrofishing. In 2023, the Rappahannock, Pamunkey, and Mattaponi rivers were sampled; the James, Chickahominy, and Piankatank rivers will be sampled in 2024. These data are used to detect trends in blue catfish populations, monitor size structure, and contribute to research throughout the region.

MOVEMENT STUDY. 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 80 blue catfish to date. 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.

Data from 2023 are currently being analyzed but below is a map summarizing our first full year of data collection from 2021 through 2022. The area between Tar Bay and Weyanoke Point consistently had the highest density of blue catfish across all seasons. 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. Blue catfish movement below Hog Island primarily occurred in late winter and spring, when higher precipitation leads to lower salinity downstream. Fish were overwhelmingly detected above Hog Island during summer, when dry summer months cause higher salinity in downstream reaches. This does not mean blue catfish aren't found below Hog Island in summer or

when salinity is high; it does mean that a relatively small percentage of blue catfish move below Hog Island, overall. Furthermore, fish that do move below Hog Island, spend relatively little time there. Overall, blue catfish that moved below Hog Island, spent an average of 11% of their time in that area. This is preliminary data and DWR will continue to analyze data and provide updates as available.

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

Prepared by: Margaret Whitmore & Scott Herrmann

For more information, please contact:

Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

Region 1 Office

3801 John Tyler Memorial Hwy

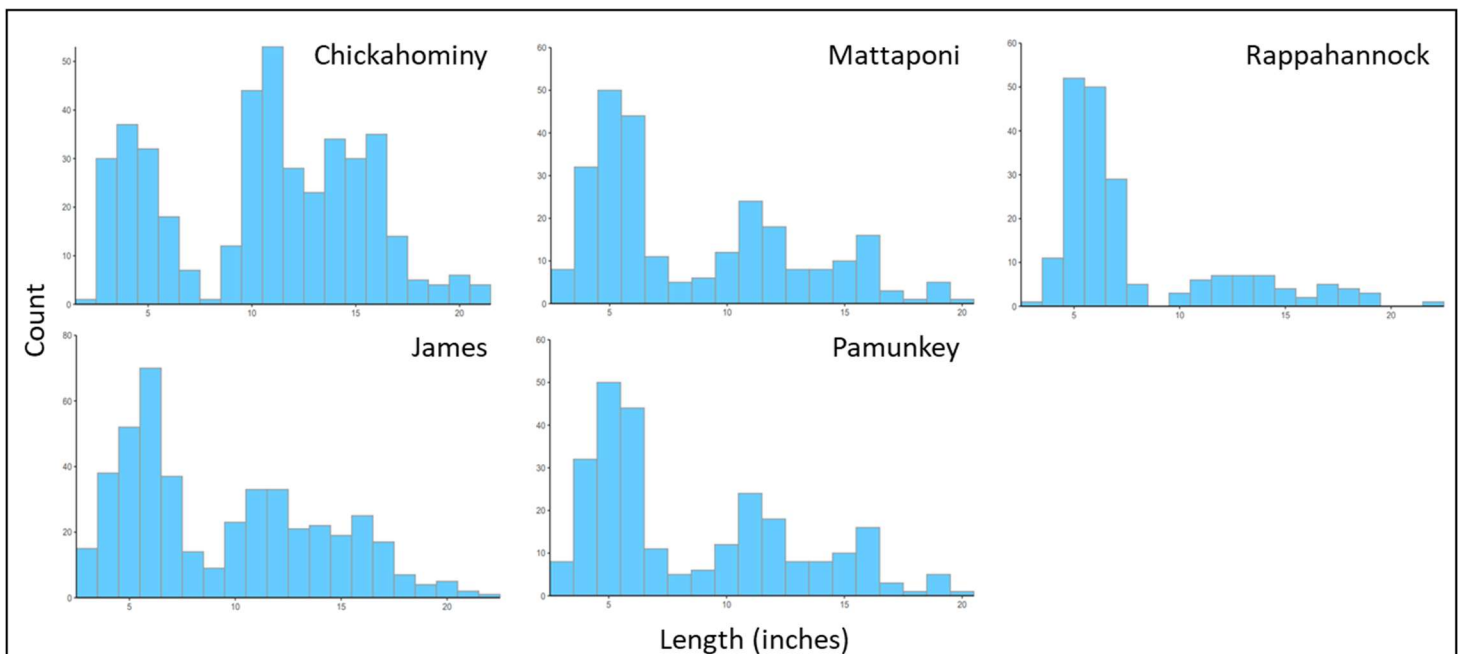


LARGEMOUTH BASS

Largemouth bass fishing on tidal waters has been consistently good for the past several years. The Chickahominy and James Rivers continue to be popular destinations for bass anglers with plenty of opportunities to catch 4-5 lb. fish and the potential to land larger fish in the 6-8 lb range. James River tributaries, such as Powell and Herring Creeks, have consistently been more productive than mainstem habitats for both juvenile and adult fish. This is also true for the tidal Rappahannock River, with upper tributaries and Green Bay offering the most consistent opportunities. The tidal Rappahannock bass population below Port Royal is lower compared to 2010's, largely due to loss of aquatic vegetation. Numbers have been slowly increasing in recent years as vegetation has come back and strong recruitment over the past three years bodes well for future population growth. Pamunkey and Mattaponi bass populations have been consistent

with plenty of opportunities to catch 2-3 lb. fish in the Mattaponi and 3-4 lb. fish in the Pamunkey, with the potential to catch fish in the 5-6 lb. range. During high water events and incoming tide, anglers might have better luck in small tributaries with shoreline structure.

Heading into spring, bass are more likely to be found along grass and spatterdock edges in 2-3 ft of water as they get ready to spawn. 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 are still a concern in the James and Chickahominy rivers. In the tidewater region, Alabama bass have been found in Diascund Creek and the James and Chickahominy rivers. We are still asking anglers who think they have caught an Alabama Bass to take a photo 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

ANGLER SURVEY. Beginning in March 2024, DWR began an angler creel survey in the tidal James River and fall line that will run until February 2025. DWR Survey Technicians will be interviewing anglers at select boat ramps along the James River. The data collected helps DWR assess recreational use, effort, angler attitudes, and value of recreational fisheries.

TAGGING STUDY. 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).

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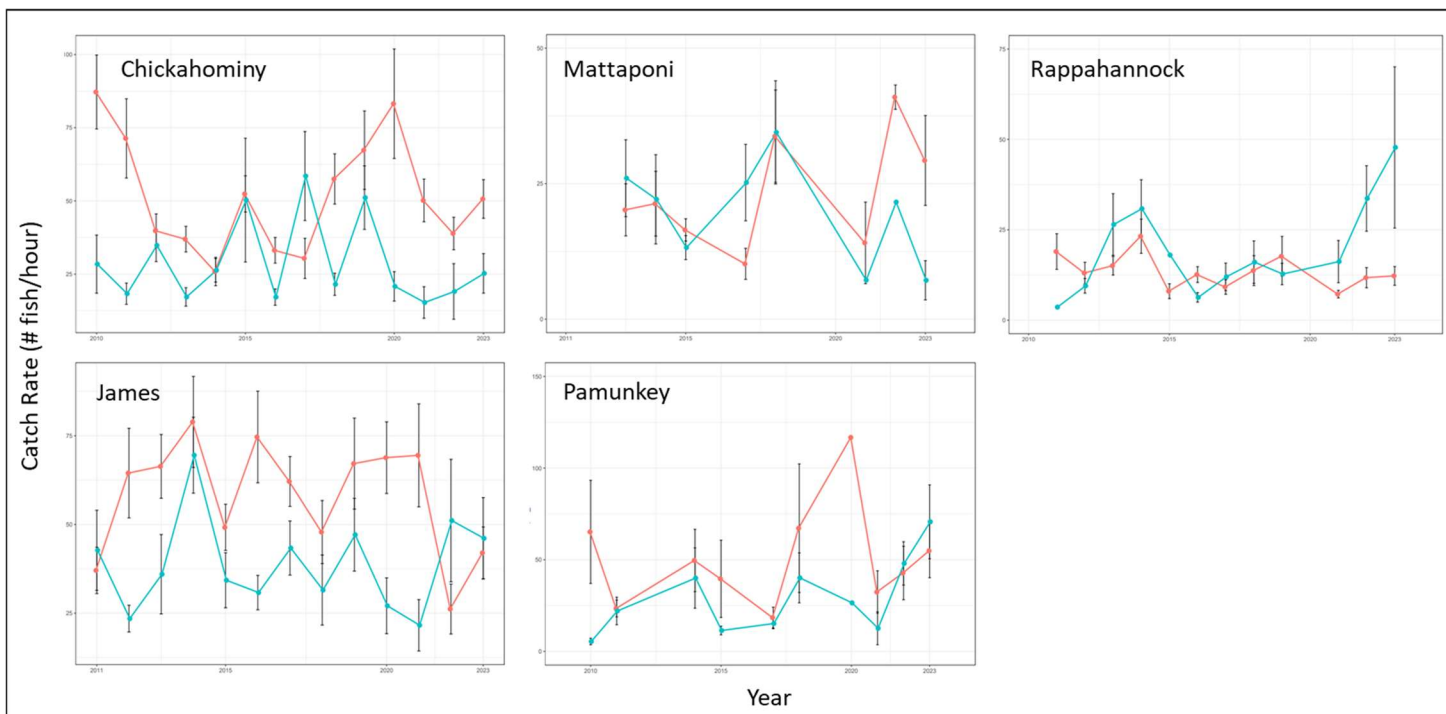
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Adult (red) and juvenile (blue) largemouth bass catch rates in tidal rivers since 2010. Catch rate is calculated as the number of fish collected per hour of sampling. Sampling is conducted via boat electrofishing every fall. DWR's sampling design was changed in 2021 to better assess bass population health long-term. Significant changes in catch rates between pre-2020 and 2021-2023 reflect that change in design and not a sudden change in population health.

TIDAL RAPPAHANNOCK RIVER

(Fredericksburg to Port Royal)

Fishing for Largemouth Bass, Northern Snakehead, and Bowfin should all be excellent in 2024 in the **tidal Rappahannock** between Fredericksburg and Port Royal. This area of the river had an abundance of submersed aquatic vegetation (SAV) in recent years and catch rates of all three species has been far above average lately. In fact, Largemouth Bass were more abundant in fall 2023 than at any time in the past 20+ years (overall sample catch rate of 94 bass/hour)! Target creek mouths on outgoing tides and, of course, edges (and even inside) of thick mats of vegetation. Largemouth Bass will hold on large woody debris near channel edges, especially on lower tidal stages. Snakeheads will usually be on the bank side of vegetation strips in very shallow water (sometimes inches deep). Fishing for Smallmouth Bass on the **upper Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers** (above Fredericksburg) in 2024 should be similar to last year. Like most rivers in eastern and central Virginia, high water during late spring in many recent years has resulted in poor spawning success, and consequently Smallmouth Bass abundance has been depressed since 2020. The Largemouth Bass population has been expanding, and their numbers are strong on the slower stretches especially where SAV is present. Snakeheads can be found in these same slower, vegetated habitats; so weedless baits (soft plastics in spring, and topwater in summer) are a good choice. Look for snakeheads to stack up below Rapidan Mill Dam in mid-April through early May before they drop back from their pre-spawn migration. The rivers are full of perfect eating-size Channel Catfish which have colonized the upper watershed since Embrey Dam came down. Yellow Perch, White Perch and Striped Bass can now also be found far above Fredericksburg with migration barriers gone.

Virginia **tidal Potomac River** tributaries south of Washington D.C. to Stafford County should provide good Largemouth Bass fishing in 2024. Bass catch rates in electrofishing surveys conducted in April and May 2023 were variable with excellent catch rates in creeks with good habitat (primarily SAV) and lower in creeks devoid of vegetation. Average catch rate for all study creeks was 64 bass/hour. Catch rates in Pohick Creek have routinely been over 100 bass/hour in recent years. Reproduction in the past decade has been very good with 7 of 10 years ranked above average. Look for fish on large woody debris on high tides before vegetation emerges and on Spatterdock bed edges later in spring. The Spatterdock flats outside creek mouths feeding the lower Occoquan (Belmont Bay) hold stunning numbers of bass in April and May. Snakehead fishing should be average, as numbers seem to have stabilized at a lower abundances; but decent numbers can still be found early in the season before SAV emerges. Target natural wood and docks before Spatterdock emerges, and then fish spatterdock edges at low tide before SAV begins to grow.

TIDAL RAPPAHANNOCK RIVER (below Port Royal)

Excitement can be found around the corner in many of the tributaries of the Tidal Rappahannock River. Anglers have a wealth of species to target from Port Royal on down past Tappahannock. Recent electrofishing surveys collected 36 fish species during October 2023. The Rappahannock River experienced higher than normal salinity levels during the fall of 2023 due to a prolonged dry spell from August to October. Some of the lower end sites were not sampled due to high salinity and conductivity levels. The majority of the better Largemouth Bass were collected in and around the hydrilla flats just east of Port Royal. The spatterdock pad fields on the southern shoreline across from Wilmont Boat Landing are always an attractive place to find bass. The largest bass collected was just shy of six pounds. Anglers have been catching a few bass in the 7-to-8-pound range but are usually pretty tight lipped on where they catch them. The last two survey years have shown consistent bass recruitment with an abundance of juvenile fish collected. The majority of these juvenile fish were found in and around Port Royal and Gingoteague Creek. The dense mats of hydrilla in this area of the river create productive nursery habitat for Young of Year bass. Additional Largemouth Bass were tagged during 2023 as part of the tagging study that started in 2022. Anglers are encouraged to report any tagged bass they catch by calling (804) 829-6580. Anglers should try to take a picture of the specific # on the Floy tag and to leave the tag in the fish if released. Valuable data on fish movement and growth are what VDWR staff are looking to gather from the study.



The Rappahannock River has been yielding some better than normal catches of Blue Catfish in the 30-to-50-pound range with reports surfacing of a few fish even larger. The trophy component of the fishery has created a recent stir that several catfish tournaments have been held on the river. The Blue Catfish population still has plenty of eater-sized fish available in the 2-to-4-pound range if anglers are looking to find a decent meal. Some of the better spots to try are the deeper holes in a few of the larger tributaries where the catfish will typically stack up. The Longnose Gar population appears to be rather abundant based on recent findings. Large schools of gar have been encountered in several of the tributaries in the late May to early June time frame. Most of these fish will typically make a spawning run up these creeks as you never know when you might find a larger gar in the 17–18-pound range. Anglers are reminded that there is a protective creel limit in place for Longnose Gar and Bowfin during April 15th to June 30th as anglers can only harvest 1 fish per species during this time frame.



The Tidal Rappahannock River has been a popular destination for anglers looking to get in on the action of the Yellow Perch run each spring. Most of this action can be found toward the tail end of February to the first couple weeks of March. Some of the lower tributaries in and around Tappahannock have seen their share of angler pressure. Recent VDWR surveys have collected a decent abundance of Yellow Perch in the 10-12" range with a few fish pushing citation size. Most of these collections have

been during the summer and mid-fall time frame and not during the spring run. Anglers are reminded that the minimum size limit for Yellow Perch is 9" for all tidal rivers of the Chesapeake Bay below the fall lines. White Perch are abundant as anglers might have to weed their way through numerous smaller fish in the 5–7-inch range to find larger-sized fish for the frying pan. Surveys have found scattered pockets of healthy Bowfin in certain tributaries, but overall abundance showed a decline in 2023. The Northern Snakehead population also showed a decline in most areas surveyed. The fall survey showed the Northern Snakehead catch rate of 7 fish/hr. Many areas of the river have seen a large influx of bowfishing action with people trying their best to fill their freezers. One of the recent surprises observed during the surveys were the citation sized Redear Sunfish collected toward the western areas of the river. These trophy Redear Sunfish in the 1.2-to-1.4-pound range were absolutely amazing. Some pockets of the river hold decent Black Crappie in the 12-to-14-inch range, but large schools of crappie were not detected.

UPPER PIANKATANK RIVER

The Upper Piankatank River provides a scenic location for anglers. The nearest public boat ramp is quite some distance down river at the VDWR Deep Point boat landing. Several miles upriver from the boat ramp, anglers will find plentiful amounts of marsh habitat lining the shorelines along with plenty of cypress trees. Similar to what was found on the Rappahannock River, the salinity levels were extremely high on the Piankatank River during the fall of 2023. Selected electrofishing locations in the middle reaches of the river were not conducted. Seven electrofishing sites were sampled toward the



upper end of the Piankatank River where it blends into the Dragon Run. Even areas of Dragon Run experienced the push of salinity with each high tide cycle. The 2023 surveys did not yield the greatest concentration of Largemouth Bass when compared to previous surveys. Bass recruitment has been limited with a depressed collection of juvenile fish observed. The average size bass weighed a tad over 1 pound with the largest bass weighed at 4.82 pounds. Anglers will be hard pressed to find any/much bass greater than 5 pounds in this stretch of the river. Recent social media reports have surfaced of anglers having better luck than the electrofishing boat with the catch of bass in the 1-to-1.5-pound range being common. The catch of Bowfin was once again impressive with 178 fish collected. The Bowfin population within the Piankatank River is one of the strongest within Virginia, although the average size of 2.3 pounds leaves something to be desired. Very few Bowfin will be found larger than 5 pounds. The fall survey discovered only one Northern Snakehead that weighed in at 6.11 pounds. The Northern Snakehead population never fully established in the Piankatank River as it appears that the Bowfin have not given up their native turf to this intruder species. The Bluegill population is nothing to write home about, but the Redear Sunfish have shown some great potential with 9 to 10" fish present. Upper Piankatank River has a decent abundance of White Perch with most fish running in the 7 to 9" range. Larger-sized White Perch in the 10 to 12" range have been reported by anglers fishing the more brackish water of the middle river. Anglers might encounter some decent Chain Pickerel in the tannin-stained waters of Dragon Run. The fall surveys found a few respectable Chain Pickerel in the 2-pound range. Blue Catfish abundance during the high frequency electrofishing survey was very limited. Low frequency surveys have shown a better assortment of Blue Catfish. Recent commercial harvest of Blue Catfish may have impacted their overall abundance in this nutrient limited fishery. Recent surveys have shown forage base limitations in areas covered. These limitations might find predator fish more active and susceptible to strike properly placed lures and baits.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON VIRGINIA'S TIDAL RIVERS, CONTACT THE RESPECTIVE REGIONAL OFFICE:

- **Region 1: Charles City, VA 804-829-6788**
- **Region 4: Fredericksburg, VA 540-899-4169**