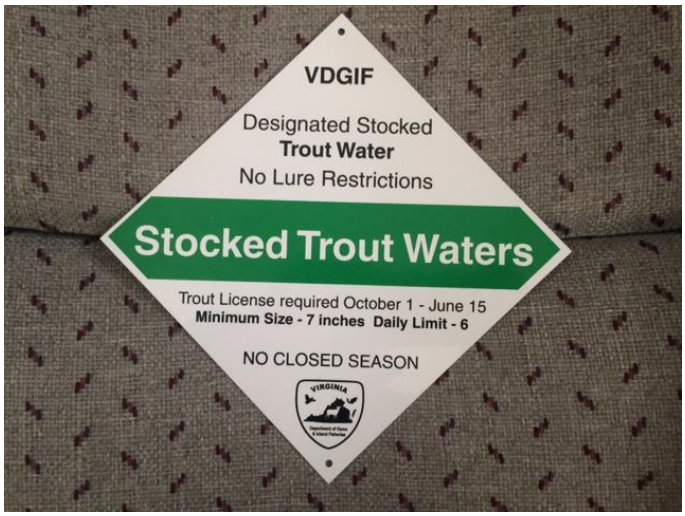
2024 Smith River Fisheries Report

The Smith River in Henry County is one of the state's most unique fisheries. The cold water released from Philpott Dam provides miles of quality trout water and offers excellent fishing opportunities throughout the year. Approximately 31 miles from Philpott Dam downstream to State Route 636 (Mitchell Bridge) are managed by the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (VDWR) as brown trout special regulation waters. Brown trout from 10 to 24 inches are protected and must be released. Anglers fishing this section should be aware that water levels rise, and flows increase as water is released from Philpott Dam. Information about the daily generation schedule for Philpott Dam can be obtained by calling (276) 629-2432. The following regulation sign is posted throughout this 31-mile section of the Smith River.

Within the 31-mile special regulation section, there are two areas designated as stocked trout waters. These put-and-take stocked trout areas provide opportunities for anglers to catch rainbow and brook trout. The first area identified as "Smith River Upper" starts at Philpott Dam and continues downstream approximately 3.3 miles to the confluence with Town Creek. This area is classified by VDWR as a "Category B Stocked Trout Water" and is stocked with rainbow trout 5 times from October 1st through June 15th. The second stocked trout area, identified as "Smith River Lower", is classified as "Category A Stocked Trout Waters". It begins in North Bassett and continues downstream approximately 9.5 miles to below Fieldale. It is stocked with rainbow trout 8 times from October 1st through June 15th. Both stocked trout areas require a stocked trout license in addition to a state freshwater fishing license. Designated stocked trout areas of the Smith River display signs like the one below.

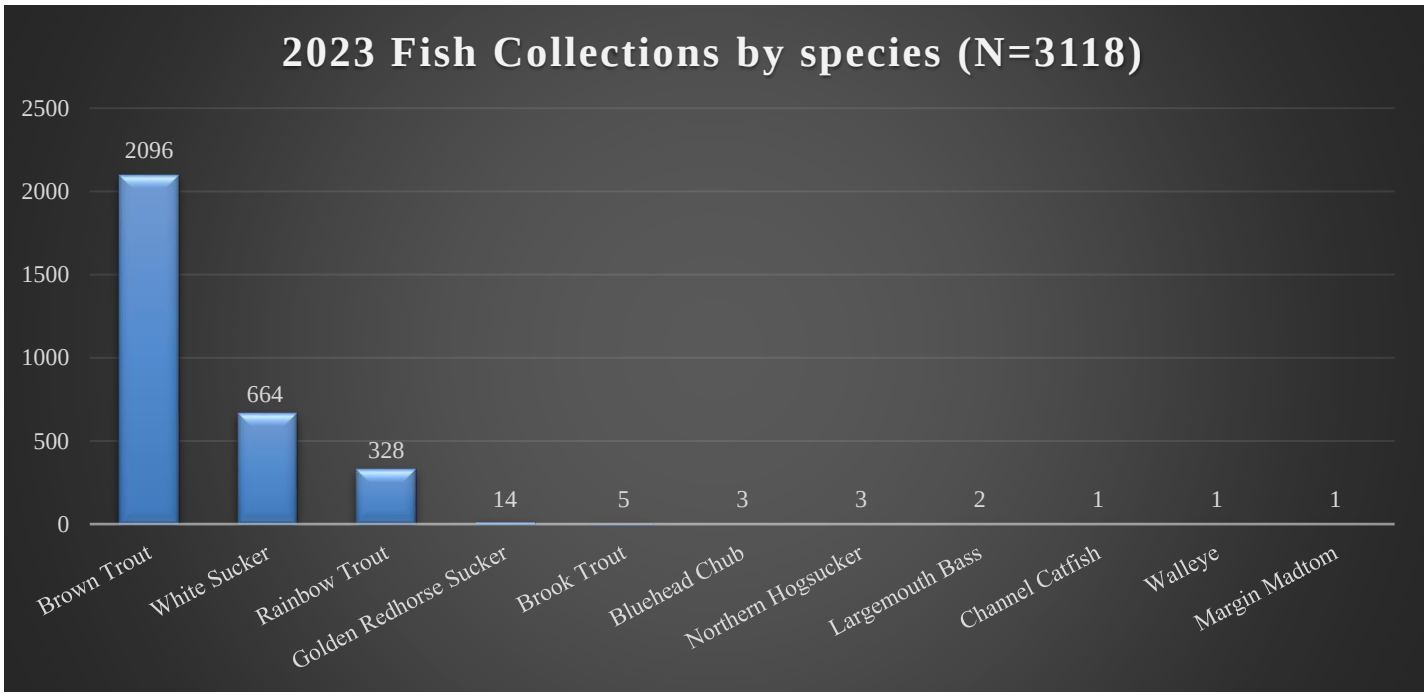


Downstream of the special regulation section, anglers can expect to catch smallmouth bass, rock bass, and sunfish as the Smith flows into North Carolina. The Smith River is home to many different fish species.

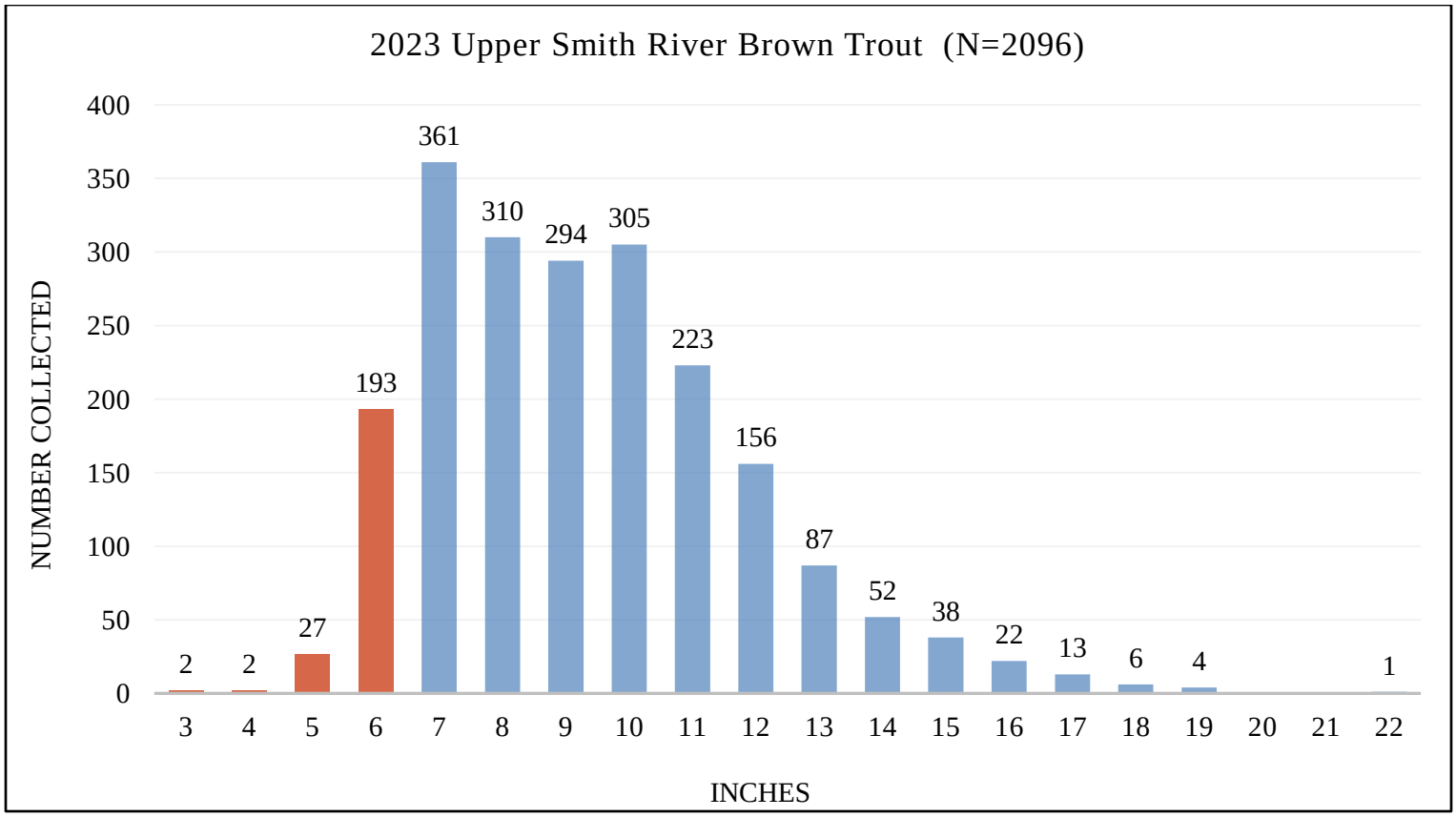
The following report summarizes the results of fish population sampling by the VDWR in 202 and compares the results to previous year's collections. The Department, in conjunction with the Smith River Chapter of Trout Unlimited collects fish population data annually to assess the health and status of the brown trout fishery. Routine population monitoring has been conducted since the mid 1990's.

Philpott Dam to Martinsville Dam

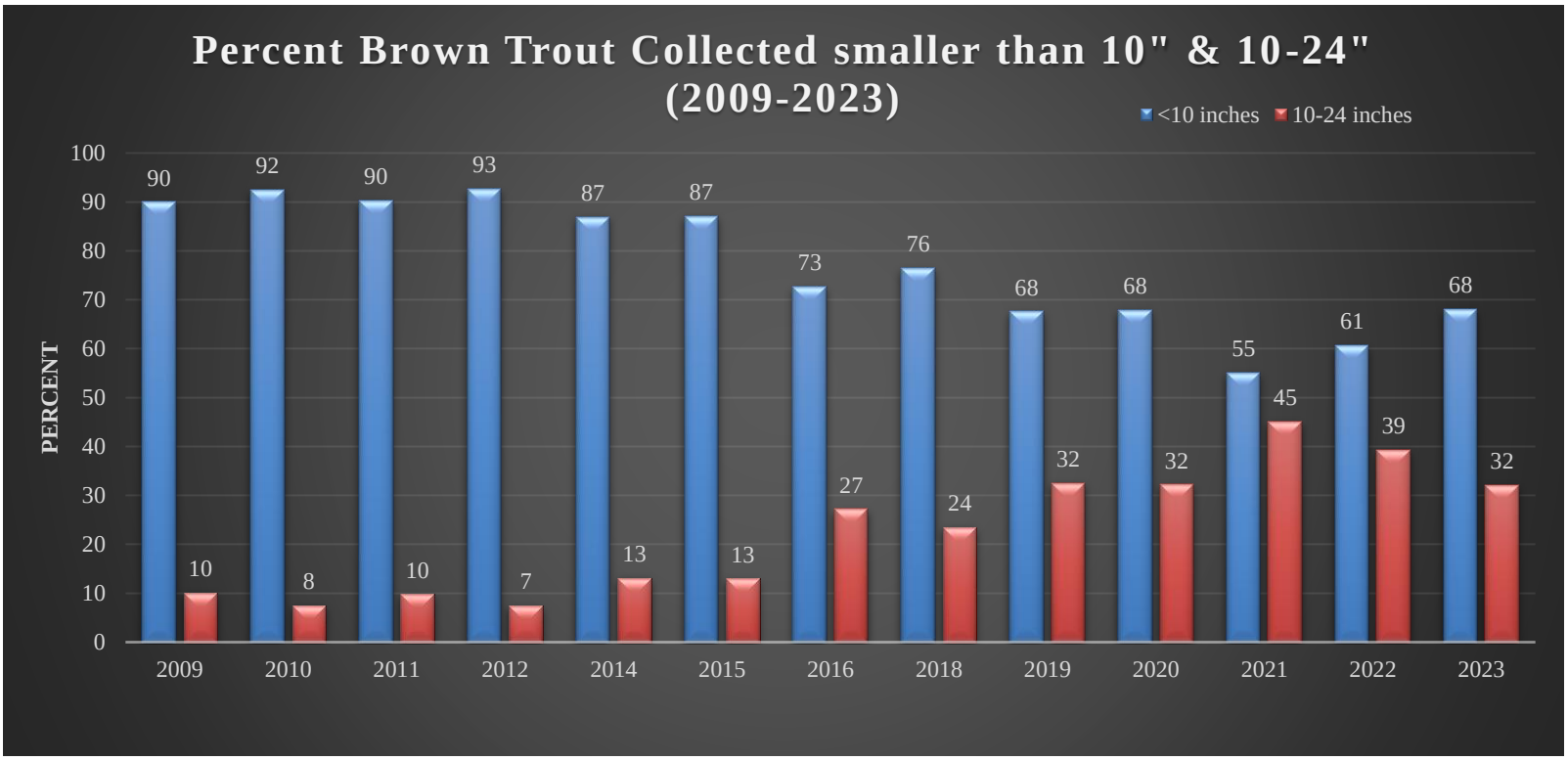
In 2023 routine fish sampling on the upper Smith River between Philpott and Martinsville dams 3,118 fish comprising 11 different species were collected, (see chart below). Approximated 78% of all fish collected were trout. A total of 2,429 trout were collected (5 brook trout, 328 rainbow trout & 2,096 brown trout), in three sampling events. Brook and rainbow trout are stocked annually, and brown trout are naturally reproducing.

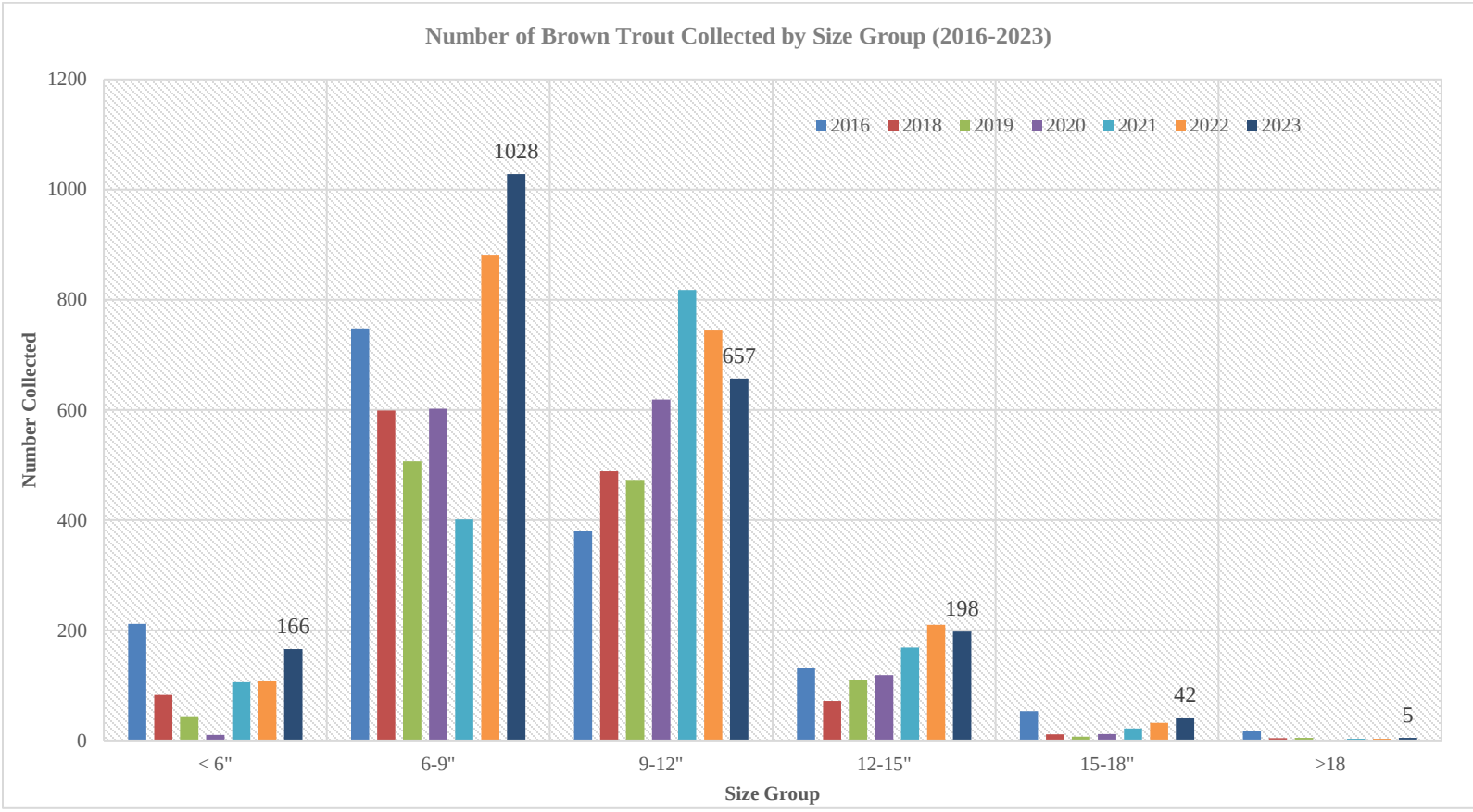


Brown trout comprised 86% of trout species collected with sizes of brown trout collected ranging from 3-22 inches. Brown trout 6 inches or smaller were considered juvenile or young and 204 were collected in the samples. Additionally, 1,892 adult brown trout (> 6") were collected from the sample with an average size of 9 inches. Anglers fishing this section of the Smith River can expect to catch brown trout in the 7–14-inch range. The following chart shows the number of brown trout collected by inch group in 2023. There are excellent numbers of "Quality" sized (9-12 inch) brown trout for anglers to catch.



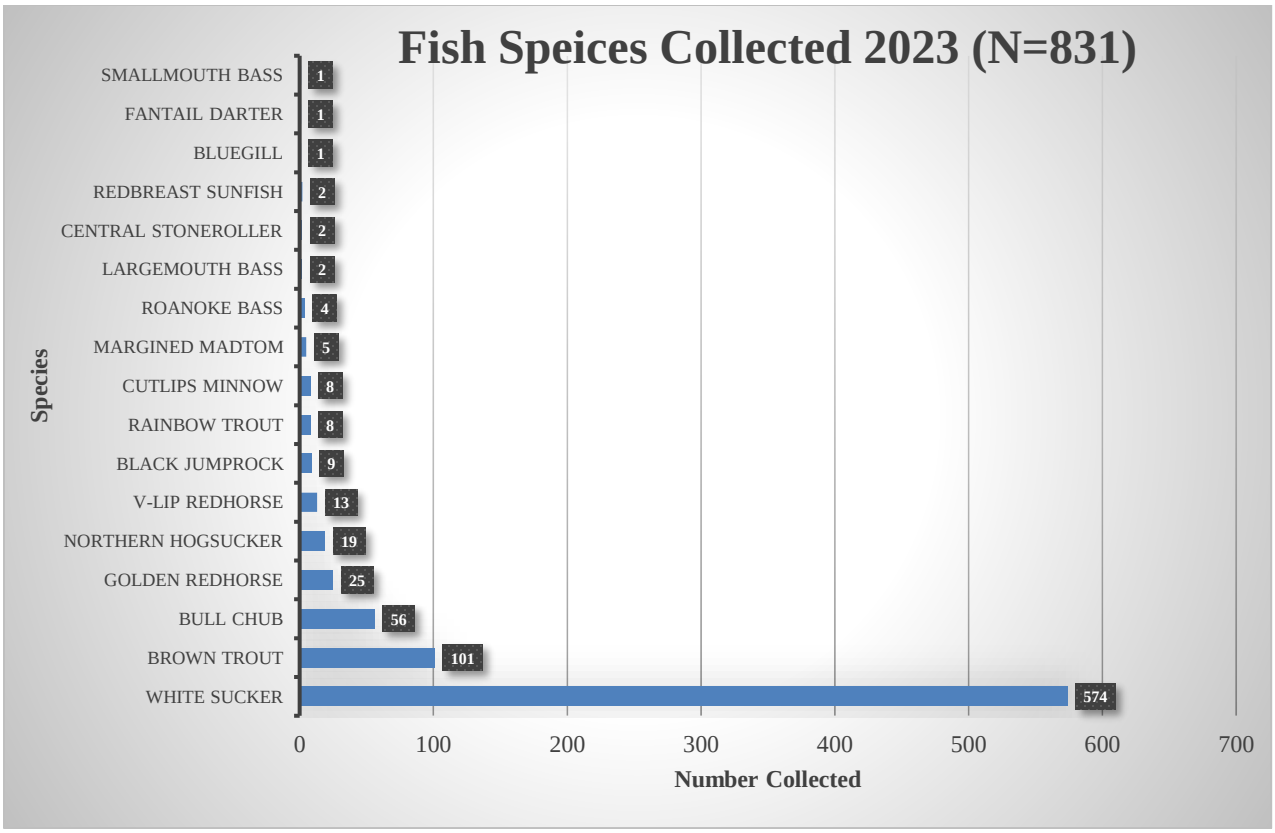
Comparing the 2023 brown trout collections to those since 2009 shows an increase in the percentage of trout collected within 10–24-inch protective slot limit as seen in the following charts. In 2023 samples, 32% of the brown trout collected were greater than 10 inches and within the protective 10–24-inch slot limit. However, prior to 2016 and previous, less than 25% of the brown trout collected were greater than 10 inches. Changes in the discharge volume and duration of water released from Philpott Reservoir over the past years have positively changed the aquatic environment resulting in increased growth and overall size of brown trout collected. Additionally, changes in sampling methods and technology have allowed DWR biologists to sample longer reaches of the river in areas that were previously inaccessible. Anglers reported that 2023 was a good fishing year on the Smith River and for 2024 that good fishing should continue.


Percent Brown Trout Collected smaller than 10" & 10-24" (2009-2023)
<10 inches
10-24 inches
PERCENT
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
90
10
92
8
90
10
93
7
87
13
87
13
73
27
76
24
68
32
68
32
55
45
61
39
68
32
2009
2010
2011
2012
2014
2015
2016
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023


Number of Brown Trout Collected by Size Group (2016-2023)
2016
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
Number Collected
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
166
1028
657
198
42
5
< 6"
6-9"
9-12"
12-15"
15-18"
>18
Size Group

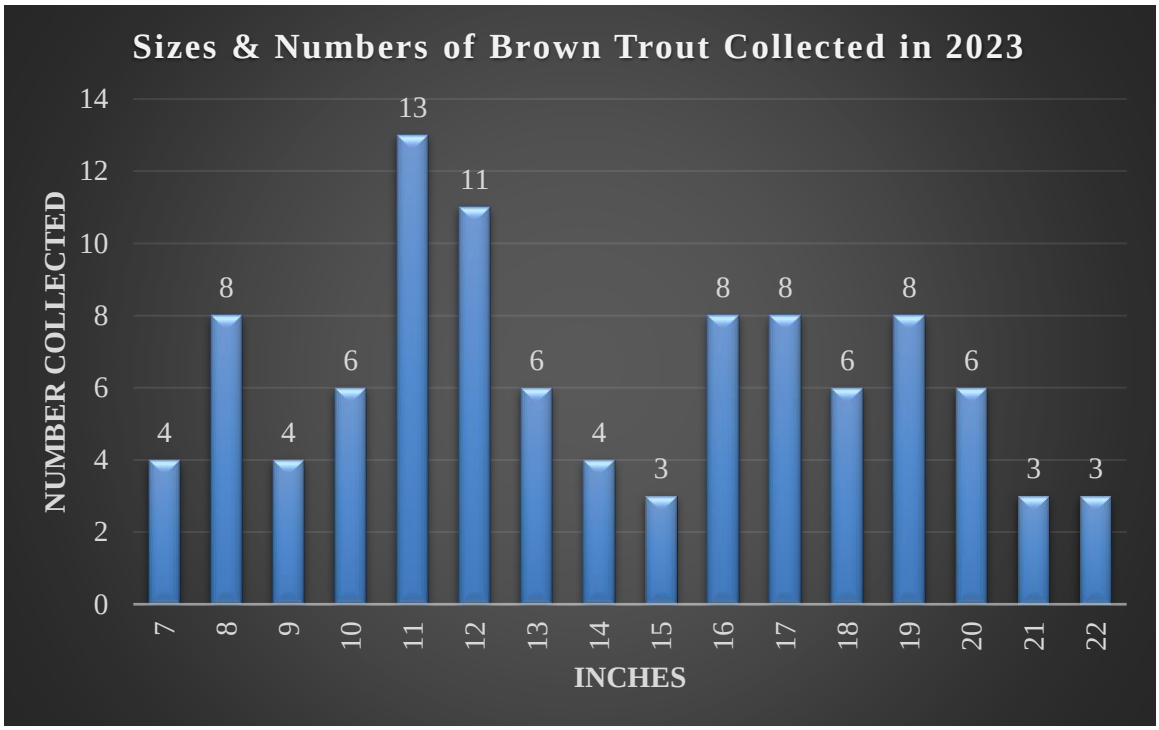
Martinsville Dam to Mitchell Bridge

The Smith River below Martinsville Dam is different from the river above the dam. First and most noticeable is water temperature. Water temperature coming out of Philpott Dam is cold because it comes from the lower parts of the reservoir. As the water flows away from the dam it warms up. By the time it reaches Martinsville Dam about 19 miles downstream the water has warmed significantly. In the summer months, the water temperatures below Martinsville Dam are borderline for supporting trout in some locations. As the water temperature increases, the fish community shifts from trout to a warm/cool water species composition such as sucker species, chubs and minnows, rock bass and sunfish. The trout section below Martinsville Dam is approximately 11 miles in length, with few access points and deep pools with steep banks. The following chart shows the composition of fish species by the percentage of those collected in this reach from 2023.



White suckers, northern hogsuckers, golden redhorse suckers, along with different minnow and chub species comprised approximately 85% of all the species collected. Brown trout, rainbow trout, largemouth bass, Roanoke bass and various sunfish species made up the remaining 15% of the 2023 collections. Brown trout were the most abundant sport fish species collected. A total of 101 brown trout were collected. The abundance or number of brown trout decreases traveling downstream away from Martinsville Dam.

The brown trout population below Martinsville Dam is fewer in number than the population above Martinsville Dam however, average size increases. Brown trout sizes below Martinsville Dam ranged between 7-22 inches and averaged 14 inches. No brown trout less than 6 inches were collected. The following chart shows the size distribution of brown trout collected below Martinsville Dam in 2023.



Very little natural reproduction of brown trout has been identified in the Smith River below Martinsville Dam. Most of the brown trout in this section are from above the dam, having been washed down, relocated from sites in the upper Smith River or stocked by the Department. In 2022, the Department relocated about 1,377 brown trout (< 10 inches) from sampling sites below Philpott Dam where trout densities are high, to locations below Martinsville Dam where densities are low. Additionally, in 2023 approximately 2,800 young (7-inch) brown trout and 8,000 fingerling (2-inch) rainbow trout were stocked to enhance the trout population. This section provides great diversity in fish species and good sizes of brown trout. Recently, anglers are reporting catching nice size brown trout and rainbow trout in this reach.

Brown trout diets have been monitored for several years. In 2021, fifty-four brown trout were selected for stomach content analysis. Items identified in stomaches consisted of crayfish, minnows/fish, snails, aquatic insects, terrestrial insects and unidentified dedris. The following table shows the percent of stomachs that contained the items. Many stomaches contained multiple items and a few were empty.

Item	Percent of Stomachs with Identified Items
Snails	3.7%
Fish	7.4%
Crayfish	20.4%
Aquatic Insects	72.2%
Terrestrial Insects	18.5%
Debris	11.1%
Empty	3.7%

The Smith River provides great trout fishing all year and has much to offer all anglers. Success of the fishery involves anglers following regulations (size and creel limits), conservation officers enforcing fishing laws and biologists working with stakeholders, user groups and concerned citizens to formulate plans that benefit the fisheries and users of the aquatic resources. Anglers who would like to get involved in working to improve and enhance the Smith River trout fisheries are encouraged to contact the Smith River Trout Unlimited Chapter. Their Facebook link is https://www.facebook.com/SmithRiverTU, check the page for links to river flow information and other helpful information.

For more information on the fishery, contact George Palmer by email, george.palmer@dwr.virginia.gov