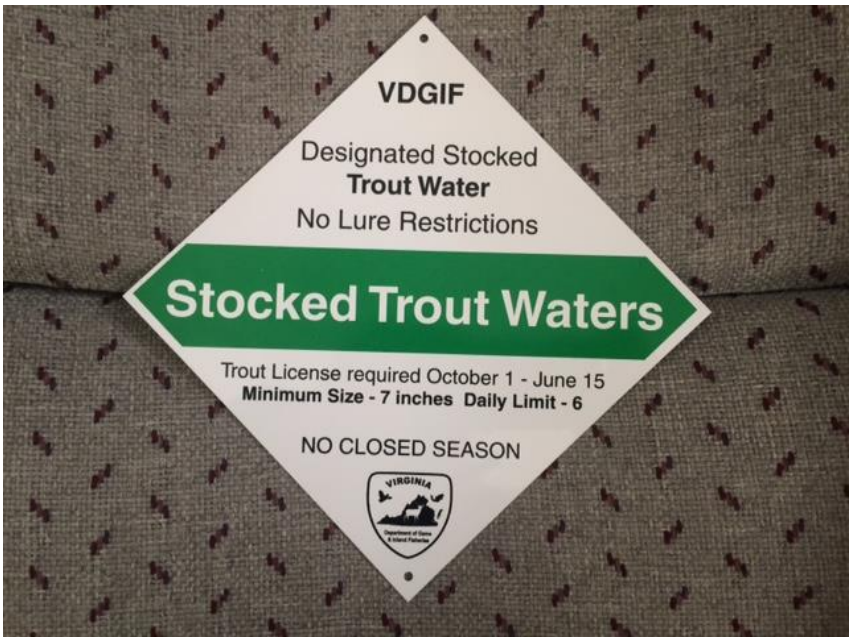
2025 Smith River Fisheries Report

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, tiger 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 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 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.

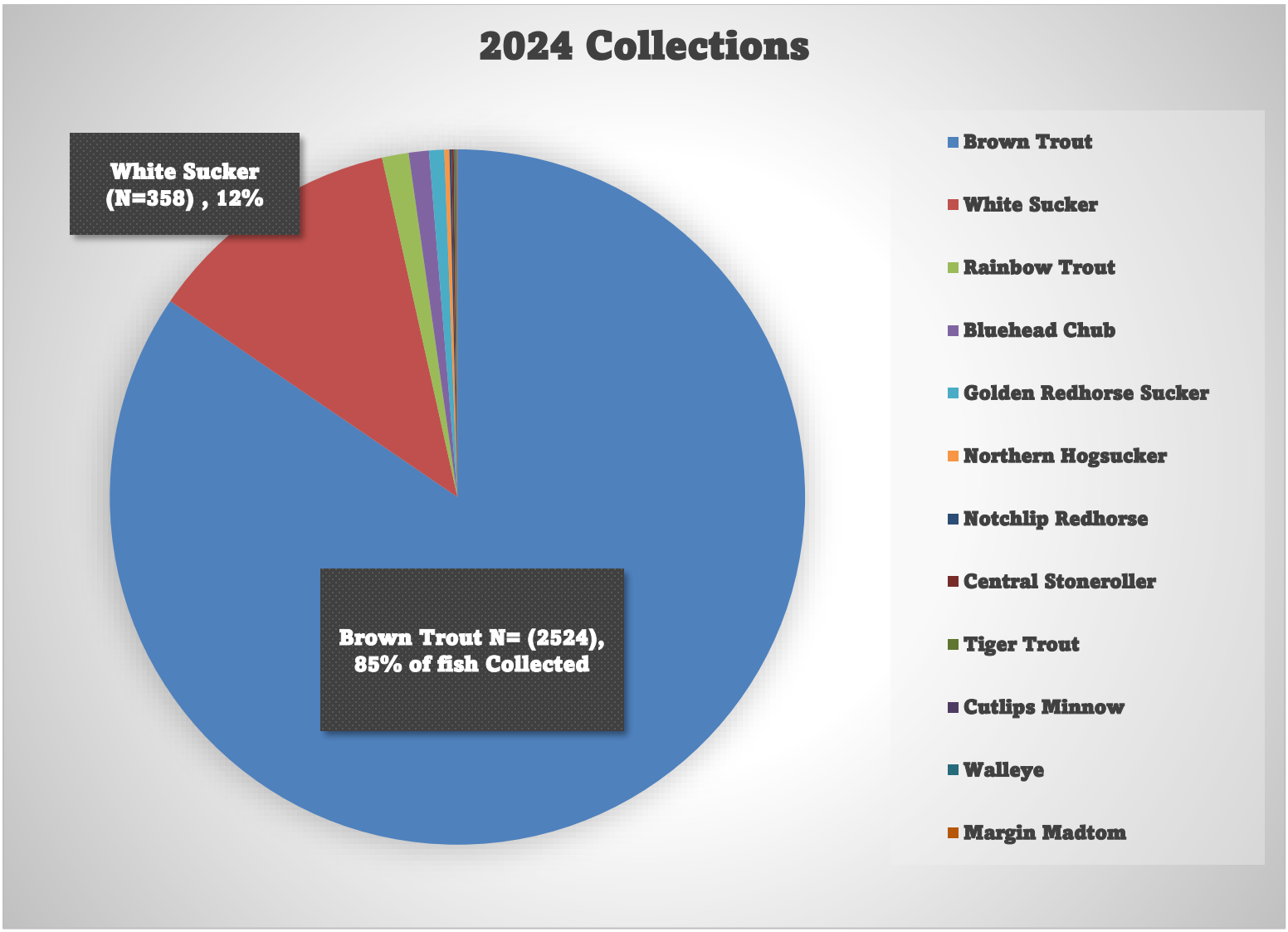


Downstream of the special regulation section, anglers can expect to catch smallmouth bass, Roanoke bass, and sunfish as the Smith flows into North Carolina. The Smith River is home to many different fish species.

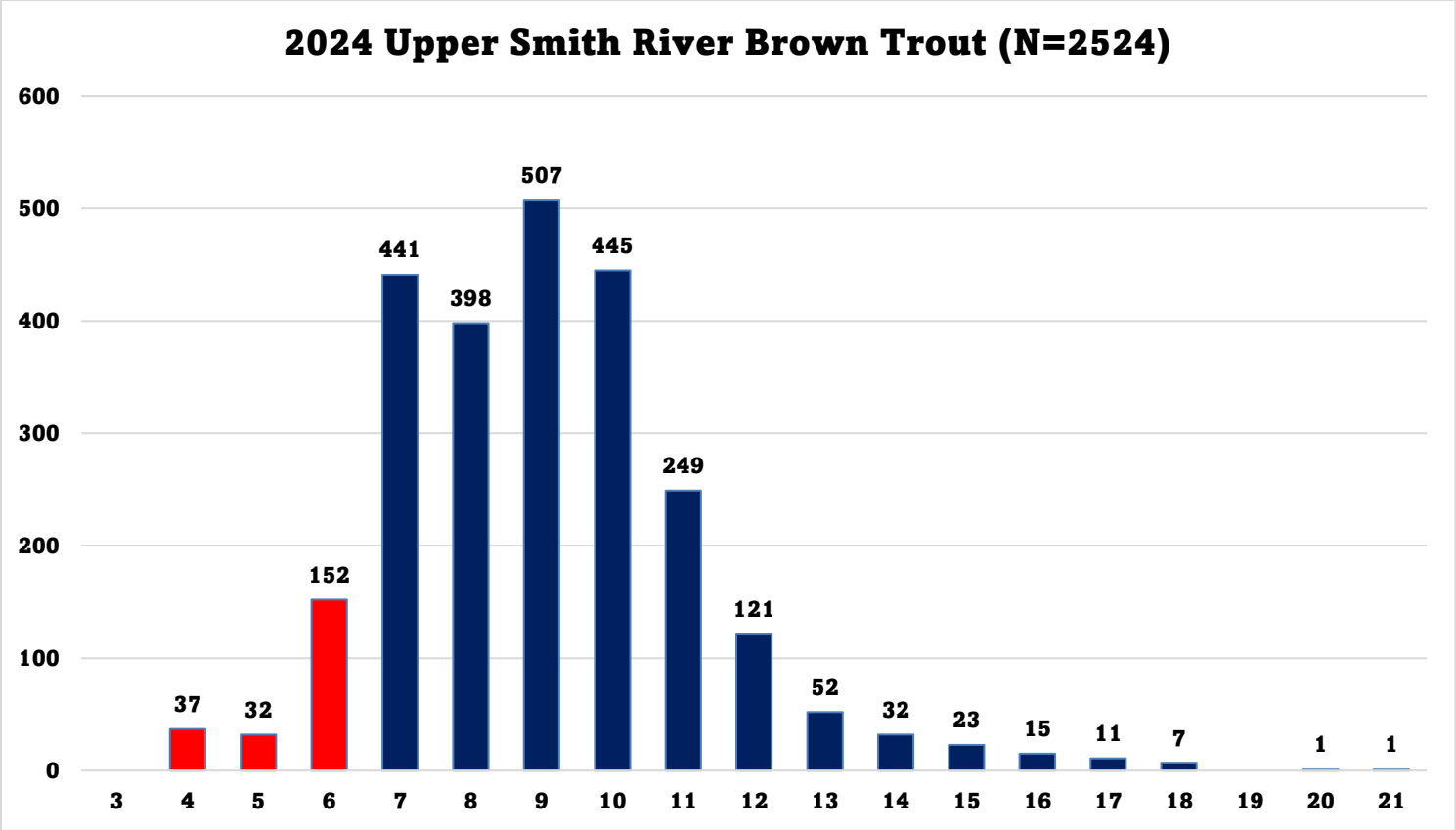
The following report summarizes the results of fish population sampling by the VDWR in 2024 and compares the results to previous year's collections. The Department, in conjunction with the Smith River Chapter of Trout Unlimited collects fish population data annually to assess the health and status of the fishery. Routine population monitoring has been conducted since the mid 1990's.

Philpott Dam to Martinsville Dam

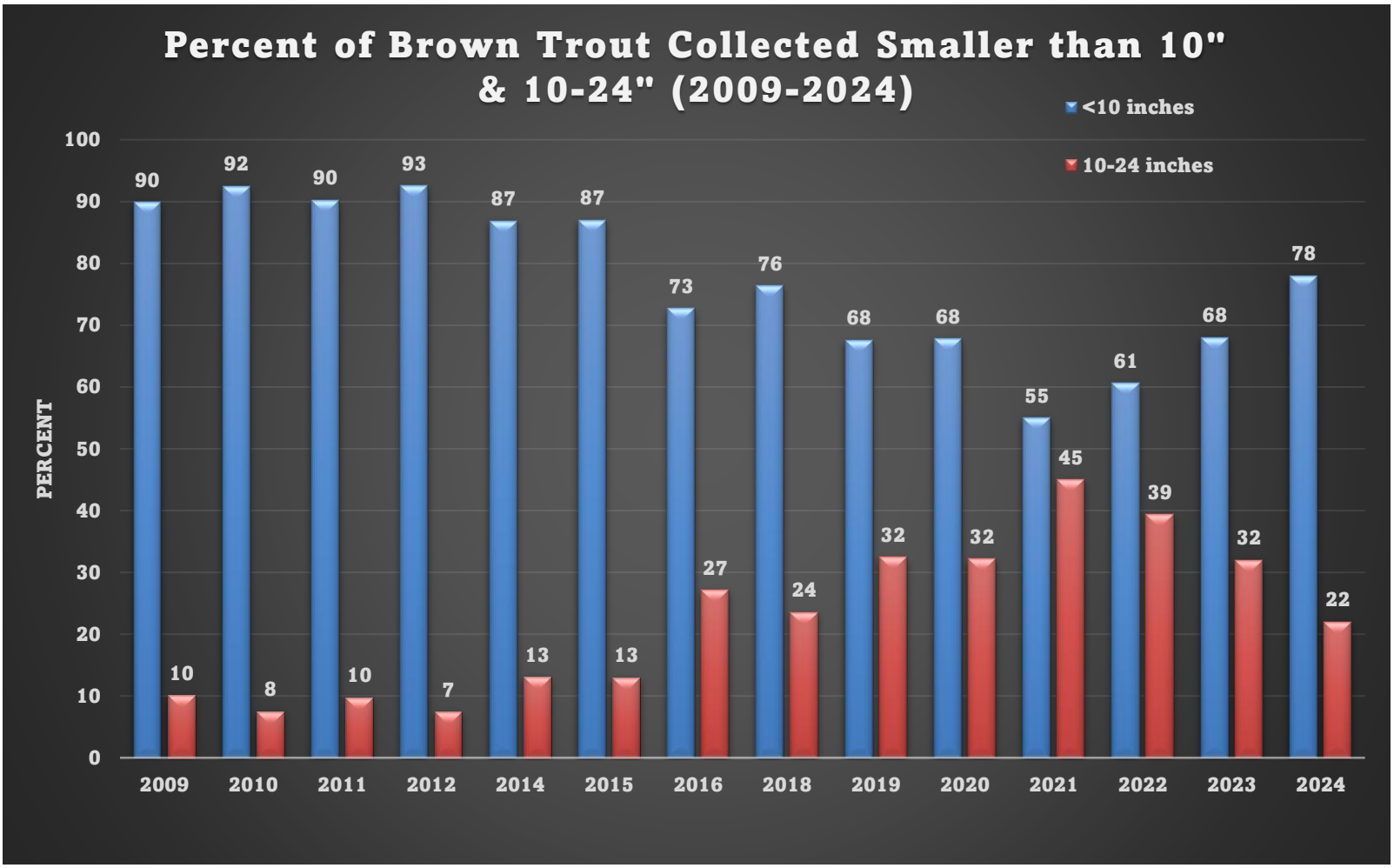
In 2024 routine fish sampling on the upper Smith River between Philpott and Martinsville dams 2,986 fish comprising 12 different species were collected, (see chart below). Approximated 86% of all fish collected were trout. A total of 2,563 trout were collected (2 tiger trout, 37 rainbow trout & 2,524 brown trout), in three sampling events. Tiger, brook, and rainbow trout are stocked annually, and brown trout are naturally reproducing.

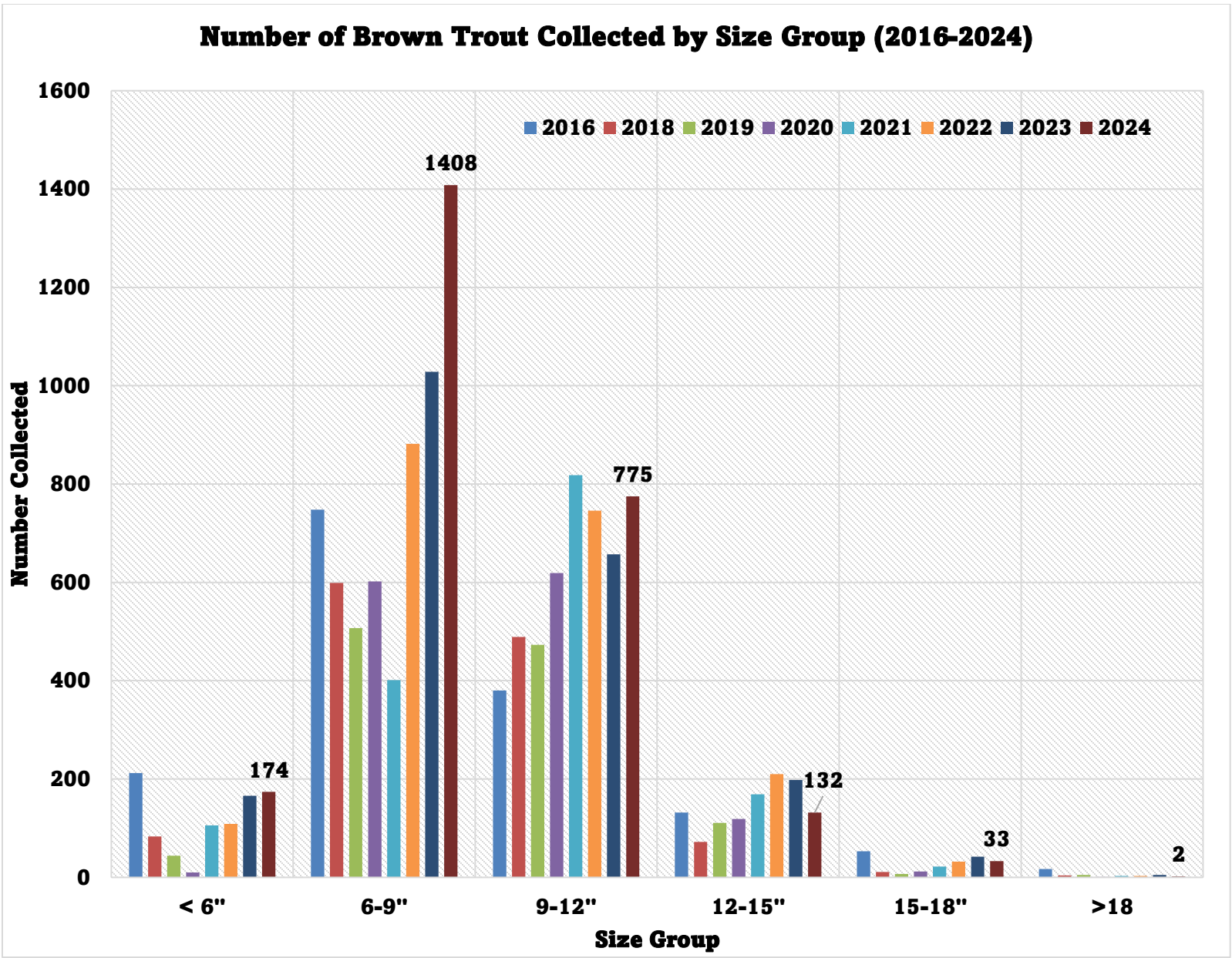


Brown trout comprised 85% of trout species collected with sizes of brown trout collected ranging from 3-20 inches. Brown trout 6 inches or smaller were considered juvenile or young and 446 were collected in the samples. Additionally, 2,078 adult brown trout (> 6") were collected from the sample with an average size of 9 inches. Anglers fishing this section of the Smith River can expect to catch brown trout in the 7–12-inch range. The following chart shows the number of brown trout collected by inch group in 2024. There are excellent numbers of "Quality" sized (9-12 inch) brown trout for anglers to catch.



Comparing the 2024 brown trout collections to those previous shows an increase in the percentage of trout collected below the 10–24-inch protective slot limit since 2021, as seen in the following charts. In 2024 samples, 22% of the brown trout collected were greater than 10 inches and within the protective 10–24-inch slot limit. However, prior to 2016 less than 15% 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 2024 was a good fishing year on the Smith River and for 2025 that good fishing should continue.

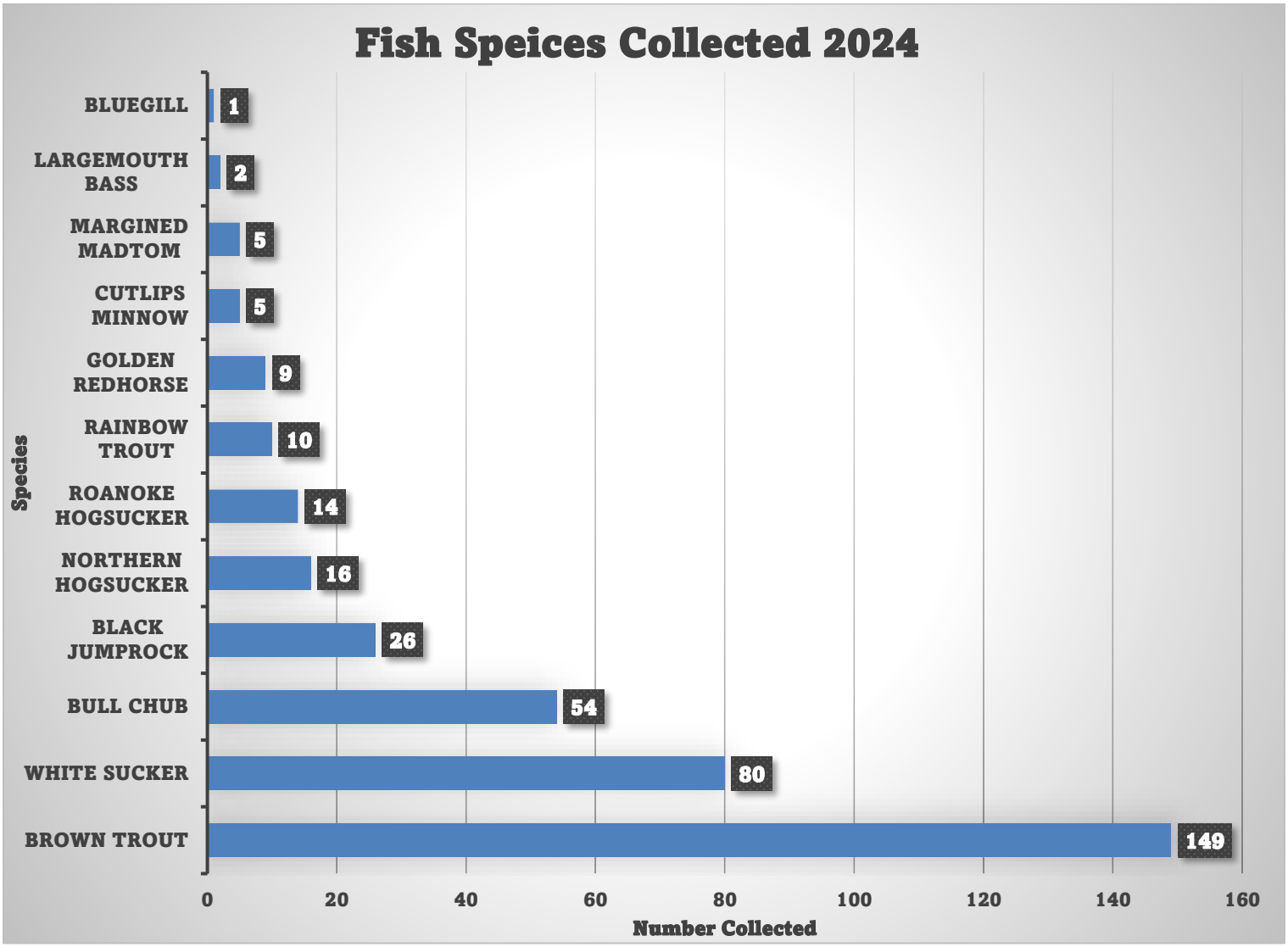

Percent of Brown Trout Collected Smaller than 10" & 10-24" (2009-2024)
<10 inches
10-24 inches
PERCENT
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
90
10
92
8
90
10
93
7
87
13
87
13
73
27
76
24
68
32
68
32
55
45
61
39
68
32
78
22
2009
2010
2011
2012
2014
2015
2016
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024


Number of Brown Trout Collected by Size Group (2016-2024)
2016
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
Number Collected
1600
1400
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
1408
775
174
132
33
2
< 6"
6-9"
9-12"
12-15"
15-18"
>18
Size Group

Martinsville Dam to Mitchell Bridge

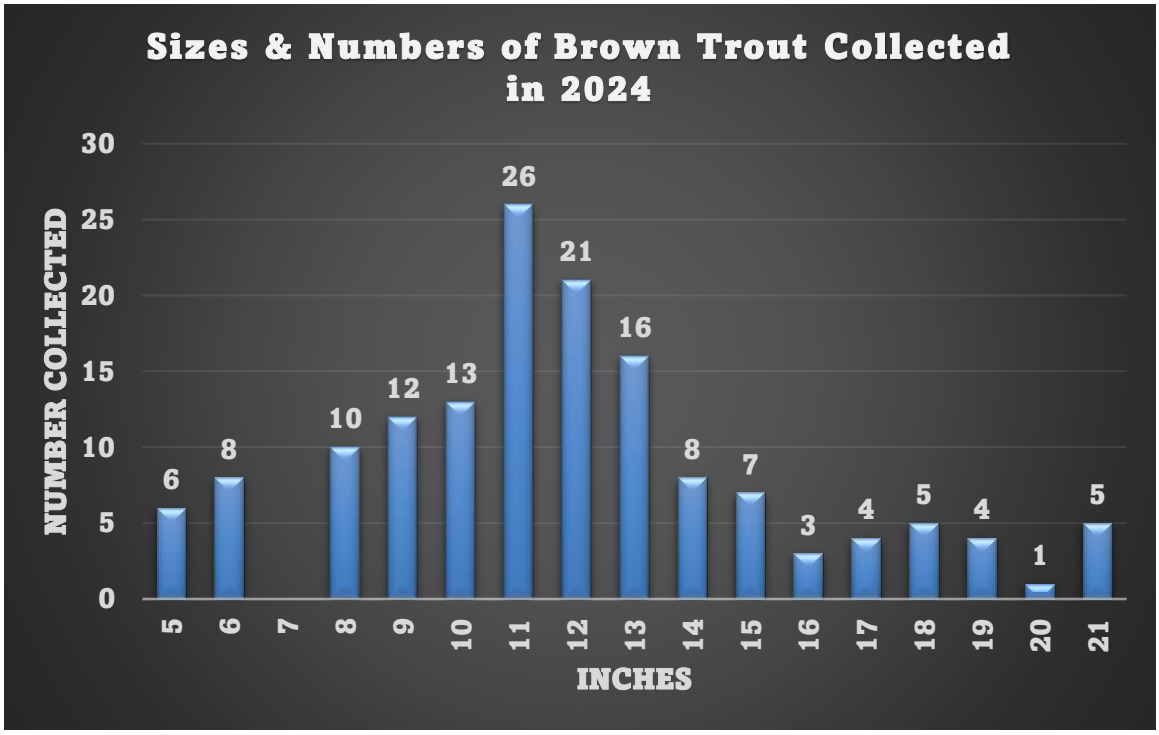
The Smith River below Martinsville Dam is different from the river above the dam. First and most noticeable is water temperature. Water temperature coming out of Philpott Dam is cold because it comes from the lower parts of the reservoir. As the water flows away from the dam it warms up. By the time 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, various bass species 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 number of those collected in this reach from 2024.



White suckers, northern hogsuckers, golden redhorse suckers, along with different minnow and chub species comprised approximately 57% of all the species collected. Brown and rainbow trout, largemouth bass and bluegill made up the remaining 43% of the 2024 collections. Brown trout were the most abundant sport fish species collected. A total of 149 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 5-21 inches and averaged 11 inches. The following chart shows the size distribution of brown trout collected below Martinsville Dam in 2024.



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 2024, the Department did not stock or relocated brown trout. This section of the river 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