



Tidal River Blue Catfish 2011



While several of Virginia's tidal rivers offer excellent opportunities to catch blue catfish, the James River in particular has been recognized nationally over the past decade as a premier trophy fishery for blue catfish. People from around the country have been traveling to central Virginia for guided James River Blue Cat fishing trips. A large component of this fishery includes anglers from nearby states and other areas of the Commonwealth who are traveling to the James River, spending vacation time and money to "fish the James". A primary attraction for these anglers has been the opportunity to catch fish which regularly weigh-in in the 40 – 60 pound range. The current James River record blue catfish, caught in 2009, weighed over 102 pounds.

Not native to Virginia's tidal rivers, blue catfish are a large fork-tailed catfish species native to the Mississippi River drainage. They were first introduced to tidal waters of Virginia in the early 1970's with stockings in the tidal James and Rappahannock rivers. In 1985, a number of blue catfish were released in the Mattaponi River, and fish from this river eventually populated the Pamunkey River. Blue catfish have also colonized the Piankatank River and the tidal Potomac River system, and blue catfish are now well established in all of Virginia's major tidal tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay. The

establishment of non-native predatory fish species has a long history in freshwater fisheries management. Other freshwater fisheries in Virginia that are based on introduced fish populations include: rainbow trout, brown trout, walleye, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, and channel catfish and flathead catfish.

The “32 inch” regulation which limits possession of blue catfish over 32 inches to one fish per person per day is still in place, and applies to recreational and commercial fishers no matter the method of harvest. Restricted harvest of these large, relatively rare, fish allows them to be recycled – resulting in more fish living to achieve even larger sizes, and to be caught again. One of the criteria for developing the regulation was the Virginia Department of Health’s consumption advisory recommending no consumption of James River blue catfish over 32 inches, and one meal per month of fish caught from other rivers. There is no limit on harvest of blue catfish smaller than 32 inches from Virginia’s tidal rivers.

Chesapeake Bay Program & Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Are Looking for Your Involvement in Determining Action on Blue Catfish

The Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) has several science teams. One such team is the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team which is composed of federal, state, and private fisheries managers from around the region. Chaired by the director of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Chesapeake Bay Office, a core group of fisheries managers forms an Executive Committee for the Fisheries Team. The Team’s mission includes supporting viable recreational and commercial fisheries, with a view to “ecosystem-based” management goals. During its first meeting in June 2010, the Team determined to focus on blue catfish management as an issue of concern.

After hearing from a panel of blue catfish science experts during its December 2010 meeting, the Team determined to develop a Chesapeake Bay wide management policy for blue catfish. The team asked this group of experts to: 1) compile all the known science related to blue catfish, focusing on likely impacts on other species, as well as means of eradicating or minimizing blue catfish population sizes; 2) assess areas where research is needed due to lacking information; and 3) develop a range of management options by the time of the Team’s June 2011 meeting. Policy options requested by the Team were to range from eradication to leaving management unchanged. While the Team recognized eradication of blue catfish from the Chesapeake Bay watershed is likely not feasible, this was one of the management options the Team requested the group of science experts to evaluate. Increased management for trophy catfish fisheries is not included in the list of policy options currently being looked at by the Team.

Through the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) coordinates management of fisheries for species that migrate into Atlantic coastal waters. The CBP Fisheries Goal Implementation Team recently developed a draft resolution on blue catfish and flathead catfish for the ASMFC. An early draft of the ASMFC resolution defines blue catfish and flathead catfish as

“invasive”. The draft ASMFC resolution states “that all practicable efforts should be made to reduce the population level and range of non-native invasive species” in the Chesapeake Bay watershed – which includes Virginia’s tidal river blue catfish populations. The draft resolution states that ASMFC supports “the development and implementation of a strategy to minimize the population of non-native invasive catfish species throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed”.

If blue catfish, and/or flathead catfish, are defined as invasive by either the Chesapeake Bay Program or the Atlantic States Fisheries Commission, management for trophy fisheries for these species in Virginia tidal rivers would likely undergo review. Particularly if the CBP Fisheries Goal Implementation Team develops a Chesapeake Bay wide management goal of minimizing and/or eradicating these catfish populations. It should be noted, Virginia law and regulation currently define blue catfish and flathead catfish as naturalized. Laws and regulation in Virginia related to invasive species, do not include either species.

If you are a recreational angler, or otherwise have an interest in this resource, you have a role to play in this ongoing process. Both the Chesapeake Bay Program and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission welcome and encourage stakeholder and public involvement.

The web link to the Chesapeake Bay Sustainable Goal Implementation Team is:
http://www.chesapeakebay.net/team_fisheries_info.aspx?menuitem=51029

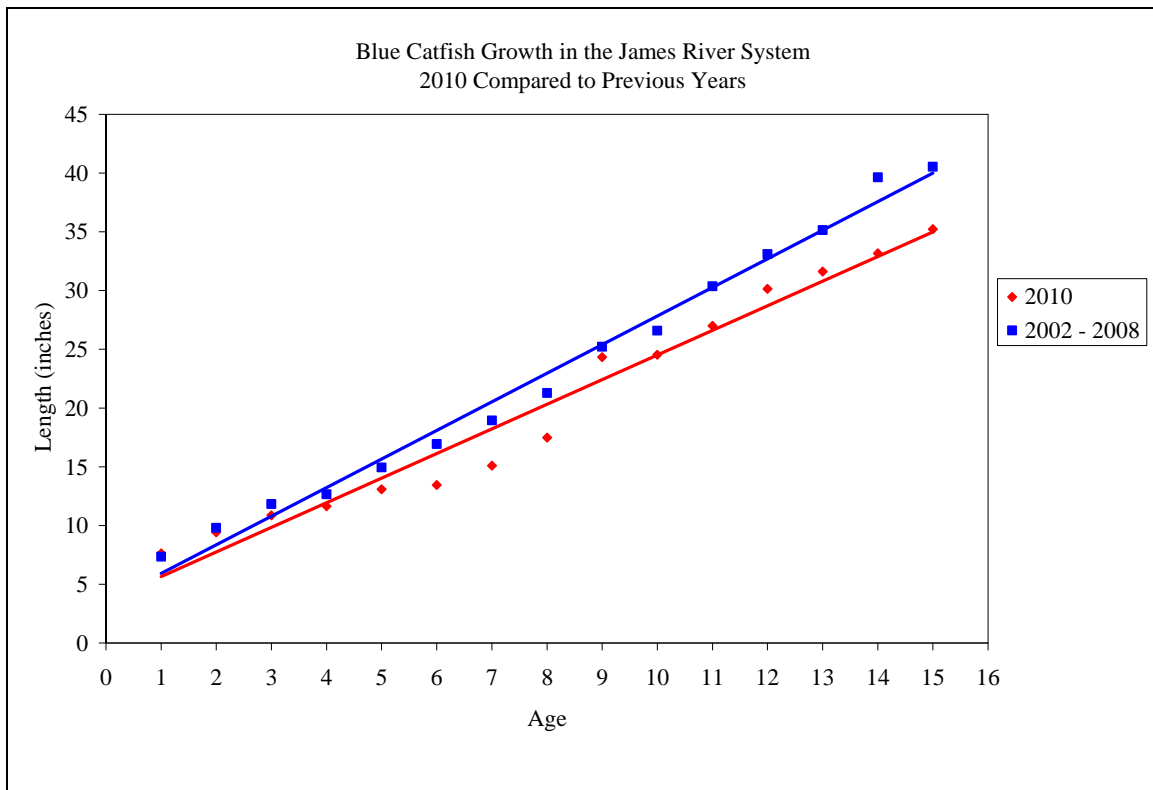
The web link to the Atlantic States Fisheries Commission is: <http://www.asmfc.org>

Changes in Tidal River Blue Catfish Populations and Fishing Forecast

As a rule, when fish species are successfully introduced to new systems, populations expand dramatically with an initial period of extremely rapid growth. This is then followed by a period of population decline, during which growth rates slow. This process can take decades, as has been the case with blue catfish in Virginia’s tidal rivers. It has been over 35 years since blue catfish were established in these waters, and the populations still have not settled into an “equilibrium state” – a level sustainable in the long-term.

At this point, it would be hard to overstate the abundance of blue catfish in Virginia’s tidal rivers. However, while smaller-size blue catfish are very abundant, the number of large blue catfish available for trophy-oriented anglers is relatively low. Blue catfish over 32 inches account for less than 1% of blue catfish found in our tidal rivers, and fish over 35 inches (typical length of a 30 pound fish) are rarer still.

In the period 2002 – 2008, as blue catfish populations became overcrowded, VDGIF biologists documented significant declines in blue catfish growth in the Rappahannock, Mattaponi, and Pamunkey. Until recently growth in the James River had remained stable, in spite of dramatic increases in the number (crowding) of blue catfish in that population. However in 2010, significant declines in growth were documented in the James River.

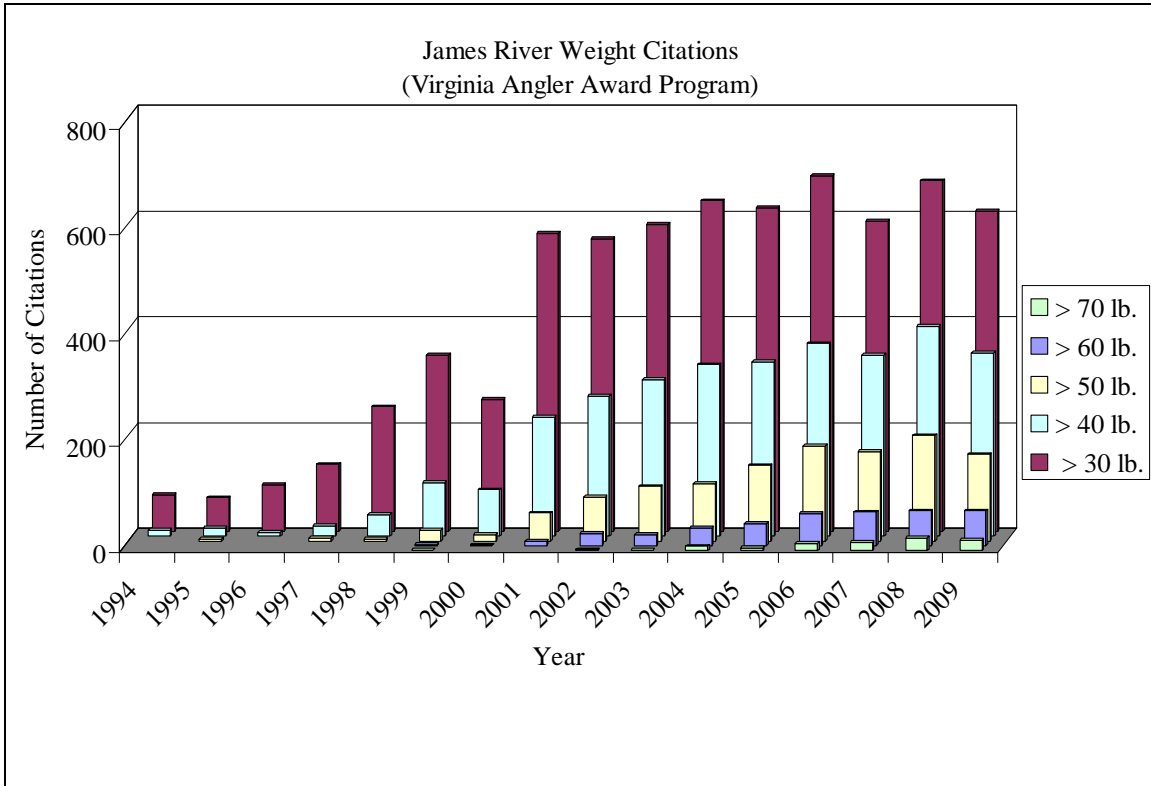


The time it takes a James River blue catfish to reach 35 inches increased from 13 years to 15 years. In other words, to reach 30 pounds a blue catfish will now have to live 15 years, when it previously would have reached this weight by age 12. If growth continues to slow in coming years, as has been the case in other tidal rivers, the resulting increase in the time to reach a given weight will mean fewer fish surviving to reach “trophy” size.

While blue catfish in these rivers increase in length at a steady rate over a long period of time (through age 15), weight gain occurs slowly for the first several years of life. Then, a diet shift to larger, energy-rich, prey items occurs and the rate of weight-gain increases dramatically. Blue catfish in the James River reach just 5 pounds by age 9. Then, with a rapid increase in growth, they weigh 15 pounds at age 12, and 30 pounds at age 16.

Mortality rates for blue catfish to age 8 are very low in these populations, however as fish reach the age (9 – 14) where rapid weight gain occurs, total annual mortality increases dramatically, approaching 60%. Given this high level of mortality, and slowing growth, continued harvest restriction on large-sized fish will continue to benefit the trophy aspect of the fishery. Conversely, dramatic increases in harvest of small fillet-size fish would be beneficial, as overcrowding is a problem – associated with slowing growth.

Whereas, the James is still capable of producing “trophy” blue catfish in good numbers, there has been a leveling off in the number of “citation-size” blue catfish reported by anglers in recent years.



Anglers have reported fish to 80 pounds from the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers in recent years. However, growth has slowed dramatically, particularly in the Pamunkey. While these two rivers continue to be capable of producing trophy sized blue catfish, the number of big fish available to anglers will not match the James, as these are smaller river systems.

The Rappahannock River with slower growth than the other rivers, only extremely rarely produces a blue catfish over 30 pounds, with only a dozen, or so, citations issued annually in recent years. Blue catfish do not reach 20 pounds until age 19 in this river.

Large blue cats prefer to feed on abundant schooling fish species, primarily gizzard shad, when they are available. Anglers use this knowledge of catfish feeding habits, fishing with fresh-caught gizzard shad, either in large chunks or whole, when looking to land trophy-sized fish.

River Summaries

1 – James River and its tributaries: Virginia’s premier trophy blue cat fishery, still with good numbers of fish to the 50 pound range, and fair numbers of fish to the 70 pound range.

2 – Mattaponi and Pamunkey: Currently good numbers of fish to the 50 pound range, with anglers reporting the occasional fish to 80 pounds. Growth rates in decline, therefore future production of trophy fish is uncertain.

3 – Rappahannock River: This river is only rarely producing citation-sized blue catfish. However, as with Virginia’s other tidal blue cat fisheries, an extremely high abundance of smaller fish are available to anglers looking to take fish home to the table.

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