Tidal rivers produce some of the best Largemouth Bass fisheries in Virginia. These dynamic flowing systems allow for a diverse fishing experience. Rivers are in a constant state of flux, and so are fish populations. Biologists sample rivers annually with specialized electrofishing (EF) equipment to assess population status and trends. Angler surveys are used to gather information on angler catch rates, harvest, effort, and opinions. Tidal river Largemouth Bass fisheries are stable to increasing, angler satisfaction is high, and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) has strived to improve fisheries with supplemental stockings.

River Rankings (based on EF surveys):
#1 James River
#2 Rappahannock River (above Rte. 301)
#3 Chickahominy River
#4 Pamunkey River
#5 Rappahannock River (below Rte. 301)
#6 Mattaponi River

Background

These are excellent days to be involved with tidal river Largemouth Bass fisheries. Drought and, conversely, high flows and/or storm surges from tropical and coastal systems can dramatically impact tidal bass populations due to habitat shifts. Thankfully, weather and rainfall patterns have been favorable in recent years. The extremely poor fishing associated with the drought of 1999 – 2002 is a distant memory, and the tidal rivers of Virginia provide excellent fishing opportunities. The near-term outlook is good, short of a major storm event. March and April fishing will be weather and water temperature dependent. When water temperatures are cool, anglers should focus on sunny days with an outgoing tide. Fish the bass actively feeding on the flats. As water temperatures warm, bass will go in to pre-spawn and then spawn mode. Fishing a falling tide on channel drop-offs would be a good strategy. Also, take advantage of fallen trees, weed lines, and other habitat structure where bass hang out. Anglers should know that the tide produces strong current on tidal rivers and their tributaries, and many anglers prefer to fish the timeframe around slack tide – the time period around either high or low tide.

Findings

The James, Chickahominy, Rappahannock (above and below Rte. 301), Pamunkey, and Mattaponi rivers were sampled using boat electrofishing in September-October 2014 to detect annual status and trends in bass populations. The Chickahominy River angler (creel) survey was conducted in April-June 2014. In May, the tidal portion of Rappahannock River below Rte. 301 received 40,000 F1 hybrid fingerling Largemouth Bass.

Here’s how they stack up:

#1 James River & tributaries — The highest bass EF catch rates (number of fish caught per annum) in the Chesapeake Bay region. Anglers should expect to find Largemouth Bass in the 12” to 18” size range. Fishing in the fall, when bass move up from the flats, is ideal for larger bass. Anglers should focus on the areas with the most structure, such as fallen trees, weed lines, and other habitat features where bass may be holding.

The Proportional Size Distribution for preferred sized (≥15”) or PSD-P, is a numerical descriptor of length-frequency data with larger values indicating a greater number of preferred sized fish in the population. The top plot shows the Proportional Size Distribution for each river, with larger values indicating a greater number of preferred sized fish in the population. The bottom plot shows average catch rates of bass ≥ 15” from electrofishing surveys in 2014 from each river.
hour of electrofishing (top) among all tidal rivers were found here. Length-frequency indicated good age class structure with an abundance of bass to 2½ pounds, and fish to 3½ pounds not uncommon. Bass 6–8 pounds are rare.

#2 Rappahannock River (above Rte. 301) — EF catch rates in 2014 increased to a record high over the 12-year monitoring period. PSD P rivaled that of the Chickahominy River. The past 4 years have produced record numbers of young-of-year bass. This is a great option for anglers in Northern VA.

#3 Chickahominy River — EF catch rates and angler catch rates are stable with no differences found over the last 3 years, but overall and preferred (bass ≥ 15”) catch rates are lower than the peak in 2010. Sixty-six percent of bass anglers reported good-excellent satisfaction on this river. The few bass still surviving from the 2006 and 2007 monster year classes and F1 stockings are likely providing big fish action. This river is the best bet for catching a lunker (6–8 lbs.), and has the highest PSD-P.

#4 Pamunkey River — This river might surprise you over the next couple of years if you’re looking for numbers. Expect good numbers of 1-2 pound bass.

#5 Rappahannock River (below Rte. 301) — Overall, bass numbers are low relative to other rivers. Low bass numbers triggered fingerling stockings of F1 hybrid Florida X Northern strain Largemouth Bass in 2013 (Concerned Bass Anglers of Virginia) and 2014 (VDGIF). Stocked fingerlings exhibited high growth over summer and fall in 2013, however over-winter survival appeared extremely low based on spring EF surveys. Lack of quality habitat is likely driving bass populations here. Fear not, this section of river still provides a great opportunity for bass angling to those interested in tidal bass action, and although the numbers are low, the fish are in good condition based on high relative weight.

#6 Mattaponi River — This river produced the lowest EF catch rate among tidal rivers. The highest catches of bass were concentrated from just above Aylett to several river miles downstream of Walkerton. With the exception those who are aware of isolated “hot spots”, anglers should expect low catch rates for largemouth in this river.

Tidal Bass Footballs

Tidal bass are shaped different than “normal” Largemouth Bass found in lakes and ponds. The length-weight relationship is much different with fish “stunting” out in length, but weighing much more than “normal” bass at a given length – they are shaped like footballs. So, it is more useful to talk about tidal river bass in terms of weight when comparing to lake/pond populations. However, length can be useful when comparing amongst tidal rivers.

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