



## Smith Mountain Lake 2015



Smith Mountain Lake is a 20,600-acre impoundment located near Roanoke, Virginia. This reservoir is one of Virginia's premier fisheries, offering a variety of fishing and other recreational opportunities. The reservoir is owned by American Electric Power Company and is managed primarily for hydroelectric power generation. Most of the shoreline is developed with residential homes but other facilities catering to outdoor enthusiasts are found at various locations.

Black bass (largemouth and smallmouth bass) are the most sought after species by anglers at Smith Mountain Lake, which hosted the BASSMASTER Elite Series tournaments in 2008 and 2009. Largemouth bass comprise approximately 90% of the black bass fishery. Largemouth bass fishing on this 20,600-acre lake is good but this fishery receives a lot of pressure. Extensive electrofishing surveys (conducted by fisheries biologists each spring) typically produce many largemouth bass in the 2-4 pound range, with the bulk of fish between 14 and 17 inches. The largemouth bass population had been stable for several years (2010-2012) following increases during 2004-2009 with 2009 producing the highest catch rates ever recorded and slightly surpassing historical highs of the mid 1990's. Sampling in 2014 indicated a 14% decline in the largemouth bass population; however, the size distributions were similar to previous years. Smallmouth bass population has remained stable for many years but also declined in 2014.

The highest densities of largemouth bass in this reservoir are found upstream (heading away from the dam) of Hales Ford Bridge area in the Roanoke River arm and buoy B26 in the Blackwater River arm. However, anglers are often more successful in the downstream areas where the water is less stained and bottom contours are more favorable due to flatter shorelines of the lower end than the vertical shorelines of the upper end. Smallmouth bass are most abundant in the downstream end of the reservoir. Piers and boathouses provide extensive shoreline cover that anglers should take advantage of. Fishing around and under boat docks/piers from the water is legal but remember to be courteous to dock owners. Additionally, natural structures such as fallen trees, rock shoals and points are seasonally productive. Coves typically produce the best largemouth bass angling opportunities during the winter and spring months due to shallower water and less boating traffic. However, these fish tend to move into deeper water, closer to the main channel areas, and often suspend seeking schooling shad during the warmer months (July-September). To avoid the heavy boat traffic in the summer, anglers should concentrate their efforts at night or very early in the morning.

Largemouth bass virus (LMBv) is a disease that impacts several fish species but only appears to cause death in some largemouth bass. In fact, it is the only known virus to cause substantial mortality in largemouth bass. Unfortunately, most bass mortality is from the largest fish in the population and while this disease typically does not impact the overall population, it can reduce the number of large fish in a population for several years. During August 2011, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) tested sixteen bodies of water statewide; including large impoundments, small impoundments and major rivers to test for presence of the

virus. LMBv was found in all of the tested waterbodies except the tidal James River. Despite the spread and discovery of LMBv across many waterbodies in Virginia, there are reasons for optimism. Reservoirs like Smith Mountain Lake, Lake Chesdin and Lake Anna where LMBv has been found, still maintain excellent bass populations. Bass do build up resistance to the disease, and reservoirs in the southern states hit hard by the virus in the late 1990's have recovered to pre-exposure angler success rates. Testing conducted for LMBv at Smith Mountain Lake in 2001 was negative, but 58% of the bass sampled in 2011 were positive. There is the potential that this disease could cause some mortality and could impact the population in the near future but long-term impacts should be minimal. The 2014 sampling indicated a reduction in the bass population, but this decline may not be linked to LMBv since the percent of larger bass did not appear to change. Additional sampling in 2015 will assist DGIF in determining if the population is really declining, or if the 2014 collection was an anomaly. To learn more about this virus and testing results in Virginia, go to the DGIF website at

<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/largemouth-bass-virus/>

Smith Mountain Lake has also gained national attention for its striped bass fishery. Striped bass have been stocked into this reservoir since impoundment in 1963. Limited spawning habitat for striped bass prevents natural reproduction. Stocking is required to maintain the fishery, unlike other species such as bass, crappie, catfish, and shad.

The striped bass population began increasing in the late 1990's as a result of increased stockings and better survival of young fish; however, the Smith Mountain Lake striped bass fishery experienced a major setback in 2003. A parasitic copepod (*Achtheres*) infestation of striped bass began in the fall of 2002, and the shad population was reduced by more than 80% for several months due to a shad winterkill in 2003. As a result, a major striped bass kill occurred in the spring of 2003. Based on observations during the fish kill, gill net data, DGIF citation program data and angler diary data, the fish kill eliminated most of the striped bass over 10 pounds. Gill net data indicated that the number of young striped bass (up to 3 years of age) remained stable despite the fish kills. The number of bigger striped bass did improve from 2004-2011 but most of the larger fish are still limited to 10-16 pounds. There are a few striped bass available over 20 pounds.

Beginning in 2003, striped bass stocking rates were reduced to keep the population at a healthy level since higher stockings from 1998-2002 resulted in poor fish health, slower growth, and an eventual striped bass kill. The reduction of larger striped bass during the 2003 fish kill, in conjunction with continued heavy harvest of the largest fish in the population, prompted new regulations in 2006 to rebuild the trophy fishery. The new striped bass size limits were designed to limit the harvest of larger striped bass during periods when survival of catch and released fish is high and to allow harvest of these fish during the summer, when survival is typically low. This new regulation did improve the number of larger striped bass in the population; only 2% of the adult population was over 30 inches in 2004. This improved to 18% by 2009, and held steady through 2011. The new striped bass regulations maintained the two-fish creel limit throughout the year but require all striped bass between 26 to 36 inches be released from November 1 through May 31. There was no size limit from June-October.

The protective slot limit initiated in 2006 was modified in 2015, after data indicated there were too many striped bass between 26 and 29 inches and most fish after reaching this size experienced very little or no growth. It should only take striped bass an average of two years to grow from 26 to 30 inches but after 2012, most striped bass never reach 30 inches due to poor growth. For example, 10 year old striped bass in 2014 averaged 29.5 inches, but should have

been approximately 36 inches long at that age. However, growth for younger fish has remained good and stable for the same time period. The new protective slot limit was adjusted in 2015 to 30-40 inches (only for the months of Nov-May), up from 26-36 inches initiated in 2006. Anglers who prefer catch-and-release of 26-29 inch fish should continue that practice. Excessive harvest of this size group is not necessary to improve growth, some catch-and-release will still be necessary to maintain a trophy fishery.

Studies have consistently shown that catch and release of striped bass in the summer months results in high mortality. Most of these striped bass die 1-2 days after release and most sink to the bottom and never surface. Catch and release mortality appears to be especially high for the larger fish. Consequently, anglers should not be targeting large striped bass with the intent of catch and release during the summer months. Smaller fish (generally < 22 inches) generally survive summer release rather well. Department of Game and Inland Fisheries encourages striped bass anglers to stop fishing after catching their 2-fish limit in the months of June-September and occasionally during warm periods in October. Catch-and-release is recommended for striped bass from November through May.

Striped bass are distributed throughout the lake during most of the year, but are concentrated in lower lake (between the dam and buoy 64 of the Roanoke Arm and up to buoy 40 of the Blackwater Arm) areas during the summer months. Coves are typically not very productive for striped bass during the summer, so anglers should concentrate their efforts on the main lake when water temperatures begin to rise. Some of the bigger coves and the upper ends of the lake are more productive during the fall, winter and spring months. Although these are the general areas most striped bass are caught, these fish are very mobile and may change locations continuously depending on forage availability, water temperatures, and spawning. Striped bass anglers utilize a variety of fishing methods such as drifting or slow trolling live shad, trolling (plugs, bucktail jigs, swim baits, umbrella rigs), casting lures (flukes, swim baits, bucktail jigs), or vertical jigging. Anglers use live shad throughout the year, trolling is most popular during the warmer months, casting lures is most productive during the winter and spring at night. All of the above methods are utilized during the winter months.

There is an ongoing striped bass tagging study to provide biologists with information on striped bass catch rates, harvest rates, movement, survival, and population dynamics. The fish tags are yellow, approximately three inches in length, attached near the dorsal fin and should be easily recognized without dissection. Tagged fish do not have to be harvested in order to collect the reward. Cut or clip tags (do not pull tags loose) from the fish you wish to release. Anglers are encouraged to submit all tags collected from striped bass to the address printed on the tag with the following information: date fish was caught, marker number nearest to location of capture (also include the marker letter, i.e. R31), length of fish and indicate whether the fish harvested or released. Rewards are assigned to specific tags and not to any particular size of fish. All returned tags will be worth one of the following amounts: \$5, \$10, \$20, \$35, or \$50.

The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries does not typically collect older and larger (over 8 lbs) striped bass in their routine sampling, but these data are very important for monitoring the fishery and new regulations. Any willing angler is asked to keep striped bass heads from fish they harvest larger than 26 inches or 8 pounds. The heads can be frozen and delivered to a freezer at "Captain's Quarters", located next to Hales Ford Bridge, where DGIF will pick up them up. Be sure to fill out and include a form detailing the length of each fish and when it was caught upon drop off. If you would like to know the age and year the fish was stocked, include your mailing address and you will be sent the information after the fish has been

aged. Fish have an inner ear bone in the head (termed “otolith”), from which the age is determined. Each otolith contains rings similar to tree rings and can be counted for an accurate age determination.

This reservoir has limited crappie habitat. Although the lake produces many quality-size crappie, anglers should not expect to consistently catch large numbers of crappie. The crappie population is smaller than some other Virginia reservoirs but the quality of these fish is very good. Large coves and the upper ends of the reservoir should be the most productive, especially near fallen trees, brush piles, and some docks. During the 2014 angler creel survey, crappie anglers were most productive in March-May but October-December are typically good months for crappie fishing. Fewer crappie are caught in June-September. DGIF sampling indicates the crappie population is stable and has shown little change for many years. The crappie fishery should remain good and no substantial changes in the population are expected.

Sunfish and catfish are also present at Smith Mountain Lake. Sunfish are abundant but competition with shad prevents good growth, so most of these fish are small. Channel catfish, flathead catfish, and white catfish make up the catfish fishery. Flathead and channel catfish are most abundant in the upper reaches of the Roanoke Arm and white catfish are found primarily in the lower third of the reservoir where the water clarity is much better. Catfish anglers can enjoy good fishing from the shoreline and docks.

White perch are a relatively new species to the lake and have recently provided great fishing opportunities. This species can be found throughout the reservoir but higher concentrations are typically found in the lower end (dam end) of the reservoir. White perch generally travel in large groups and can provide fast action after a “school” of white perch is located. Anglers should look for large numbers of smaller fish on their electronics, especially along points in 15-30 feet of water near channels. After locating a “school” of white perch, vertical jig small spoons or drop baits (small pieces of cut bait or worms) and prepare for a lot of action. White perch can also be found along shoreline structure especially in the spring and fall months but will go deeper when the water starts to warm up in the summer or gets too cold in the late fall and winter.

Numerous public and private boat ramps and marinas are found around the lake. In addition, there are very nice handicapped-accessible fishing piers located in the Smith Mountain Lake State Park and Franklin County Park. Additional information on lodging, marinas, and other attractions can be obtained by calling the Smith Mountain Lake Visitors Center at 1-800-676-8203 or by visiting the Smith Mountain Lake Visitor Center online at [www.smith-mountain-lake-visitor-center.com](http://www.smith-mountain-lake-visitor-center.com). Additional information concerning the fishery can be obtained by calling DGIF at 434-525-7522.