



# 2015 TIDAL BASS OUTLOOK



*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



An 8-pound bass collected from the Chickahominy River during the 2014 fall electrofishing survey (right). Bass measurement taken during survey (top left). The tidal river systems entering the Chesapeake Bay (bottom left). (Photo credit: Aaron Bunch; Map source: ESRI)



## 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 ad-

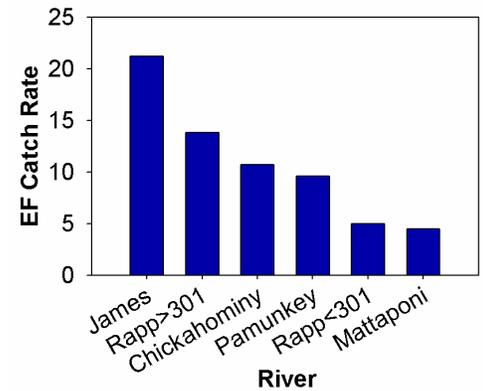
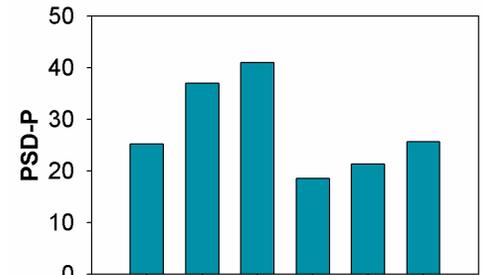
vantage of fallen trees, weed lines, and other habitat structure where bass hang out. Anglers should know that the tide produces strong current on tidal rivers and their tributaries, and many anglers prefer to fish the timeframe around slack tide – the time period around either high or low tide.

## Findings

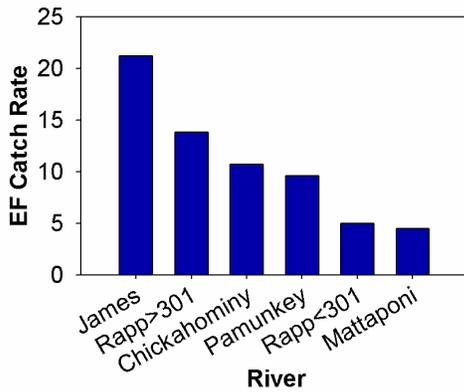
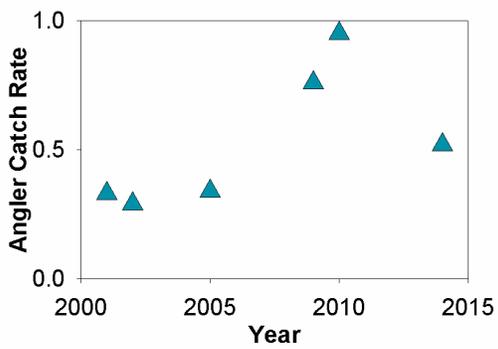
The James, Chickahominy, Rappahannock (above and below Rte. 301), Pamunkey, and Mattaponi rivers were sampled using boat electrofishing in September-October 2014 to detect annual status and trends in bass populations. The Chickahominy River angler (creel) survey was conducted in April-June 2014. In May, the tidal portion of Rappahannock River below Rte. 301 received 40,000 F<sub>1</sub> 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



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 when comparing rivers (top). The bottom plot shows average catch rates of bass ≥ 15" from electrofishing surveys in 2014 from each river.



Angler data from the Chickahominy River shows catch rates (number of fish caught per hour of fishing) from 6 surveys between 2001-2014. Bass stockings and strong year-classes in 2006-2007 likely enhanced the fishery (top). Relative weight is a measure of fish condition often associated with population health. All rivers are over the 90 mark and considered healthy populations (bottom). The Rappahannock River above Rte. 301 was not included due to lack of weight data.

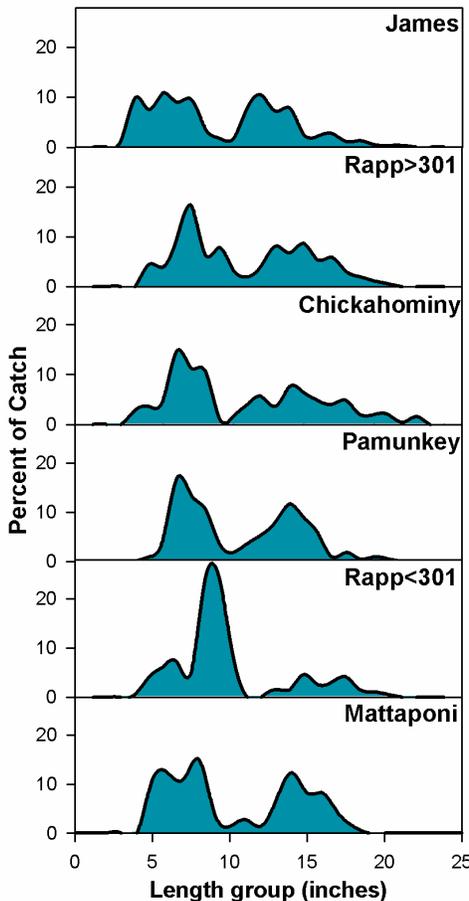
hour of electrofishing) among all tidal rivers were found here. Length-frequency indicated good age class structure with an abundance of bass to 2 ½ pounds, and fish to 3 ½ pounds not uncommon. Bass 6-8 pounds are rare.

**#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.

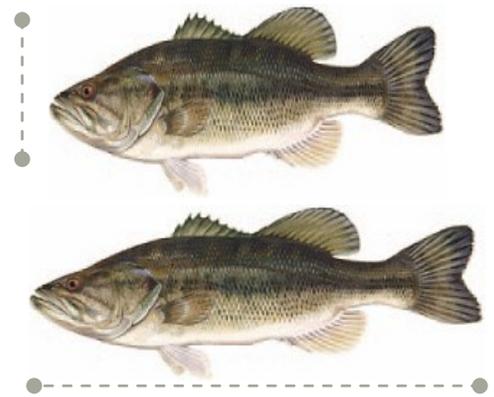
**#3 Chickahominy River** — EF catch rates and angler catch rates are stable with no differences found over the last 3 years, but overall and preferred (bass ≥ 15”) catch rates are lower than the peak in 2010. Sixty-six percent of bass anglers reported good-excellent satisfaction on this river. The few bass still surviving from the 2006 and 2007 monster year classes and F<sub>1</sub> 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 F<sub>1</sub> 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.



Length frequency expressed as the percent of catch during 2014 electrofishing surveys for each river. The more peaks present indicate more age classes in the population. The more peaks in the larger size groups indicate larger fish in the population. The top 3 rivers above show many age classes across a large range of sizes indicating constant recruitment into the fishery.



**Top:** Football-shaped tidal Largemouth Bass.  
**Bottom:** Typical, more elongate Largemouth Bass from a lake or pond.

Worth a try to see if stocked bass have recruited to the fishery. Look for creeks with emergent and submersed aquatic vegetation.

**#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.

\*\*\*Be safe, wear a life jacket, and please obey fishing and boating regulations while on the water\*\*\*

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