



Buggs Island Lake Report 2012

Buggs Island Lake (also known as Kerr Reservoir) is a 48,900-acre impoundment of the Dan and Staunton Rivers on the Virginia-North Carolina border in Mecklenberg County, Virginia. The reservoir was created in 1952 and is operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) for hydroelectric generation, flood control, water supply, and recreation. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) is charged with the responsibility of managing the fisheries resources of the reservoir. Buggs Island Lake has an average depth of about 30 feet and about 800 miles of shoreline. Full pool is at an elevation of 300 feet (msl) which is important since the lake can fluctuate about 15 feet per year.

Buggs Island Lake has a diverse sport fishery that attracts anglers from across the country. The most popular fisheries are for largemouth bass, crappie, catfish (channel, blue and flathead), and striped bass. Each of these species is supported by natural reproduction, although VDGIF occasionally stocks striped bass to supplement the fishery.

Largemouth Bass

Largemouth bass are by far the most popular species in the lake. In 2007, 59% of the total fishing effort for the lake was for largemouth bass. Catch rates average 0.62 fish/hour which is exceptionally good (one fish for every 1.6 hours of fishing). Catch rates vary little throughout the year so anglers can typically expect good fishing at any time. While catch rates and angler success remain high, the population has experienced a decline in larger fish. While lunker bass (> 8 pounds) have always been rare in Buggs Island Lake, catch rates for fish > 5 pounds also declined. In spring of 2010, it was discovered that largemouth bass virus (LMBv) was present in the population resulting in higher mortality rates, especially in larger bass, and slower growth. Despite the presence of LMBv, the density and reproduction rates of largemouth bass remain excellent and we are confident that the fishery will recover in a few years. Spring sampling has already shown an increase in numbers of bigger bass and tournament catch has improved as well. The regulation for largemouth bass is a modified 14 inch-minimum length limit and a five fish per day bag limit. Two of the five bass allowed for harvest can be less than 14 inches.

Crappie

In addition to an excellent largemouth bass fishery, Buggs Island has one of the best crappie fisheries in the southeast. Crappie are the second most sought after species at Buggs Island Lake making up about 20% of the total fishing effort. Crappie make up 74% of the total fish harvested at Buggs Island with an average size harvested of 10 inches (about $\frac{3}{4}$ pounds). However, 1-2 pound fish are common. Crappie catch rates are extremely high (almost two caught per hour) and are consistent throughout the year. However, most crappie are caught during the spring as the fish move shallow to spawn. Crappie fishing tends to be better in the creeks as opposed to the main channel. Some of the better creeks are Buffalo, Grassy, Butcher, Bluestone, Eastland, and Panhandle. The VDGIF surveys crappie populations during the spring to monitor abundance, growth and survival and results have proved interesting. Overall, abundance and survival are good and while Buggs Island produces some of the largest crappie in the state, growth is not good for all fish. For instance, some crappie can reach 12 inches in three years but we have also collected some 14-year-old crappie that were less than 10 inches! This large range in growth rates means that minimum length limits, which have gained popularity for crappie in other states, are not practical at Buggs Island. A 10-inch minimum length limit at Buggs Island would in essence protect only the slow-growing fish. There is no length or bag limit on crappie at Buggs Island.

Catfish

Buggs Island is home to blue catfish, channel catfish, flathead catfish, and white catfish with the blue catfish gaining the most attention from anglers. Based on VDGIF gill net surveys, blue catfish are the most abundant of the four species and also grow the largest. In fact, Buggs Island is home to the largest blue catfish ever caught. In June 2011, a 143 pound blue catfish was caught, crushing the previous record of 130 pounds! The blue catfish fishery gains popularity each year and attracts anglers and tournaments from all over the country. As of the last creel survey, blue catfish was nearly tied with crappie as the second most sought after species at Buggs behind only largemouth bass. Anglers can catch blue catfish year-round while summer is best for flatheads and channels. Catfish fishing tends to be better from late afternoon to late morning. The best areas for catfish tend to be from Goat Island to the confluence of the Dan and Staunton Rivers. Live and cut bait tends to work best for blue cats. A study by Virginia Tech will provide DGIF with information on growth rates, survival and angler practices at Buggs Island to better determine population characteristics of a very important fishery.

Striped Bass

Buggs Island is one of only a few lakes in the country where striped bass reproduce naturally. Each spring, adult fish migrate up the Staunton and Dan Rivers where they provide a popular fishery. During the summer, striped bass congregate in the lower end of the lake where they can find the only cool, oxygenated water available at that time. Fall and winter find striped bass spread throughout the reservoir as fish begin feeding actively. Striped bass feed on abundant supplies of gizzard shad, threadfin shad, alewife

and blueback herring. Fisheries biologists monitor the striped bass population with gill nets set in the fall to get important information on abundance, size distribution, reproductive success, growth and survival. Striped bass reach 20 inches in about 2.5 years but growth of older fish is slower than Smith Mountain Lake stripers. At Buggs Island, striped bass typically range between 6 and 12 pounds (24 – 32 inches). Striped bass growth rates have slowed in recent years due mostly to a parasitic copepod (“gill maggot”) infestation and reduced productivity of the Buggs Island system. Stocking rate and length limit changes are being actively pursued to try to improve growth rates and thus angler satisfaction. A split regulation season was implemented in 2006 to try to ameliorate the impacts of summertime mortality associated with fishing stress. From June to September there is no length limit and a four fish creel limit. Anglers are encouraged to quit fishing after catching those four stripers. In the cool season, October to May, there is proposed to be a 24” length limit and 2 fish creel to protect some stripers to grow to a larger size. Survival rates are much higher in the cool season than during the summer.

Other Species

White perch were first documented by fisheries biologists in 1988 and since that time, the white perch population has exploded and they are now one of the most abundant species in the lake. White perch rarely exceed 10 inches, which likely limits their popularity with anglers.

Walleye are present as well, although they are not very abundant. Gill net samples conducted by fisheries biologists in the fall routinely pick up walleye (2-6 pounds) in the South Bend area near Goat Island.

Summary

Anglers spend about 900,000 hours fishing at Buggs Island Lake each year. Anglers not only have a variety of high quality fisheries to choose from, but there are numerous campgrounds, access points and boat ramps for the lake. Buggs Island Lake and the surrounding recreation areas receive about 4 million visitors each year. There is a reciprocal fishing license agreement between the VDGIF and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission meaning that either state fishing license is legal. For a more complete list of fishing regulations, please obtain the current year Virginia Freshwater Fishing Regulations booklet.