



An Angler's Guide to the Lower New River



by

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The New River begins its journey north as two small streams on the western side of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Watauga County, near Boone, North Carolina. After passing out of North Carolina, through Virginia, and into West Virginia, the New River joins the Gauley River near Fayetteville, West Virginia, forming the Kanawha River, which flows into the Ohio River at Point Pleasant, West Virginia. All the water in the huge New River watershed eventually flows down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico.

From the confluence of the North and South Forks of the New River near Mouth of Wilson, Virginia, the river meanders northward through Virginia for about 160 miles before reaching the West Virginia state line near Glen Lyn, Virginia. This river offers a variety of fishing opportunities, trophy fishing potential, and a variety of scenery in those miles. Whether you are a dedicated angler or an occasional one who appreciates getting away on a river, the New River offers the potential to satisfy your recreational needs. The 62.5 miles of river downstream from Claytor Lake (the Lower New River) offers some of the best river fishing in Virginia.

The New River hosts a variety of fish species that are favorites of many float anglers. Smallmouth, spotted, and largemouth bass, rock bass, redbreast sunfish, and bluegill were all introduced many years ago to the New River to provide fishing

opportunities. All these fish species spawn in the river each year. Muskellunge are a more recent introduction. Channel and flathead catfish are both native to the New River.

Boat Access and Float Information

A basic New River float guide is available on our Department website at: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/waterbodies/display.asp?id=163§ion=maps>. *The New River Guide* by Bruce Ingram, a more thorough float and fishing guidebook, is available from local bookstores.

Smallmouth Bass

Smallmouth bass are the most abundant bass species in the New River. During a 2010 New River angler survey, 88 percent of the anglers downstream from Claytor Lake fished for smallmouth bass and smallmouth bass were the top species of fish caught. The New River is one of the top Virginia rivers for smallmouth bass. The current state record smallmouth bass (8 pounds, 1 ounce), caught by Donald Eaton in March 2003, came from the New River downstream from Claytor Lake.



Donald Eaton and fisheries biologist John Copeland with the state record 8 pound, 1 ounce smallmouth bass Mr. Eaton caught from the New River in March 2003.

The top months to catch trophy smallmouth bass from the New River are July through September, but a good number of trophy “smallies” are also caught in April, May, and June. The majority of trophy smallmouth bass turned in for Department of Game and Inland Fisheries angler recognition certificates are from the counties downstream from Claytor Lake. Anglers do well year-round for smallmouth bass with any bait that mimics crayfish, their preferred prey. Techniques that produce trophy smallmouth bass include fishing nightcrawlers, soft plastic baits, and top water lures in the summer months. Buzz baits worked around downed trees or weedbeds (particularly water willows) often produce strikes from lunker smallmouth bass. The best areas to fish

for smallmouth bass are the Whitethorne to Eggleston section of Montgomery and Giles counties and the Pembroke to Pearisburg section of Giles County. During winter, look for big smallies in deeper water areas. All sections of the river have difficult rapids to navigate, so a little research ahead of time is necessary to ensure your safety on the river.

Department fisheries biologists began smallmouth bass studies in the New River downstream from Claytor Lake in 1996. In 2006, fisheries biologist John Copeland wrote a case history of smallmouth bass management. This scientific journal article goes into more detail about the history of smallmouth bass management in this premier Virginia river (available at <http://www.seafwa.org/resource/dynamic/private/PDF/Copeland-180-187.pdf>). Based on data collected since 1996, smallmouth bass spawning success is controlled more by July river flows than any other factor. During years with average flows in July, young smallmouth bass survive better, resulting in good smallmouth bass fishing over a number of years. The best recent New River smallmouth bass spawns downstream from Claytor Lake were in 2007, 2010, 2011 and 2012 (Figure 1).

Young of Year Smallmouth Bass Catch Rates (less than 5 inches) Lower New River - Fall Electrofishing

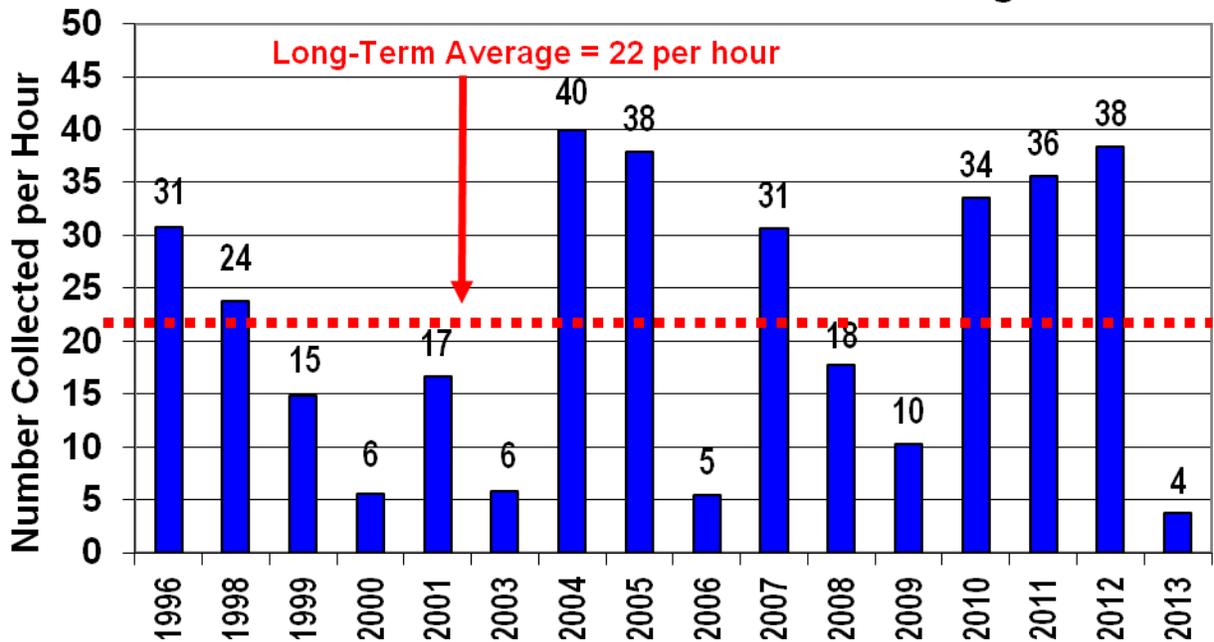


Figure 1: Electrofishing catch rates for young-of-year smallmouth bass in the Lower New River during fall collections from 1996 to 2013.

The large spawns during 2010, 2011, and 2012 were reflected in electrofishing samples in fall 2013, with 82% of the adult (over 7 inches long) smallmouth bass catch consisting of bass between 7 and 14 inches. The smallmouth bass spawned in 2007 will result in good numbers of 15 to 17 inch bass in angler catches this year. Trophy smallmouth bass fishing will be good in coming years, with smallmouth bass from the 2004 and 2005 spawns reaching 20 inches.

Catch rates for adult smallmouth bass peaked in recent years due to a greater number of adult smallmouth bass in the river from the excellent spawns in recent years (Figure 2). Adult smallmouth bass catch rates are currently above the long-term average.

From Claytor Dam to the West Virginia state line, all three bass species are protected by a 14 to 20 inch slot limit. The daily creel limit is 5 bass, with only one allowed over 20 inches. This limit, which allows harvest of bass up to 14 inches, restricts taking bass between 14 and 20 inches. Department fisheries biologists enacted this size limit in January 2003 to improve smallmouth bass size ranges in the river.

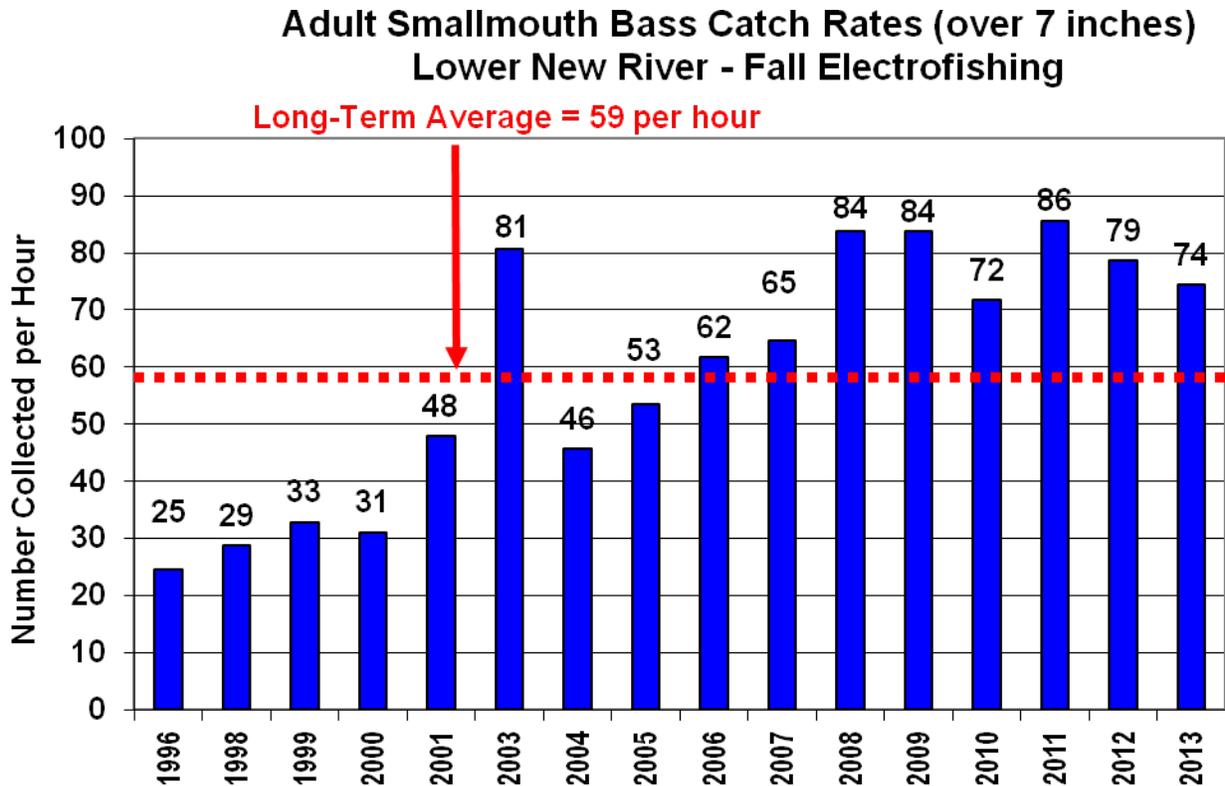


Figure 2: Electrofishing catch rates for adult smallmouth bass in the Lower New River during fall collections from 1996 to 2013.

Growth of smallmouth bass in the New River below Claytor Lake is average when compared to other rivers in Virginia. Smallmouth bass in the New River reach 11 inches in 4.5 years, 14 inches in 6.5 years, and 17 inches in 8.5 years. It takes an average of 10 years for them to reach 20 inches. The maximum age for smallmouth bass in the New River is 15 years, when they will likely be 24 to 25 inches long.

Panfish

New River panfish include redbreast sunfish, bluegill, and rock bass. Rock bass are found in the highest numbers, followed by redbreast sunfish, and then bluegill. Rock bass were the second most caught and the most harvested species during the 2010 New River angler survey. In that survey, rock bass accounted for 26 percent of the total fish catch and 53 percent of the total harvest downstream from Claytor Lake. Rock bass and

redbreast sunfish catches should be good during 2014. Panfish sizes vary between areas of the river. Good locations for nice-sized rock bass include Claytor Dam and Whitethorne in Montgomery County and Pembroke in Giles County. Many of the major tributaries of the New River provide an opportunity to catch numerous sunfish in solitude. Check out Big Walker and Wolf Creeks in Giles County and the Little River in Floyd and Montgomery Counties. Since these streams are on private land, ask streamside landowners for permission to fish them.



Tyler Young displays a typical New River muskie from Giles County.

Muskellunge (Muskie)

The New River downstream of Claytor Lake has always supported an abundant population of muskie, and that fact led to a VDGIF/Virginia Tech muskie research project that began in 1999 and continued for four years. One part of the project was to pump the stomachs of live muskie to determine their food preferences. Minnows, rock bass, sunfish, and suckers were the most common food items found in muskie stomachs. Few smallmouth bass were found in muskie stomach samples. Based on results of the research, in 2006 the legal harvest length of muskie was raised from thirty inches to forty-two inches, and the daily creel limit was decreased from two per day to just one. The state record muskie, a giant 45.5 pound fish, was caught from the New River in June 2007.

Annual electrofishing surveys have been conducted each winter to further our knowledge of the muskie population. This work has shown an increase in abundance of all sizes of muskie in the New River, and with that has come an increased interest in muskie fishing. Guided fly fishing trips for muskie have become very popular and an increase in muskie fishing pressure has been documented in agency angler surveys.

Many anglers still think that muskies are eating many of the smallmouth bass in the river and they believe muskie predation has led to a decrease in smallmouth bass abundance. To determine if muskie feeding habits have changed, we again pumped muskie stomachs in 2013 and out of approximately 100 muskie stomachs that contained food items, only two smallmouth and two largemouth bass were collected. Not

surprisingly, minnows, rock bass, sunfish, and suckers were again the preferred food of muskies. We have now begun a second cooperative muskie research project with VT and muskie stomachs will be pumped for an additional two years. Muskie growth and other population information will also be collected to help us better manage the river.

Muskie stockings have been put on hold in the lower river because of the increase in the population that has been seen by biologists, and also because we have seen a significant increase in muskie natural reproduction. Muskies have not been stocked since 2011 between Claytor Lake and West Virginia. In fact, since 2007 only 981 muskies have been stocked below Claytor Lake, 511 in 2009 and 470 in 2011.

Now is a great time for you to choose to start fishing for muskies. They are a very opportunistic and aggressive predator. A variety of lures, both big and small, can be successfully used by anglers. In-line spinners, glide baits, jerk baits, and topwater baits are all effective, and don't forget about the new fly fishing craze. Catch a muskie on a topwater lure and you could become hooked for life. Questions or concerns should be addressed to Joe Williams at joe.williams@dgif.virginia.gov.



Flathead catfish are a large native predatory fish found in the New River.

Catfish

While all sections of the New River have native populations of flathead and channel catfish, recent electrofishing population estimates at Whitethorne, Eggleston, and Rich Creek suggest anglers will find more catfish in Giles than in Montgomery County. In Montgomery County, look for catfish below Claytor Dam, the mouth of the Little River (near the Claytor Dam boat ramp), and below Pepper's Ferry Bridge (Route 114). In Giles County, the Eggleston and Pearisburg to Wylie Falls sections of the river are all good catfish areas. Most of the catfish harvested downstream from Claytor Lake are from the Giles County section of the river, but catfish catches are lower in the river downstream from Claytor Lake than they are upstream from Claytor Lake. Flathead catfish population estimates downstream from Claytor Lake are 50 percent of the estimates upstream from Claytor Lake. Temperature studies below Claytor Dam indicate these population differences may be due to coolwater discharge from the dam, which limits catfish populations until the river reaches normal temperatures in Giles County.

Fish Consumption Advisory in Montgomery, Giles, and Pulaski Counties and Radford City

The New River from Claytor Dam downstream to the West Virginia state line has a consumption advisory on carp, channel catfish, and flathead catfish. The Virginia Department of Health recommends anglers limit themselves to no more than 2 meals per month of channel catfish and flathead catfish and that no carp be eaten from this section of river. PCBs are a group of man-made industrial chemicals that exist as a mixture and may contain up to 209 individual compounds. Prior to 1977, PCBs were widely used as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors and other electrical equipment. Long-term consumption of fish contaminated with high levels of PCBs may increase the risk of cancer. The Virginia Department of Health recommends the following preparation precautions to reduce any potential harmful effects from PCBs:

- Eat the smaller, younger fish (within the legal limits). They are less likely to contain harmful levels of PCBs than larger, older fish.
- Remove the skin, fat (from the belly and top of the fish) and internal organs where PCBs are most likely to accumulate before cooking the fish.
- Bake, broil or grill on an open rack to allow fats to drain away from the meat.
- Discard the fats that cook out of the fish.
- Avoid or reduce the amount of fish drippings or broth that are used to flavor the meal.
- Eat less deep fried fish, since frying seals PCBs into the fatty tissue.

More information on this fish consumption advisory is available at: <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/Epidemiology/dee/PublicHealthToxicology/Advisories/NewRiver.htm> .