



Middle James River 2012



The Middle James River (61.5-mile section of river from Scottsville down to Watkins Landing) has historically been known for its great canoeing and fishing recreation. Ample amounts of public access throughout this stretch of river provides great opportunities for anglers to journey after numerous fish species including smallmouth bass, redbreast sunfish, and channel catfish. Additionally, this section of river has historically been one of the better trophy smallmouth bass locations in the state. Unfortunately, severe weather events over the past two decades have lead to extremely variable reproductive success of smallmouth bass and a reduction in the number of trophy smallmouth bass. In October 2011, the fish community within the Middle James River was sampled at six locations between Columbia and Watkins Landings. This report summarizes the findings from the 2011 survey and informs anglers on what they can expect to catch from this section of the James River.

This Middle James River contains an excellent diversity of fish species with 23 different species collected in 2011 (Table 1). After American eel, smallmouth bass was the most abundant species collected (Table 1). The electrofishing catch rate for smallmouth bass was lower than in previous years and lower than the historical average for this section of river. The reduction in catch rate was mainly due to a decrease in the catch of young-of-the-year smallmouth bass. Low water levels during the spring and summer months of 2011, due to drought conditions, considerably hampered smallmouth bass reproduction and/or baby bass survival. Catch rates for adult smallmouth bass were lower than the historical average, mainly due to previous years of low recruitment (Figure 1). The adult population is dominated by smaller fish (Figure 2), especially bass in the 8-11 inch range. The abundance of these smaller fish indicate that baby bass spawned in 2010 experience great survival and that these fish combined with the 14-22 inch protective slot limit should help sustain the limited adult population for many years. Catch rates for bass in the greater than 11 inches was low indicating a limited adult population. Smallmouth bass up to 20 inches were collected, but the average angler will have to fish hard to catch one of these trophy fish. The largest smallmouth bass collected measured 20 inches and weighted approximately 4.5 lbs.

Smallmouth bass were present at all sampling sites, so anglers can expect to catch them throughout the Middle James River. Anglers preparing to journey after smallmouth bass should concentrate efforts on shallow to mid-depth riffles, areas near the bank with some type of structure, or deeper areas adjacent to aquatic vegetation. Any lures that mimics small minnows or crayfish should be a must for smallmouth bass anglers of the James River.

The sunfish catch rate was low for the Middle James River, with redbreast sunfish and bluegill comprising the bulk (88%) of sunfish collected. The majority of sunfish collected were relatively small (> 8 inches; Figure 2). Anglers targeting these species should concentrate their efforts around bank structure, and water adjacent to aquatic vegetation. Small twister tailed grubs, live crickets, and worms are outstanding baits for any of the panfish species.

Catfish populations were exceptionally good throughout the Middle James River. After eels, smallmouth bass and sunfish, channel catfish were the most abundant species collected (Table 1). Most of the channel catfish collected were of harvestable size (12-20 inch) with some

larger channel catfish collected up to 25 inches (Figure 3). Flathead catfish were not nearly as abundant as channels, but when collected were generally larger fish (20-30 inches). Catfish anglers should concentrate on areas with deep water (6-10 ft) and structure (large boulders or woody debris). The deep water just above the Cartersville Boat Launch was a good location to search for flatheads while any deep water throughout the Middle James appeared to hold channel catfish. Anglers should try using live bait for flathead and cut or stink-bait for channel catfish.

The only other species of fish from these samples that is worth mentioning to anglers is largemouth bass. Largemouth bass were fairly uncommon throughout the Middle James River, and when collected largemouth bass were generally small (<12 inches). Although they were rare, a few big largemouth (>16 inches) were collected. Big largemouth bass were collected more frequently around the bridge abutments at Cartersville and Maidens Landings and in areas with a lot of bank structure surrounded by slow moving water.

The Middle James can provide a rewarding trip for any angler because of its scenic views and abundance of fishing opportunities. Numerous float trips possibilities are available to anglers (<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/waterbodies/display.asp?id=158§ion=maps>), but be aware that these are generally all day trips. Recreationist also should be aware of low water conditions present during the late summer months (generally Aug-Sept) and the large amount of aquatic vegetation (primarily hydrilla) that grows during these low water conditions. Even with the low water period, fishing can still be rewarding if anglers are willing to put in the time to fish.

For more information on the James River, please contact:

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Table 1. Species account and catch rates for fish collected throughout the Middle James River (Columbia downstream to Watkins), October 2011.

Species	Number Collected	Relative Abundance (fish/hour electrofishing)	Percentage of Total Catch
American Eel	459	75.8	35.8
Black Crappie	6	1.0	0.5
Black Jumprock	6.0	1.0	0.5
Blue Catfish	2	0.3	0.2
Bluegill	97	16.0	7.6
Bull Chub	60	9.9	4.7
Channel Catfish	107	17.7	8.4
Common Carp	16	2.6	1.2
Flathead Catfish	33	5.5	2.6
Gizzard Shad	10	1.7	0.8
Goldfish	1	0.2	0.1
Green Sunfish	1	0.2	0.1
Largemouth Bass	23	3.8	1.8
Longnose Gar	42	6.9	3.3
Northern Hog Sucker	23	3.8	1.8
Quillback	12	2.0	0.9
Redbreast Sunfish	107	17.7	8.4
Redear Sunfish	17	2.8	1.3
Rock Bass	9	1.5	0.7
Shield Darter	2	0.3	0.2
Shorthead Redhorse	70	11.6	5.5
Smallmouth Bass	177	29.3	13.8
White Sucker	1	0.2	0.1

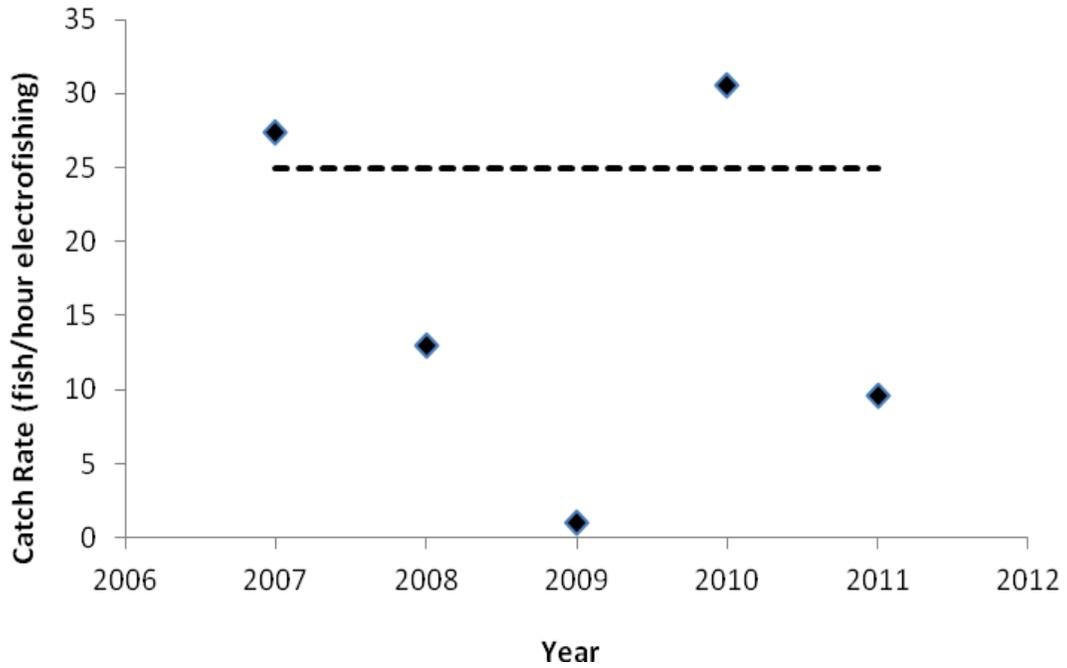


Figure 1. Young-of-the-year smallmouth bass catch rate versus year of collection. Dashed line indicates value of average catch rates for yoy smallmouth bass in the middle James River.

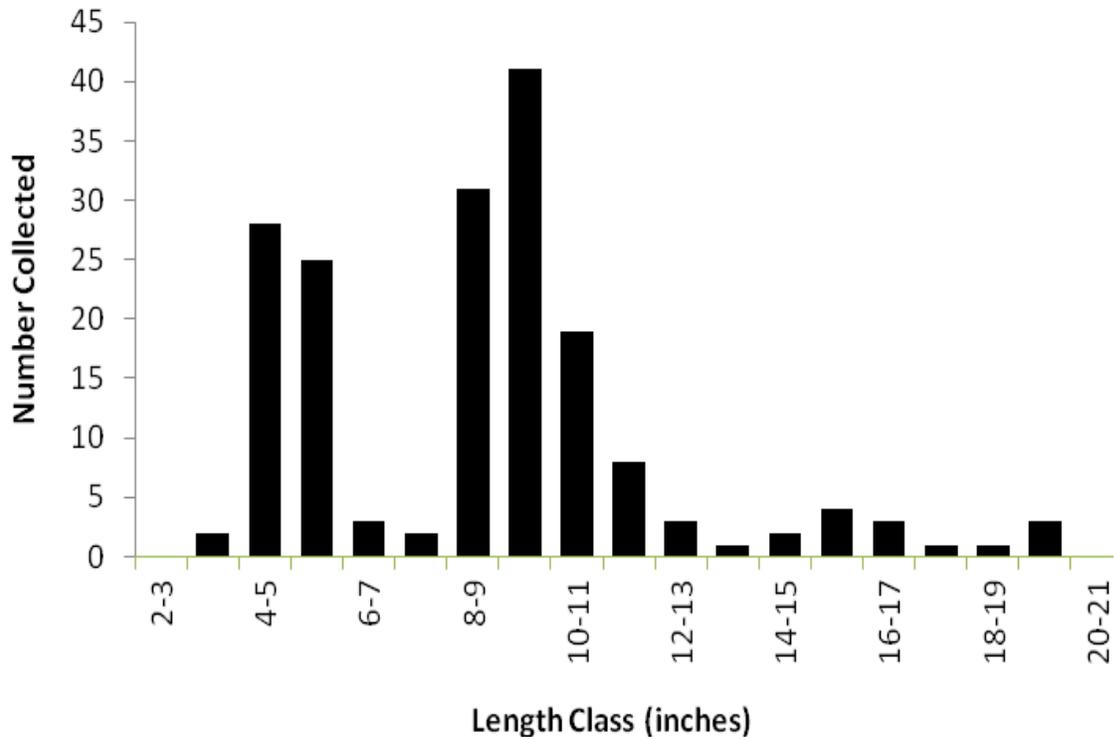


Figure 1. Length distribution of smallmouth bass collected throughout the Middle James River, October, 2008.

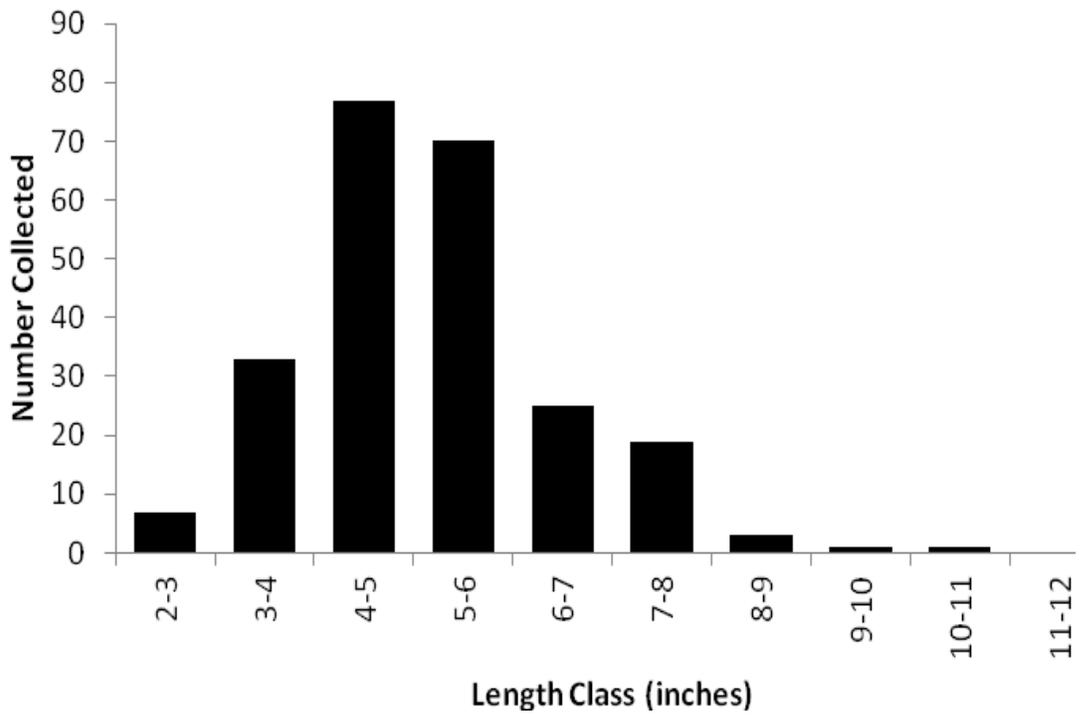


Figure 2. Length distribution of sunfish collected throughout the Middle James River, October, 2011. Sunfish species include bluegill, redbreast, redear, and rock bass.

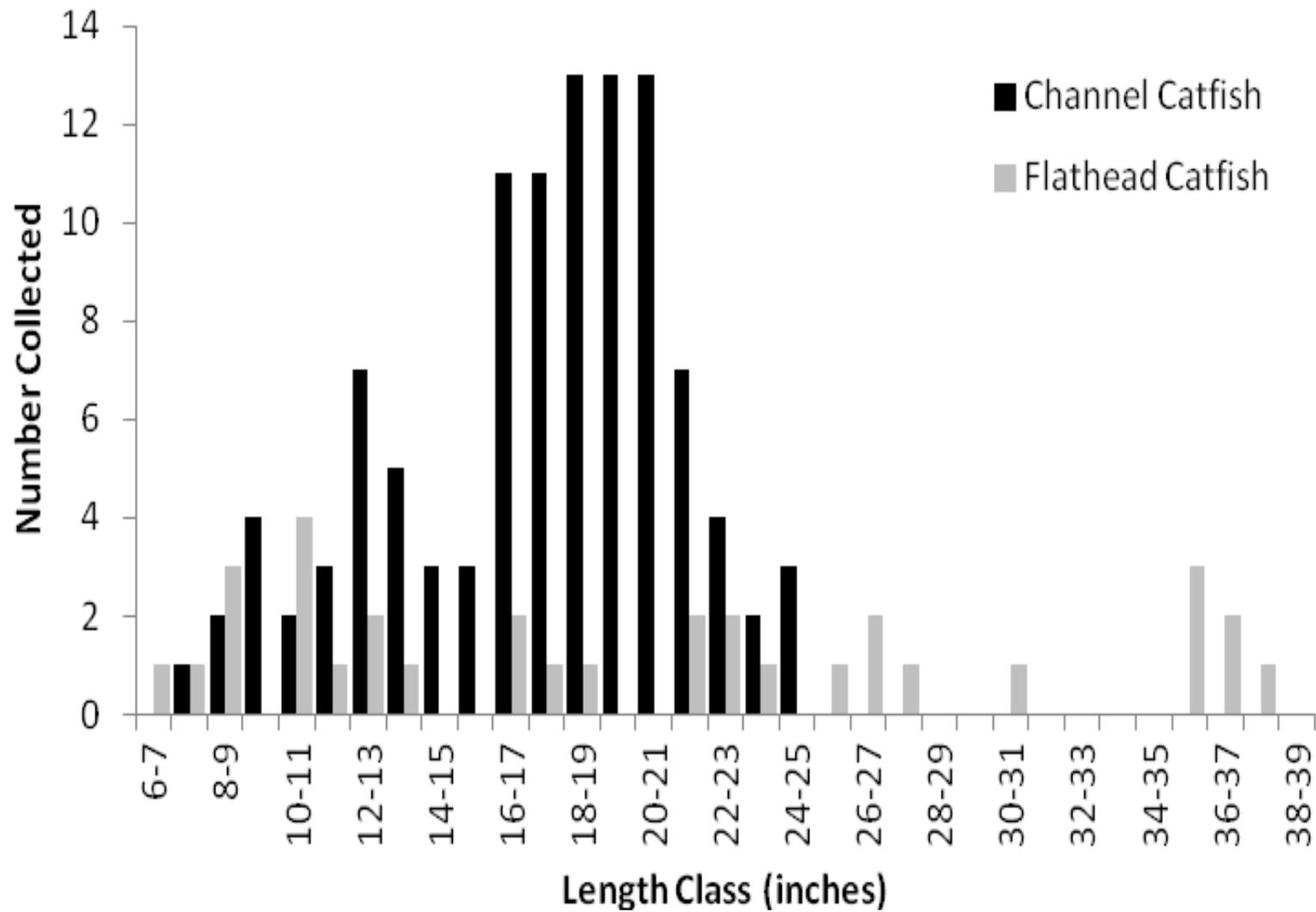


Figure 3. Length distribution of catfish species collected throughout the Middle James River, October, 2011.