



2017/18 TIDAL BLUE CATFISH OUTLOOK



The tidal rivers in Virginia provide excellent opportunities for anglers interested in catching Blue Catfish. 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. Much has happened over the last several years in terms of catfish sampling. Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) sampling dates back to the 1990's and is the primary long-term dataset used for assessing Blue Catfish populations in Virginia.

River Rankings (based on EF surveys):

#1 James River

#2 Pamunkey River / Mattaponi River

#3 Rappahannock River



An 88 lb. Blue Catfish was collected in the Mattaponi River by VDGIF staff (left; credit: A. Bunch). The James River record was caught by Stephen Miklandric weighing in at 102 lbs, 10 oz. (top right; Photo credit: S. Miklandric). A Blue Catfish was tagged and released as part of a movement study on the Rappahannock River (bottom right; credit: G. Reger)

Background

Virginia's tidal rivers offer excellent opportunities to catch Blue Catfish, but the James River in particular has been recognized nationally for more than a decade as a premier trophy fishery. Anglers from around the country and Commonwealth have been traveling to central Virginia for guided James River fishing trips. A new James River record was caught in December 2014 (see picture above)

To find them, look for deep holes, fallen trees, and drop-offs, especially along the outer bends in the river. Creek mouths are also a good option. If you can find gizzard shad, eel, or various types of cut bait to rig near the bottom, you have a good chance of catching Blue Catfish. They are considered opportunistic omnivores which means they have a diverse diet and feed on what's abundant at the time.

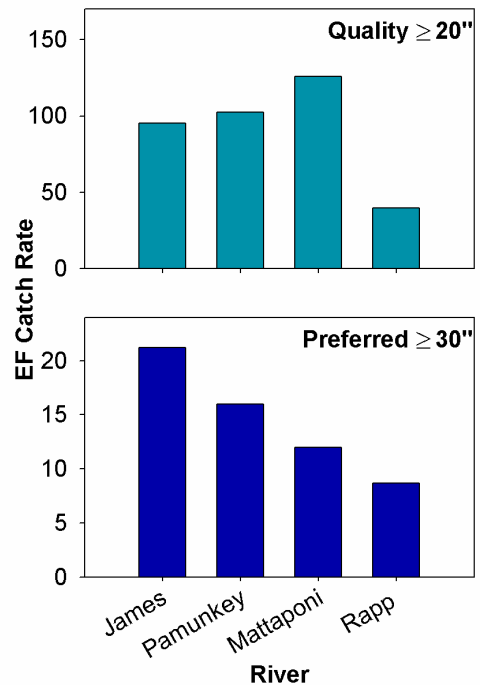
Blue Catfish are native to several Mid-west U.S. river drainages (Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio rivers) and range geograph-

ically into South America. Not native to Virginia, Blue Catfish are a large fork-tailed catfish species. They were first introduced to tidal waters of Virginia in the early 1970's with stockings in the tidal James and Rappahannock rivers. In 1985, they were released in the Mattaponi River, and eventually populated the Pamunkey River.

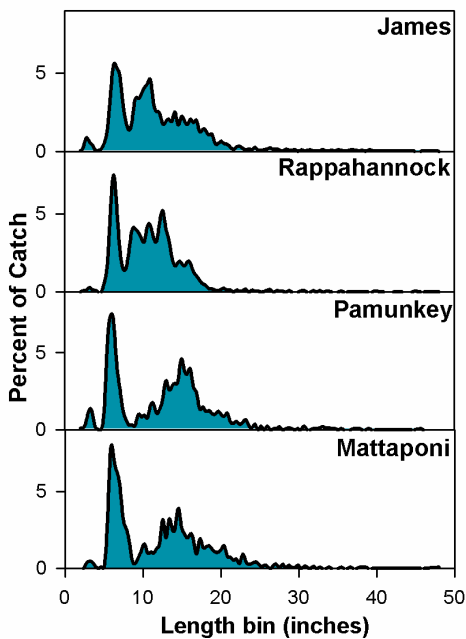
They can survive in relatively high salinities up to 15 ppt, about half the salinity of sea-water. This has allowed populations to spread into other tributaries throughout the Chesapeake Bay including the Piankatank River and the tidal Potomac River system. Populations are likely driven by productivity levels (nutrient availability) in tidal rivers.

Monitoring & Management

Because of the broad expansion and high numbers, there is uncertainty with regards to impacts on other important fisheries resources (e.g., Striped Bass, American Shad, River



The plots shown above give the average catch rates (catch per hour of electrofishing) of quality-size (≥ 20") and preferred-size (≥ 30") Blue Catfish from electrofishing (EF) surveys in 2016. Based on this information, James, Pamunkey, and Mattaponi rivers have highest catch rates of quality size fish, while larger preferred size fish occur in the James River.



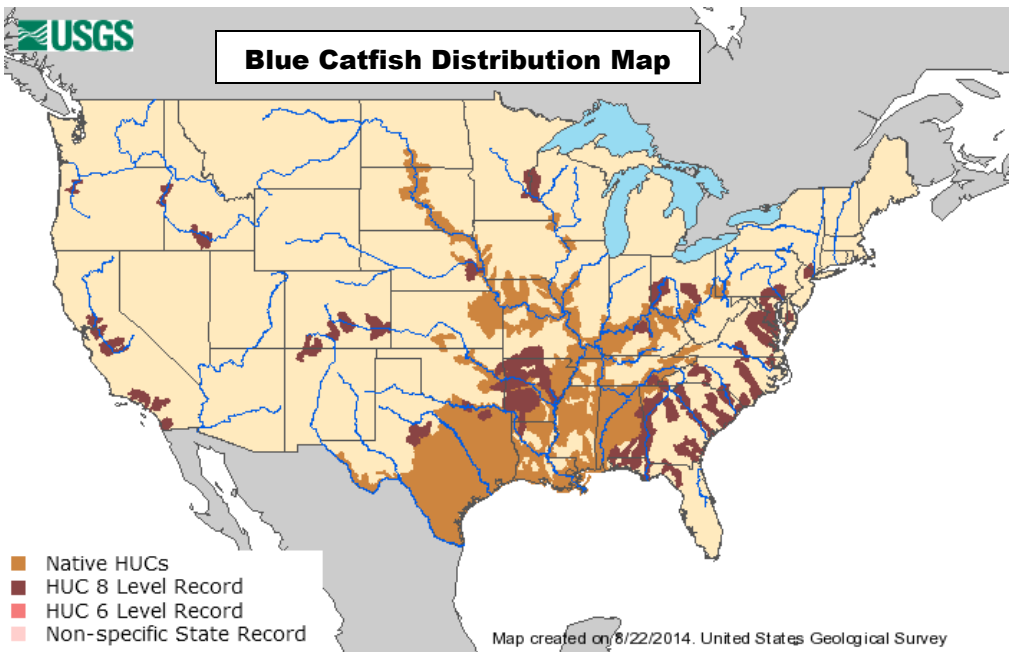
Length frequency expressed as the percent of catch during 2016 EF surveys for each river. The more peaks present indicate more age classes in the population. The more peaks in the larger size groups indicate larger fish in the population.

Herring, and Blue Crabs) causing major concerns among Chesapeake Bay stakeholders. For this reason, large-scale research studies are in place to understand potential impacts. For example, Virginia Tech researchers are exploring the diet of Blue Catfish. This is key to understanding impacts to other species. The Virginia Institute of Marine Science has conducted a large-scale study to estimate population size in the lower James River.

VDGIF sampling dates back to the 1990's and is the primary long-term dataset used for assessing Blue Catfish populations in Virginia. Boat electrofishing occurred in July-September 2016 to detect status and trends. Studies to estimate population size at several sites occurred in 2015.

Rankings

Even with these rankings, there's really no wrong answer. They are abundant in all tidal rivers, but the key is to know where to look. Focus on the habitats mentioned earlier, and you should have a good shot at catching fish. Base your destination on your fishing goals: are you out to fill the freezer, are you searching for that giant, or does distance to home matter?



Map of Blue Catfish distribution from the U.S. Geological Survey. Light brown shows native range of the species, while darker brown indicates an introduced non-native population. HUC = hydrologic unit code.

#1 James River & tributaries — This river provides the best catfishing in Virginia with unmatched numbers and high abundance of large fish. The James has the highest EF catch rates of preferred sized (≥ 30 ") Blue Catfish. High numbers of large fish can be found upstream of James Harrison Bridge. Be prepared for any size between 1-100 pounds.

#2 Pamunkey River & Mattaponi River — These systems form the York River, and are very similar in terms of size distribution and EF catch rates. If you want an opportunity to catch good eating size cats in the 3-5 pound range, look no further.

#3 Rappahannock River — The Rapp is characterized by high abundance of small fish. If you want numbers to fill the freezer, and aren't worried as much about trophy fishing, the Rapp provides a great opportunity in Northern Virginia.

Regulations & Advisories

Changes have been made to Blue Catfish regulations in tidal rivers. There is no daily limit on length or creel in tidal rivers below the fall line, except in the James River and its tributaries below the fall line, and the York River (including the Pamunkey and Mattaponi) below the fall line where the "32 inch" regulation still applies. The "32 inch" regula-

tion allows harvest of 1 fish over 32" per person per day, and this applies to recreational and commercial fishers no matter the method of harvest. Go to www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing for more information on fishing regulations, and licensing.

The VA Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) regulates commercial fisheries in these waters, but in the case of freshwater species, VDGIF regulation allows harvest of certain species from tidal rivers. Questions regarding commercial harvest should be directed to the VMRC (www.mrc.virginia.gov)

It is important to understand consumption advisories updated each year by the VA Dept. of Health. In the tidal James River and tributaries, the consumption advisory recommends that people "DO NOT EAT" Blue Catfish over 32", and no more than 2 meals per month of less than 32". Recommendations for other rivers and waterbodies in Virginia can be found at www.vdh.virginia.gov.

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

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