



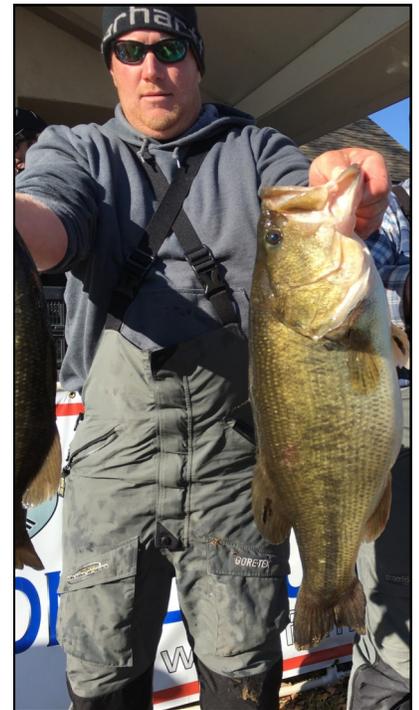
2017/18 TIDAL BASS OUTLOOK



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/Chickahominy River
- #2 Pamunkey River
- #3 Rappahannock River (above Rte. 301)
- #4 Rappahannock River (below Rte. 301)
- #5 Mattaponi River



Recent surveys and angler catches show **BIG** bass are in the Chickahominy River: a 10.2 lb and a couple of 7s caught during fall 2016 surveys (top left; credit: A. Bunch), an 11.35 lb was caught by Brad Webb earlier this year (right; credit: B. Webb), and the biggest bass ever collected by VDGIF on the Chickahominy River weighed in at 12.3 lbs in the early spring (bottom left; credit: A. Weaver).

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.

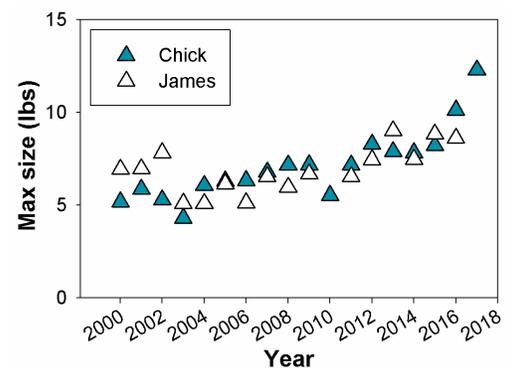
The near-term outlook is good, short of a major storm event. March and April fishing will be weather and water temperature dependent. When water temperatures are cool, anglers should focus on sunny days with an outgoing tide. Fish the bass actively feeding on the flats. As water temperatures warm, bass 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 advantage 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.

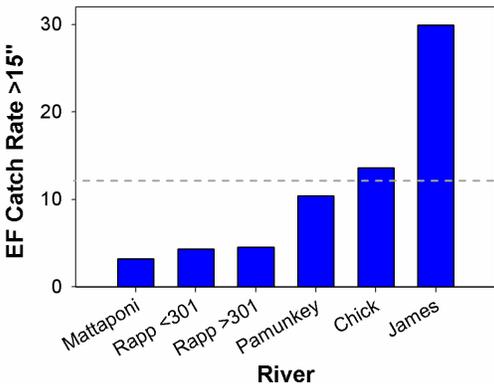
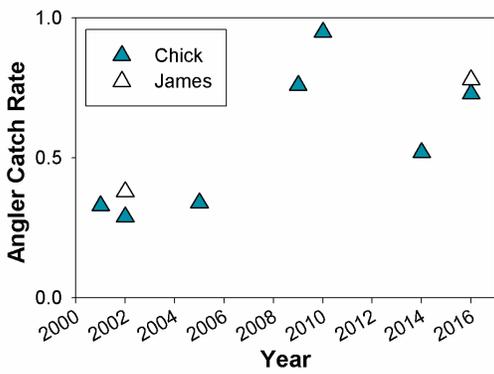
Displacement Debate

It's been debated for a while now—fish are presumably being caught in the Chickahominy, and then released into the James causing a population decline. This is known as “displacement”. After evaluating recent electrofishing and angler survey data, the numbers just don't add up...only 5% of the total Chickahominy population gets caught by those coming from the James. Given minimum tournament size requirements, culling for larger fish, and general catch-and-release

practices, 5% is an overestimate of displacement and still very low. Take a trip down memory lane—folks thought the opposite was true in the late 1990s with fish being pulled from the James and released in the Chickahominy. Anglers are experiencing well-above average catch rates, size structure in both populations are extremely robust, and both populations are outstanding right now.



The maximum size (in pounds) collected during VDGIF monitoring in the Chickahominy River has been slowly creeping up each year since 2000, and has more than doubled since that time. The James has shown increases in maximum weight as well since 2003.



Angler catch rates (# bass caught per hr of angling) for the James & Chickahominy. Both show a pattern of increased catch from 2002 to 2016. The blue bars indicate the catch rate of bass >15" during electrofishing (EF) surveys. The horizontal dashed line is the long-term average across all tidal rivers and years. Route 301 near Port Royal is the location where surveys are separated on the Rappahannock River.

The Chickahominy is a recruitment limited system meaning that there can be periods when the number of babies (i.e., recruits) born are not enough to support the population 3 to 4 years later. VDGIF has strived to offset recruitment failure by stocking over the past 3 years (2015-2017)!

Monitoring & Management

The James, Chickahominy, Rappahannock (above and below Rte. 301), Pamunkey, and Mattaponi rivers were sampled using boat electrofishing in September-October 2015 and/or 2016 to detect annual status and trends in bass populations. An angler (creel) survey was conducted on the tidal James River including the Chickahominy from August 2015 through July 2016. In 2015, the Chickahominy River was stocked with 40,000 F₁ intergrade fingerling Largemouth Bass, and in 2016 and 2017 it was stocked at the same levels as the mid-2000s (114,000 fish).

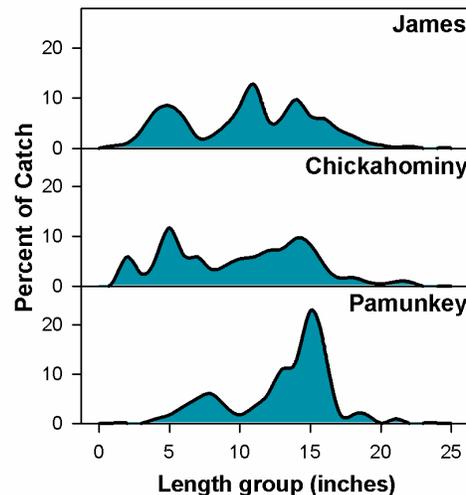
Rankings

#1 James River & Chickahominy River — There's just no place like it in Virginia right now. The James yields the highest bass catch rates (EF and angler), and the Chickahominy has been producing monsters; so either river is worthy of your time and both are tied at #1. Tournament anglers are finding themselves having to weigh-in 25 or more pound bags to get near the leader board. For both rivers, the percent of catch indicated good age class structure with an abundance 2 ½ pound bass, and fish to 3 ½ pounds not uncommon. Bass 5-8 pounds are becoming more common in the James, and Chickahominy. As pictured, the Chickahominy has been producing 10+ pound bass.

#2 Pamunkey River — If you're looking for solid numbers of 1-2 pound bass, this is your place. Typical fish comes in at around 15".

#3 Rappahannock River (above Rte. 301) — This is a great option for anglers seeking tidal river bass action in Northern VA. Look for structure: pad lines, woody debris, and dock pilings.

#4 Rappahannock River (below Rte. 301) — Overall, bass numbers are low relative to other rivers. Low bass numbers triggered fingerling stockings of F₁ intergrade Largemouth Bass in 2013 (Concerned Bass Anglers of



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 James and Chickahominy rivers show a relatively balanced size distribution while the Pamunkey is comprised of mostly 15".

Virginia) and 2014-2015 (VDGIF). Stocked fingerlings exhibited high growth over summer and fall each year, however over-winter survival was extremely low. Lack of quality habitat and recruitment failure is likely driving bass populations here. Look for creeks with emergent and submersed aquatic vegetation, and fallen trees.

#5 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.

How old is my bass?

Aging is one of the tools fisheries managers use to understand the dynamics of a fishery. When looking at the ear bone (i.e., otolith) under a microscope growth rings can be aged similar to counting rings on a tree. Bass have high variability in length at a given age due to factors such as food availability. However, age and growth data from tidal river monitoring can give you a general idea of your fish's age:

Total Length (In.)	Expected Age (Yr)
0 - 10.8	< 1
10.9 - 13.6	1
13.7 - 15.3	2
15.4 - 16.4	3
16.5 - 17.0	4
> 17.0	≥ 5

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

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