

Fishing the Big River



Bluegill, channel catfish, largemouth bass are proven stocking combination that provides both food and sport-fishing. When stocked in this order and properly managed, these species provide great fishing and good eating.

Annual Prospects Report

The entirety of the main stem of the Big River is a Smallmouth Bass Special Management Area in which only 1 smallmouth bass 15 inches or greater may be possessed daily. This includes all water between the Council Bluff Lake Dam to the confluence with the Meramec River.

In 2023, the Big River should provide quality fishing opportunities for black bass, rock bass, and channel catfish.

Washington County (upstream of the Hwy 8 bridge):

The Big River is only accessible for wade fishing or floating, but provides good bass fishing. Rock bass catch was the highest within this reach and most fish were legal-sized of 7 inches or larger. Anglers can also expect to catch quality-sized smallmouth and largemouth bass.

St. Francois County (Hwy 8 to Hwy 21):

Smallmouth bass catch was slightly higher than that of largemouth or spotted bass. Fish larger than 12 inches exist in good numbers with many 15 inches or longer. Fish to 20 inches have been collected in the past few years. Anglers should fish areas with a combination of quality cover (rocks/rootwads/downed trees), moderate current and sufficient depth.

Largemouth bass fishing should continue good as catch of this species was similar to that of the other two bass species. Largemouth collected averaged 11-17 inches although larger fish have been reported by anglers. Target pools and backwater areas with downed trees to catch this species.

Spotted (Kentucky) bass Fishing for spotted bass should be very good. They were collected in similar numbers as smallmouth and largemouth bass. Many of the fish collected were between 11 and 14 inches. They are abundant in slower moving water with rock/log cover. Anglers are urged to harvest all spotted bass caught, any size, up to the daily limit of 12. This species has not been captured in surveys upstream of the Leadwood Access.

Rock bass (goggle-eye) Rock bass fishing should be similar as in past years. Fish over 7 inches exist in average numbers with most fish captured 7 inches or longer. Target rock bass near aquatic vegetation and boulders, with jigs, soft plastics or minnows

Washington/Jefferson County (Downstream of Hwy 21):

Smallmouth bass fishing has been good in prior years and this is likely to continue. Fish larger than 12 inches exist in good numbers, with the majority being legal-sized of at least 15 inches. We have consistently seen smallmouth bass over 20 inches and fish up to 5 pounds. Anglers should fish areas with a combination of quality cover (rocks/rootwads/downed trees), moderate current and sufficient depth.

Largemouth bass fishing should continue to be only fair. Catch of this species was lower than the other two black basses. Despite low catch, the majority of largemouth seen were larger than 12 inches and some fish over 19 inches were captured. Target pools and backwater areas with downed trees to catch this species.

Spotted (Kentucky) bass fishing should be very good, especially in the lower river. They are abundant in slower moving water with rock/log cover. Anglers are urged to harvest all spotted bass caught, any size, up to the daily limit of 12. This species has not been captured in surveys upstream of the Leadwood Access.

Rock bass (goggle-eye) should provide good spring fishing once again. Fish over 7 inches exist in good numbers and at least half of the rock bass captured in the last survey were at least this size with some over 9 inches. To catch rock bass, fish the structure, aquatic vegetation and boulders, with jigs and minnows.

Channel catfish numbers in the last survey were even better than what was seen in the past, which were some of the strongest seen in recent years. Many fish were 16-20 inches and several were over 28 inches. Fish for channel catfish in moderately moving water near wood.

Flathead catfish over 25 inches were seen in the last survey, but catch continued to be low. Try for this species near large rootwads and downed trees using live bait.

A fish consumption advisory exists in St. Francois and Jefferson counties for all sunfish, rock bass, carp, redbreast and other suckers.