



Mark Jones

A GREAT DAY ON THE WATER

An Angler's Guide to Upper Potomac Game Fishing

by John Mullican

The Potomac River begins humbly from a small spring at Fairfax Stone, W. Va., winds through the mountains and valleys of Appalachia, passes by the sites of some of the nation's bloodiest historic battlefields, flows through the nation's capital where it provides a backdrop to the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial, and empties after 383 miles into the Chesapeake Bay at Point Lookout.

It's often called the Nation's River because of its connection to Washington, D.C.

But for untold numbers of sports enthusiasts in Maryland and neighboring states who ply the waters of the Upper Potomac, this beautiful blueway might also be called the Angler's River.

The Upper Potomac begins at the confluence of the North and South Branches and stretches to the tide line near Little Falls. Its watershed includes four states and forms Maryland's southern boundary with Virginia and West Virginia.

A 2004 survey listed the Upper Potomac as one of the region's most popular fishing destinations among freshwater anglers. It's easy to see why. During its 165-mile journey to tidewater, the Upper Potomac offers outstanding year-round fishing opportunities for several popular game fish and is easily accessible to nearly everyone in Maryland's western counties as well as the neighboring states.

Add beautiful scenery and abundant wildlife and you have a great day on the water.

Smallmouth Bass

Undoubtedly, the smallmouth bass is the river's most sought after sport fish. The tenacity and aerial acrobatics of even a small bass can't help but bring a smile to an angler's face.

Interestingly, the fish is not native to the Potomac. As the story goes, a worker with the B&O Railroad carried 20 smallmouths from the Ohio River in Wheeling, W. Va. in the tender of a locomotive and released them near Cumberland around 1853. From this modest introduction, smallmouth became established throughout the watershed and anglers couldn't be more grateful.

Smallmouth bass are abundant throughout the Upper Potomac. Most bass will run between 10 and 13 inches, though it's not



ABOVE: *Boonsboro angler Steve Peperak admires a trophy muskie before releasing it.*
BELOW: *Walleyes provide Potomac River anglers with steady winter action.*



uncommon to catch fish up to 20 inches. Size varies with location, with downstream stretches being best for larger fish.

Summer finds many bass in the vicinity of strong current and riffles, where they position themselves in pockets behind boulders. Wet wading is also a great tactic for getting to these fish. No waders needed, just an old pair of shorts and sneakers will suffice. What a great way to wash off the tension of the day and catch a bunch of fish, too.

While smallmouth are most active in water temperatures above 50°F, spring and

fall are the most productive times to pursue a trophy-sized bass. Water levels are usually higher then and as water temperatures cool, bass will seek refuge in the slower current areas behind islands, points, and gravel bars. Slowly working a jig or tube on the bottom will be most productive. Strikes here are subtle, felt only as a slight tap as the bass inhales the bait.

Walleye

Compared to smallmouth bass, the walleye is a relative newcomer to the Upper Potomac. A walleye stocking program was initiated in 1979 between Dams 4 and 5 in Washington County and continued for about two decades. Good quantities of walleyes can be found throughout the river, with the strongest populations occurring between Dam 5 and Point of Rocks.

Potomac River walleye grow very quickly. Females grow faster and are bigger than males, up to 29 inches long. The largest male recorded was about 26 inches.

Walleye are considered a cool-water species and remain active even in winter's icy waters. The earliest of the Potomac's game fish to spawn, walleye begin to move upstream during the winter just before they spawn in rubble-bottomed riffles around the beginning of April.



Steve Peperak

ABOVE: *Mullican caught and released this early spring muskie from the upper Potomac.*

BELOW: *The author's son, Nicholas, with one of several walleyes he caught during a summer evening.*



John Mullican

It is during this winter and early-spring run that walleyes are most popular with anglers, because the fish feed aggressively before spawning. As long as ice and high flows don't inhibit access and safety, hardy anglers can catch walleyes from December through March.

In general, one-eighth or quarter-ounce jigheads with various plastic bodies will be most productive in water temperatures below 40°F. As temperatures warm, crankbaits also can be very effective.

Walleye fishing also can be good through the summer when they're found many miles from their spawning areas. Look for ledges and pools with deeper water and current. Crankbaits are great lures for finding fish because more water can be covered relatively quickly. Activity

can be sporadic during the warmer months, usually around dawn and dusk.

Muskellunge and Tiger Muskie

Maryland's Inland Fisheries Division began stocking tiger muskie into the Upper Potomac River in 1989 to provide anglers with an opportunity to catch a trophy sport fish. Tiger muskie is the sterile hybrid produced by crossing muskellunge with northern pike in the hatchery. Because the hybrid will accept artificial food, they grow faster and are much easier to raise in the hatchery than pure-strain muskellunge.

Anglers wishing to try for tiger muskie should look to the North Branch Potomac River between Cumberland and the confluence with the South Branch. Tiger muskie exceeding 40 inches are still taken each year from this stretch.

Many anglers may not be aware that Maryland's only population of pure-strain muskellunge also swims the waters of the Upper Potomac. Muskellunge are not believed to be native to the Potomac watershed, though isolated reports of muskie catches in Allegheny and Washington counties go back many years.

The population has been slowly expanding, entirely through natural reproduction, and now extends from the confluence of the South

Branch downstream to Whites Ferry. The majority of muskie caught in this stretch will be pure-strain muskellunge.

As tales of battles won and lost began to circulate, angler interest in the tiger muskie and muskellunge escalated. After all, what angler wouldn't get excited by a 40 inch fish rocketing from the depths to engulf a bait at boat-side just as it is about to be pulled from the water!

As any diehard muskie fanatic will tell you, it often takes many tiresome hours of casting and reeling large baits to achieve success. Lures are usually six to eight inches long and made to resemble the muskie's primary target, suckers. Such large lures require stout tackle, with casting equipment and braided lines used almost exclusively. Other must-have items include large needle-nose pliers, hook-outs, and hook cutters. Tagging studies have shown that, with proper handling, a released muskie will live to thrill another angler and ensure the continuation of this trophy fishery.

Muskellunge are considered a cool-water species and prefer water temperatures below 80°F. The best months for muskie fishing are October through June.

Plenty of Places to Choose

Each year, more than 650,000 sport enthusiasts make Maryland their destination of choice for recreational fishing, a third of them from out of state. And that's not counting children under 16!

The impact of recreational fishing is an estimated \$1 billion each year.

For those who enjoy freshwater fishing, the Upper Potomac offers everything anglers love – variety, a challenge, and beautiful scenery. ❖

For more information on Maryland fishing, visit DNR's 2008 fishing guide at

www.dnr.maryland.gov/fisheries/pdfs/2008MSFG.pdf

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CATCH THE EXCITEMENT

The 2008 Maryland Fishing Challenge brings new spirit to an old tradition

By Kara Turner

It's just after 9 a.m. on a Saturday in early June. But instead of watching cartoons, over 100 children are gathered along the banks of Beaverdam Creek in Salisbury City Park to try their luck at catching specially tagged sunfish.

"I like to use split-top wheat bread," says one young angler, speaking with the authority of an experienced veteran and judging from the volume of her catch, experienced anglers may want to take note. "The fish really seem to like the flavor."

Other youngsters insist juicy night crawlers are the best way to lure in a big catch.

A week earlier, nearly 600 young anglers and their families braved torrential downpours for the 60th Annual Battie-Mixon Fishing Rodeo.

Organizers of the 2008 Maryland Fishing Challenge are both pleased and encouraged by this enthusiasm. As anglers across the state try to snag the elusive Diamond Jim, this year's fishing challenge includes a special youth component, part of Governor Martin O'Malley's focus on encouraging young people to enjoy the outdoors.

"Whether you are a first timer, veteran, visiting or resident angler, Maryland's annual fishing challenge encourages people from all walks of life to get outdoors by going fishing with their friends and children this summer," says Governor Martin O'Malley. "We hope that grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers and mothers, and aunts and uncles take time to pass down their fishing tips and favorite spots to their children this summer, so they too can enjoy, learn about, benefit from and become responsible stewards of our State's diverse natural resources."

Diamond Jim is Online!

Become his friend on **facebook.com** by searching for Diamond Jim in the Baltimore, MD network or visit: **www.myspace.com/fishingchallenge**.



Diamond Who?

In 1956, a Baltimore brewery put up a \$25,000 reward for any angler that captured a striped bass in the Chesapeake Bay with a gold, diamond-studded tag affixed to his lower jaw, dubbing the fish Diamond Jim.

In that first year, the Diamond Jim promotion was quite eventful. The three tagged striped bass expired in their tanks the night before the big release. Girls dressed in mermaid costumes handed out cocktails. A celebrity from New York City, the actress Joanne Bayes, put in an appearance.

The Diamond Jim contest made for an interesting promotional stunt for a few years, but it really gained popularity among anglers throughout the Mid-Atlantic with the launch of the Maryland Fishing Challenge in 2005.

The Challenge

Today's tournament is multi-faceted. Any recreational angler who catches one of 60 species meeting the minimum size requirements can take their catch to a citation center and be entered into the grand prize drawing in September.

Grand prizes include a 2008 Toyota Tundra from Central Atlantic Toyota, a boat and trailer from Bass Pro Shops and over \$5,000 in outdoor gear from Bill's Outdoor Center.

It also draws upon the success of the 1950s Diamond Jim promotion. In early June, one genuine tagged Diamond Jim striped



Youth from across the state showcased their fishing skills at a fishing derby in Salisbury City Park in June 2008.

bass and 20 imposters were released into the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. A lucky angler who catches the genuine Diamond Jim by midnight on June 30 will win \$10,000 cash courtesy of Boater's World and a \$5,000 diamond from Smyth Jewelers in Timonium.

Anglers catching Diamond Jim imposters will receive a \$500 Boater's World gift card. If the genuine Diamond Jim striped bass is not caught before midnight June 30, 2008, he becomes an imposter fish, worth \$500 and the July genuine Diamond Jim's cash value increases to \$20,000. Throughout the summer, a total of three batches of tagged rockfish will be released, and cash prizes will continue to increase if Diamond Jim is not caught.

Just For Kids

The newest addition to the challenge gives young anglers and their fishing mentors the opportunity to win chartered fishing trips throughout the state's various waterways. Five fishing rodeos across Maryland will be stocked with a limited number of orange-tagged sunfish. During each rodeo, any child that catches one of the tagged fish will have a chance to win a T-shirt. At the conclusion of each rodeo, four young anglers will be entered to win a quality Maryland fishing trip. ♦

For information on how to enter the 2008 Maryland Fishing Challenge, visit: **www.dnr.maryland.gov/fishingchallenge**