



Claytor Lake 2007



Imagine yourself on a waterbody that is more like a wide river than a lake. When you do, you will have a picture of Claytor Lake. Claytor Lake, a 4,475-acre reservoir, stretches northeastward across the Pulaski County countryside near Radford for about 21 miles. Claytor Lake State Park visitors have a limited view of Claytor Lake. From this popular state park, visitors can view a sparkling lake, bustling with boating activity, with the top of the Claytor Lake dam in the distance. A powerboat leaving the state park boat ramp can easily reach the dam and major coves in 5 minutes. Visitors who want to explore can ride 15 miles upstream to the Allisonia boat ramp, where the New River enters the lake (up to an hour's ride from Claytor Lake State Park). Claytor Lake is shallow in areas upstream from Lighthouse Bridge, the only bridge that crosses the main lake (Pulaski County Route 672). Near the midpoint of Claytor Lake, the only major tributary of the lake, Peak Creek, enters the lake.



View of the Claytor Lake dam from Claytor Lake State Park's boat ramp.

American Electric Power Company (AEP) impounded Claytor Lake in 1939 to produce hydroelectric power from the incessant flow of the New River. Claytor Lake dam features 4 hydroelectric turbines that produce electricity. Because Claytor Lake is a main stem impoundment with a large watershed upstream, water passes through more quickly than in most large Virginia reservoirs. As a result, Claytor Lake has different temperature and oxygen levels from other nearby reservoirs like Smith Mountain Lake. Claytor Lake's temperature and oxygen levels are big factors for fishes like striped bass and hybrid striped bass that are stocked for anglers to catch.

When Claytor Lake was first impounded, New River fish were trapped in the reservoir. Fish that found Claytor Lake's waters a suitable place to live expanded their populations. Smallmouth, largemouth, and spotted bass, bluegill, black crappie, channel and flathead catfish, yellow perch, and carp flourished in this new environment called Claytor Lake. Most of these fish prefer shoreline areas of the lake. Under a cooperative management agreement with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF), AEP maintains stable water levels in Claytor Lake between April 15 and June 15 to protect spawning habitat for shallow water spawning fishes like sunfish, crappie, and bass.

During the early years of VDGIF management efforts at Claytor Lake, fish were introduced to take advantage of open water areas. Species like trout did not do well, since the coldwater habitat they needed was not available. VDGIF fisheries biologists successfully introduced alewife as a prey fish in the open waters. Then, they began stocking walleye to prey on the alewife. In 1996, walleye stockings were discontinued after a genetic study of walleye in the lake and the upstream New River found that a unique strain of walleye exists in the New River. Prior to this study, walleye stocked in Claytor Lake were brought in from other areas of North America. Biologists managing the fishery feared that these other genetic strains of walleye would contaminate the unique New River walleye strain that was produced state record walleye through the early 1990's. Since 2004, VDGIF biologists have produced New River strain walleye in their fish hatcheries, so Claytor Lake is now stocked with these walleye. Since 2004, walleye numbers in Claytor Lake have increased, so angler catch should increase. Walleye in Claytor Lake are regulated with a 20 inch minimum size limit and a 5 per day creel limit.

Starting in the late 1960's, striped bass were stocked as an additional predatory fish in the open waters of Claytor Lake. Annual stocking of stripers continues today. In 1993, fisheries biologists added striped bass hybrids (a cross between striped bass and white bass) to provide another open water predatory fish for anglers.

Claytor Lake offers something for every type of angler. Whether you enjoy working shoreline trees for bass and bluegill or trolling deepwater areas for striper, hybrids, and walleye, Claytor Lake is the place for you. Read on to learn about the mysterious waters of Claytor Lake and how to catch the fish that swim in them.

Black Bass

Smallmouth, largemouth, and spotted bass (collectively called "black bass") are the "bread and butter" fishes of this lake. About 58 percent of the anglers at Claytor Lake fish for "black bass." The three black bass species in Claytor Lake are regulated by a 12-inch minimum size limit and anglers may harvest 5 per day (all three species combined). Anglers are encouraged to practice catch-and-release of trophy-size bass.

Claytor's steep and rocky shorelines make it a good place for smallmouth bass to prosper. In 2006, Claytor Lake produced 26 smallmouth bass certificates (more than 5 pounds or over 20 inches). This number of trophy smallmouth bass ranked Claytor Lake as the second-best reservoir in the state for trophy smallmouth bass (after Smith Mountain Lake). Smallmouth bass are more

numerous in the middle and lower lake areas (from the mouth of Peak Creek downstream). Good coves for smallmouth bass in the lower lake are Roseberry Hollow and Dublin Hollow.

Claytor Lake holds fewer largemouth bass than other Virginia lakes, and they grow slowly in this mountain reservoir. Claytor Lake's largemouth bass populations appear to be increasing. In 1992, largemouth bass made up about 10 percent of the black bass electrofishing catch of fisheries biologists studying the lake. Largemouth bass increased to about 30 percent of the black bass electrofishing catch by 2003. Anglers can find this species in coves throughout the lake, but they are most abundant in Peak Creek. Other good locations for largemouth bass fishing in the lake are Clapboard Hollow, Spooky Hollow, and Texas Hollow. The Claytor Lake record for largemouth bass was a 14- pound, 6-ounce giant caught in June 1991.

Spotted bass in Claytor are generally smaller than the other black basses. They rarely reach 2 pounds in size. In fact, most anglers that think they are catching small largemouth bass are probably catching small spotted bass, particularly in the upper lake area (upstream from Peak Creek) where spotted bass are more numerous.

Anglers fishing for black bass in Claytor Lake can use information collected on bass food habits at Claytor Lake to select lures and techniques for these species. Smallmouth bass and spotted bass have very similar diets, with both relying mostly on crayfish. Techniques and lures that mimic crayfish are most likely to produce catches of these fish. Both smallmouth and spotted bass eat a lot of bluegill as well as some alewife and gizzard shad, so they should hit lures that imitate fish. Largemouth bass diets are quite different from smallmouth and spotted bass diets, which may be one reason they are doing so well in the lake. Largemouth bass eat bluegill, alewife, gizzard shad, and crayfish, depending on the season of the year and whether these prey are abundant in a given year. Lures that imitate fish are the best choice for largemouth bass, but they may also hit crayfish imitations.

Striped Bass

VDGIF fisheries biologists maintain the striped bass population in Claytor Lake through annual stocking. Recent lake sampling indicates that strong year classes were produced in 1997, 1998, 2001, and 2003, so striped bass anglers should enjoy good fishing in coming years. Claytor Lake produced 13 certificate (more than 20 pounds or over 37 inches) stripers in 2006. At least one striper over thirty pounds is caught each year. Stripers can be caught year-round, although most anglers have their greatest success from late September through May. Water temperatures below 70 degrees produce the best striper fishing.

Striper diet studies at Claytor Lake showed that stripers rely mostly on alewife and gizzard shad. Therefore, it is no surprise that Claytor Lake anglers experience the best success using these species as bait. Gizzard shad and alewives are most easily caught using a cast net near the back ends of coves. Peak Creek is a great place for finding bait, but don't overlook smaller coves in the lake. Many stripers are taken with topwater baits (Redfins, Rapalas, etc.) and bucktails in the spring and fall. For best topwater action, fish points and flats adjacent to deep water. Trolling bucktails in 20-60 feet of water can produce good catches.

During the summer and early fall months of normal and wet years stripers primarily “hole up” in the middle and lower lake areas close to the lake’s thermocline (50-70 feet deep), where they find suitable temperature and oxygen levels. In drought years, stripers are unable to find suitable habitat anywhere in the lake during the summer months, so they roam the lake in search of suitable habitat. During summer, stripers are typically located from the mouth of Clapboard Hollow downstream to the dam. When the lake begins to cool in October, stripers begin chasing shad and alewife schools around the lake and are more difficult to locate. If you see stripers chasing shad at the surface, you can catch them on top water lures. In winter months, look for stripers in the middle and upper lake areas, from the mouth of Peak Creek up to the Lighthouse Bridge. Find the bait schools and you are likely to find the stripers nearby. In March and during times of high inflows, stripers run to the headwaters of the lake at Allisionia.

Striped Bass Hybrids

Striped bass hybrids, introduced to Claytor in 1993, are stocked each year. Strong year classes were produced in 1997, 1998, 2000, and 2003, so hybrid fishing in the lake is good. Striped bass hybrids are a hard fighting fish that are good to eat! Since they can tolerate higher water temperatures, hybrids often chase schools of shad at the lake’s surface at night in the summer months. In the summer, hybrids are usually found between Lighthouse Bridge and Peak Creek (upper end of the lake) and between Felt’s Hollow and Hidden Hollow (midlake area). In the fall, winter, and spring months, hybrids can be found throughout the lake. Hybrid striped bass diets are very similar to steeper diets, so they can be caught using the same techniques.

White Bass and White Perch

White bass are found in Claytor Lake, but their numbers are down from historic levels. The best opportunity to catch white bass is during April and May when they run upstream to Allisionia, where the New River flows into Claytor Lake. Fisheries biologists sampling Claytor Lake recently discovered white perch have been introduced. These close cousins of white bass are likely to become abundant in the lake.

Striper, Hybrid, White Bass and White Perch Regulations and Identification

Harvest of stripers and hybrids is limited to 4 fish per day (the two species combined), all of which must be longer than 20 inches. White bass are regulated by a creel limit of five per day, with no size limit. White perch of any size may be taken in unlimited numbers. Anglers should study the differences between these fish carefully. Identification information is available at <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/virginiafishes/group.asp?group=2> or from our Department publication “The Angler’s Guide to Virginia Freshwater Sportfish”.

Other Popular Species

Claytor Lake anglers catch yellow perch in the one-pound range. Black crappie average a little less than a pound. Many bluegill anglers take home a limit of 25 that average 0.5-pound each. Flathead and channel catfish up to 20 pounds can also be caught from the lake. With catches of 20 to 30 pound carp possible, anglers from as far away as England come to fish for them at Claytor.

Lake Access

Claytor Lake State Park, located on the north side of the lake within a few miles of the dam, provides 497 acres of park with camping, cabins, picnic areas, and a swimming beach, as well as a marina. For more information on the park, call 540-643-2500. To reach Claytor Lake State Park, take the Claytor Lake State Park exit off Interstate 81 and follow the signs to the park.

Boat access to the lake is available for a small fee at private ramps at Claytor Lake State Park, Lighthouse Bridge, and at Conrad Brothers and Rockhouse Marinas on the Peak Creek arm of the lake. The Department maintains no-fee ramps at Allisonia (in the upper lake area) and near the entrance to the state park (Dublin Ramp).

Harry's Point boat ramp, a no-fee ramp located in the mid-lake area within Pulaski County's Harry S. DeHaven Park, has a double ramp and courtesy piers. Harry's Point, as this facility is often called, also has a handicapped-accessible fishing pier, where many of the lake's species can be caught throughout the year. During the fall and winter months, anglers are likely to catch striped bass and hybrid striped bass swimming near the pier. The easiest way to get to Harry's Point from Interstate 81 is to take the Route 605 exit (near the south end of Radford), and then follow the brown trailblazer signs to Harry DeHaven Park. From the Interstate 81 exit ramp, take Route 605 (Little River Dam Road). Follow Route 605 until you reach Route 663 (Owens Road), go right on 663, then look for signs marking the park when you get near the lake.

Maps and Additional Information

Commercially produced topographic maps are available from local marinas and other retailers in the lake area. One of these maps, produced by Abingdon Spatial Technologies, is available at <http://stores.lunkerbuster.com/StoreFront.bok> . The other one, produced by Friends of Claytor Lake, is available at <http://www.focl.org/merchandise.html> . Claytor Lake is long and steep-sided, so use a depth finder to look for underwater humps and points. Clues to locations of these key features can be found by looking at the surrounding land at any point on the lake. If you are next to a steep ridge, it is unlikely that you are close to any shallow water habitat. Look for shallow water habitat on the opposite shoreline from steep ridges. The old New River channel typically follows close to the steep areas along the lake's shoreline.

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