Smallmouth Bass
in Western North Carolina Streams and Rivers

Smallmouth Bass in North Carolina
The smallmouth bass (Micropterus dolomieu) is a popular game fish sought by anglers throughout the United States. Recognizing the importance of smallmouth bass fisheries, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission produced this brochure to provide life history and angling information for this unique North Carolina fish, as well as summarize recent smallmouth bass research findings obtained by the Commission’s fisheries biologists.

Identification
The smallmouth bass is most often bronze to brownish green with dark vertical bars on its sides. Compared to largemouth bass, the smallmouth bass has a smaller upper jaw that extends only to the middle of its reddish eyes. Its dorsal fin is not deeply notched and three distinct dark bars radiate from the eye.

Habitats and Habits
Smallmouth bass are native to interior eastern North America west of the Appalachians but have been widely introduced elsewhere. In North Carolina, smallmouth bass often inhabit coolwater streams, lakes and reservoirs in the western part of the state that contain diverse habitats, such as logs, stumps, and rock outcroppings. In streams and rivers, such habitats with current are preferred. Juvenile smallmouth bass eat mostly insects and small fish, while adults will eat a variety of food items. Adult smallmouth bass living in lakes and reservoirs feed on shad and crayfish while stream-dwelling smallmouths eat mainly minnows and crayfish.

Fishing Techniques
Smallmouth bass are often regarded as one of the sportiest freshwater fish and are known for their stamina and fighting ability. They can be caught on a wide variety of artificial baits, including spinnerbaits, jigs, and soft-plastic lures (e.g., worms, tubes, minnows and crayfish), but smallmouth generally prefer smaller bait sizes than largemouth bass. During spring and summer months, surface lures and popping bugs presented by a fly rod are popular fishing techniques for exciting topwater smallmouth action. Natural baits such as hellgrammites, salamanders, minnows, and crayfish fished in stream current breaks and back eddies under a small split-shot weight are highly effective presentations. While anglers can fish for smallmouth bass in reservoirs and lakes, fishing streams and rivers can be productive and challenging.
The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission recently collected smallmouth bass population data from rivers and streams across western North Carolina. During the study, Commission fisheries biologists collected more than 2,800 smallmouth bass from 42 stream reaches. Results of these surveys indicate:

- For many populations, smallmouth bass averaged 8 to 10 inches, although some fish collected were nearly 20 inches.
- In some rivers and streams, smallmouth bass take up to five years to reach 10 inches in length, while in other waters smallmouth exceeded 10 inches in just two years.
- Sizes and growth rates of smallmouth bass differed in part due to the variety of waters sampled, which ranged from streams less than 25 feet wide to rivers more than 300 feet wide. Differences among waters probably were related to varying water temperatures and nutrient levels.

Size and creel limit regulations are a common method for managing fisheries. Using length, weight, condition, mortality and growth data collected during these surveys, Commission biologists evaluated the effects of several potential harvest regulations on river and stream smallmouth bass populations. The results indicated that a more protective length limit for smallmouth bass was appropriate. Find more information on smallmouth bass and other sport fish at ncwildlife.org/Fishing/WhattoCatch.aspx.

### Smallmouth Bass Streams in Western North Carolina

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