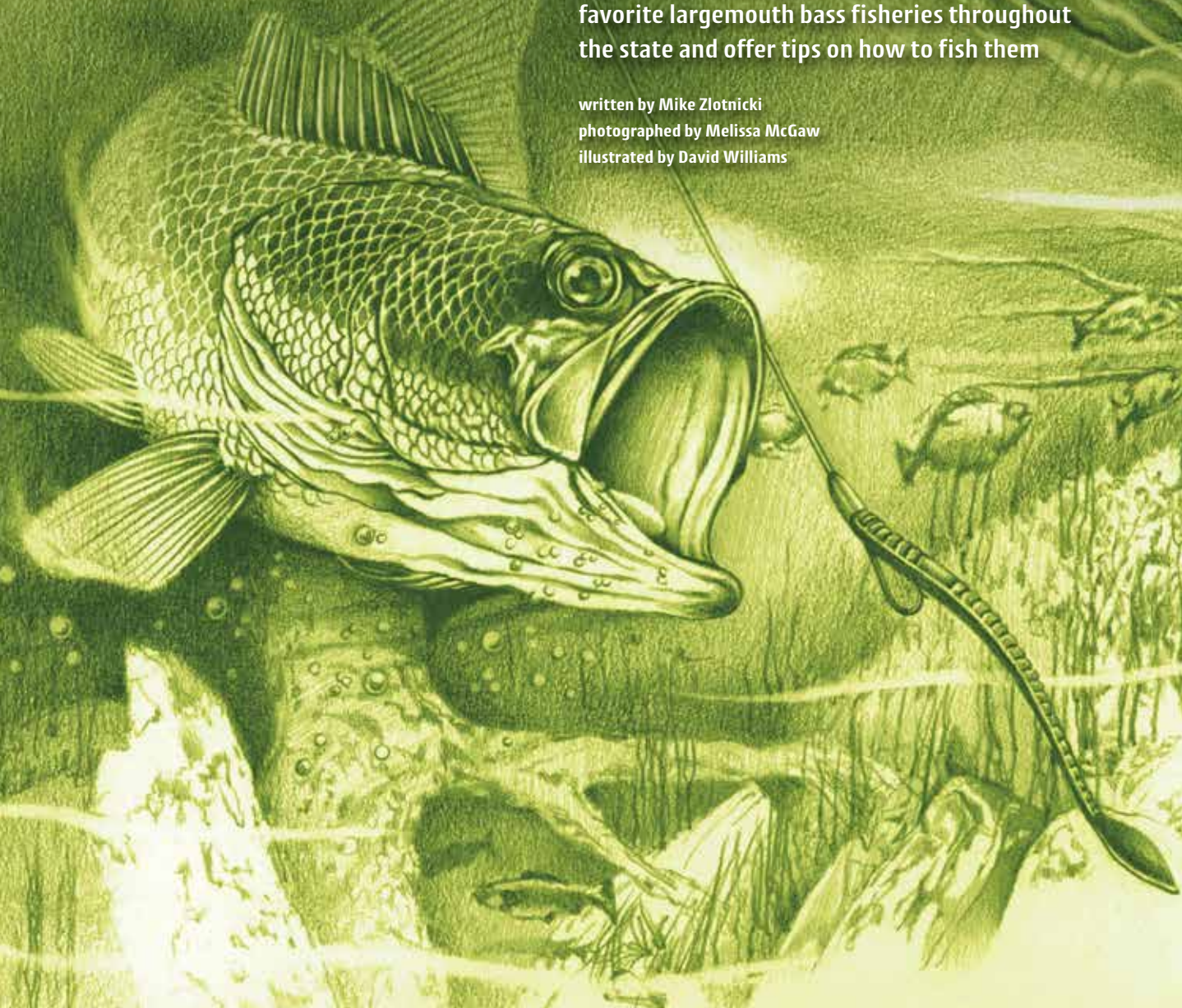


# The Better BASS WATERS

Commission biologists reveal some of their favorite largemouth bass fisheries throughout the state and offer tips on how to fish them

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WILEYDOC/SHUTTERSTOCK

A kayak angler plies the Neuse River for largemouth bass during a spring trip.

What constitutes the best largemouth bass fisheries? Anglers, usually pretty opinionated, will probably base their choices on the numbers or size of fish caught. But what about biologists?

We decided to ask biologists from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's Inland Fisheries Division about the best largemouth bass fisheries in their areas. These included three in the Coastal Plain, one in the Piedmont and one in the Mountains. Some places you may know, and some may be a surprise.

## Coastal Plain

Ben Ricks is the Coastal Region fisheries supervisor for the Commission based out of New Bern. He has a favorite bass fishery.

"I think the Neuse [River] is really strong right now," he said. "Traditionally we've had fish kills associated with hurricanes in coastal North Carolina, but we're in a period of stable weather conditions. We haven't had a fish kill recently and the fish are benefiting from that."

"We're seeing fish that are growing relatively well and survival is good, mortality is low. These fish have had enough time to reach pretty decent size. The biggest bass we saw last year was the biggest ever collected in the Coastal region and it was 12 pounds."

Specifically, Ricks is referring to the lower Neuse, starting at the Trent River and all the way up to Kinston. This, he said, is where most the "bassy-type" habitat is located.

As many readers may know, fisheries biologists use electrofishing boats to stun fish. The fish are then netted, put in a stock tank and later worked up for data before being

released. Biologists also conduct a general abundance estimate using a fish-per-hour metric. Ricks said that they haven't done any age work along the Neuse recently because of the recent fish kills.

There are some management practices that have helped the Neuse become a better largemouth bass habitat, including daily creel limits. The Neuse has a 14-inch minimum and a five fish per day creel limit with the exception that two may be less than 14 inches.

"We've got length limits in place and that helps keep over-harvest down," he said. "That's the biggest piece of it. We've got monitoring programs where if there's a change, we can adapt our management practices accordingly. There are tournaments on the Neuse year-round. There are folks out there targeting bass year-round."

As for fishing tips, Ricks said targeting bass with various lures and in different areas depends on the time of year and what the fish are chasing.





Chowan River

“At any point in the year there’s something you can be good at, something that offers a good opportunity,” he said.



Chris Smith, the Commission’s District 1 fisheries biologist, works the upper Coastal Plain. His pick for the top largemouth bass water in the region is the Chowan River.

“The Chowan River has an expanded age distribution,” he said. “The frequency of encountering 6-plus-pound fish is there, and we see large bags of fish during tournament weigh-ins.”

Smith said that sampling is done via electrofishing, in which they calculate fish-per-hour of electrofishing and evaluate size and age distribution.

Smith said that many anglers use live scope or side scan devices to find submerged structure to target, employing the trolling motor to cover a lot of water. The Chowan has a 14-inch minimum and a daily creel limit of five fish.

Popular forage species in the Chowan include sunfish, shiners and various minnow species. Other popular gamefish include catfish, crappie and perch.



“Right now [early March], we’ve got herring making their spawning run up the river, so large spinnerbaits, large swim baits would be a good choice,” he said. “As you shift more into the summertime, you may want to go to a crayfish or a smaller shad bait since there are significant amounts of swamps that drain into the river. It also depends on rainfall. If we’re in a time frame where the swamps are draining significantly, creature baits and crawfish baits may be a better choice. If we’re in a period where the swamps aren’t draining so much, maybe a shad pattern.”

Ricks said the main forage for largemouth bass in the Neuse are shad, sunfish, crawfish and various small fish species. Other popular species in the Neuse include crappie, blue and flathead catfish, as well as seasonal shad and striped bass runs.

Farther to the south, we asked District 4 Fisheries Biologist Kyle Rachels about waters in the southeastern part of the state. He cited Sutton Lake as a top bass fishery. Sutton Lake is located four miles west of Wilmington, just off Highway 421. It is about 1,100 acres in size and is a cooling lake for Duke Energy’s L.V. Sutton Steam Electric Plant. It has a 14-inch minimum length and a five fish per day creel limit.

“It’s one of the southernmost lakes in North Carolina and it receives warm water discharge from a power generation facility,” Rachels said. “This combination gives Sutton Lake a long growing season and makes for consistently fast-growing largemouth bass. It also benefits from having a lot of woody debris, stumps and other structure to provide quality sportfish habitat.”

Rachels said that his team samples the population at least once every three years through electrofishing and calculates fish-per-hour of electrofishing and evaluates size and age distribution.

As far as seasonality, Rachels said it’s year-round due to the relatively warm water temperatures. “It’s a little busier in the spring and summer months, but folks might have the lake to themselves in December.”

A creel survey conducted in 2016 found that 82% of the anglers at Sutton Lake were targeting largemouth bass, so they’re by far the most popular sportfish. The fish community is very diverse and forage is provided by a variety of sunfish species.

Rachels mentioned another area lake that many probably don’t consider when targeting largemouth bass: White Lake in Bladen County.

“White Lake was historically acidic and nutrient poor, conditions that didn’t support a noteworthy largemouth bass population,” he said. “However, it’s experienced considerable nutrient enrichment and over the last decade has become very productive. It’s producing a lot of 14-inch plus fish right now, with opportunities for fish 6-plus pounds, something local anglers are taking advantage of by fishing around the only habitat in the lake—the numerous docks extending out around almost the entire shoreline.”

Rachels said White Lake does have its challenges. It’s relatively small (about 1,000 acres) and doesn’t have much habitat diversity. That means it could be more susceptible to fishing pressure than other notable bass lakes. White Lake is also very popular in the warmer months with recreational boaters, personal watercraft and swimmers, so most anglers want to fish from sunrise to maybe 10 a.m. before calling it a day.

### The Piedmont

Seth Mycko is the Commission’s District 5 fisheries biologist in the central part of the state, as well as a tournament bass fisherman. He was emphatic about his choice for a top lake.

“Jordan Lake, for sure,” he said. “It’s one of the best lakes in the country right now.”



So, what makes it so good? Mycko said that’s a complicated question, but fertility at the base of the food chain is playing a big role. “For the bass, it’s the shad, and the shad feed on the plankton and things like that. It’s definitely a very fertile lake.”

Mycko, like the other biologists, studies population by electrofishing. He groups fish into three different class sizes: stock density, preferred length and memorable size. “Jordan, in particular, is very high in [the memorable size] category,” Mycko said.

Mycko said the Commission doesn’t really employ any species-specific management practices at Jordan. It has a 14-inch minimum and a five fish per day creel limit with the exception that two fish may be less than 14 inches.

“No, not really, other than it is a water supply and a flood control reservoir, so the water level goes up and down a lot more,” he said. “In the wet years, the banks will flood and that gives them more habitat to get around and more water to utilize. This can be beneficial for bass fisheries when they flood at the right time in the spring.”

As far as seasonality, Mycko noted the plethora of rip rap (rock piles used to protect shorelines and bridge abutments). Early in the year, anglers will fish the rip rap as it starts to heat up. The fish move away from those areas once they start spawning and move into the backs of creeks. In the summertime, they come back out toward the main lake.

“Those rip rap banks are really popular right now [in early March]. They’re the first areas to heat up,” he said, before discussing effective fishing techniques. “Crankbaits, typically, and I’ve heard Alabama rigs are really good. Topwater baits. As we move into the spring, chatterbaits and things like that. And you can’t beat a big rock pile or something like that with a big jig.”

As far as forage, Mycko pointed to the abundant shad in the lake. He also said they’re probably eating a lot of crawfish and bluegill during certain times of the year. “During the summertime, I bet sunfish is a big part of their diet,” he said.

In addition to bass and catfish, crappie are another popular sportfish at Jordan Lake.



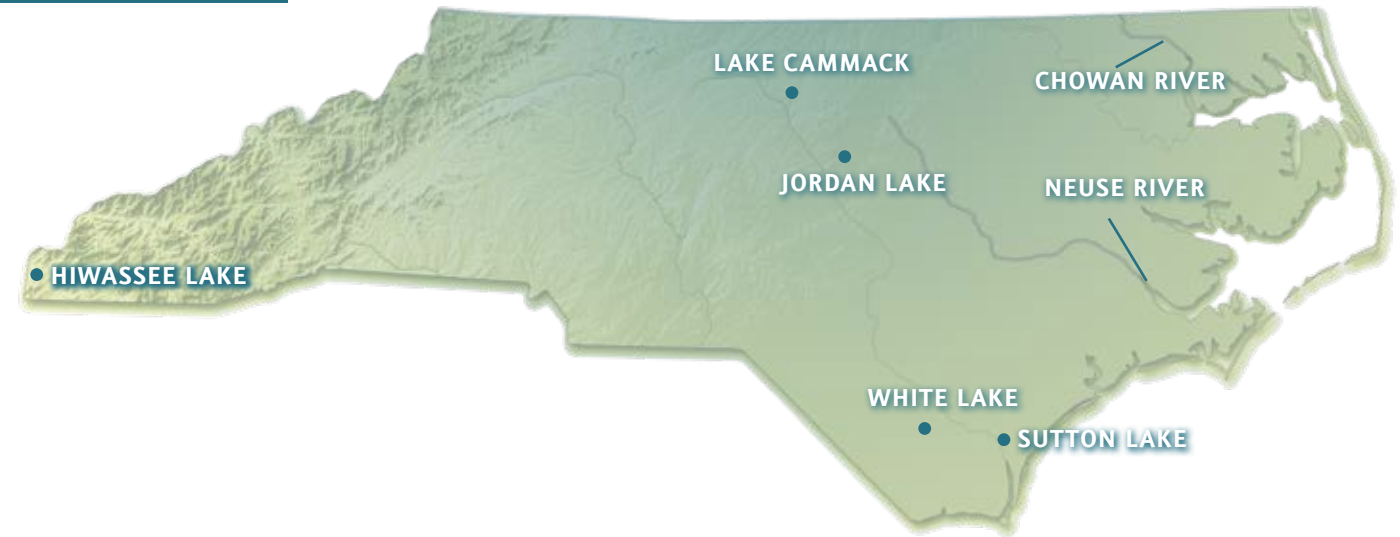
Opposite: A winding stretch of the Chowan River makes for a scenic day of fishing. Above: Commission biologist Seth Mycko (left) and angler Mike Powers fish for largemouth bass at Jordan Lake, with Mycko displaying a nice catch.





Above: Daniel Meads (front) readies to land a bass as he and Commission biologist Chris Smith fish the Little River. Right: A fly-angler fishes Lake Appalachia off the Hiwassee River.

## N.C. BASS WATERS



“Oh yeah. Crappie are a big attraction, especially in the wintertime,” he said.

Mycko had a surprise when asked about other area lakes he likes to fish.

“We have some city lakes in the area that are very good,” he said. “At some of these lakes, a good day might be 40 fish. Lake Cammack in Burlington is one. The average size is maybe 14 inches and stunted. In this case, good means that you can catch a bunch of smaller fish in one day and get used to how bass react to certain lures more often than in other lakes. Average size may be small, but anglers have more chances to get bites and practice new techniques.”

### Mountains

Scott Loftis is the aquatic habitat coordinator and warmwater research coordinator in the western part of the state. Hiwassee Lake in Cherokee County was his pick. Hiwassee is 6,100 acres in size and is in the westernmost county in North Carolina.

“The largemouth bass fishery flies high yet is ‘under the radar’ when it comes to a destination anglers think about when planning a fishing trip,” Loftis said. “This is likely because of its proximity to a large population center. Hiwassee Lake is near the town of Murphy, a population of fewer than 2,000. Cherokee County as a whole has less than 30,000. The largemouth bass fishery receives

only modest angling pressure from a handful of dedicated anglers who make the trek to this remote destination.”

Loftis said that Hiwassee has miles of undeveloped shoreline that is owned by the U.S. Forest Service. The shoreline provides the availability of natural woody cover that largemouth bass prefer and adds to the scenic beauty experienced by anglers.

Hiwassee is sampled by the Commission



via electrofishing every three to five years. Loftis said that they calculate fish-per-hour of electrofishing and evaluate length, weight, condition, size distribution and age distribution. The lake features a minimum length limit of 14 inches and a five fish per day bag limit with the exception that two fish may be less than 14 inches. Annual shoreline habitat enhancement efforts by the Commission and the U.S. Forest Service provide areas for anglers to target largemouth bass.

“Like most largemouth bass fisheries, the late spring to early summer period offers the best angling opportunities on Hiwassee Lake,” Loftis said, noting that spring (April and May), early summer (June) and fall (October) are likely the best times of year to visit. “Successful trips also occur in the winter during periods of mild weather.”

Loftis also had some information for visiting anglers. “Depending on season and location of the largemouth bass, anglers can be successful using artificial lures, like a shaky head [jigs] or Texas-rigged plastic worms or skirted jigs with plastic trailers, around the shoreline and wood cover in the spring,” he said. “Topwater lures like buzz baits or Zara Spooks work well post-spawn and early summer in the backs of coves (buzz-bait) and fished across long tapering points (Zara Spook).”

Blueback herring, threadfin shad, gizzard shad and sunfish are the prominent forage species. Other popular sportfish include striped bass, walleye, crappie, bluegill and flathead catfish, according to Loftis. ♦

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