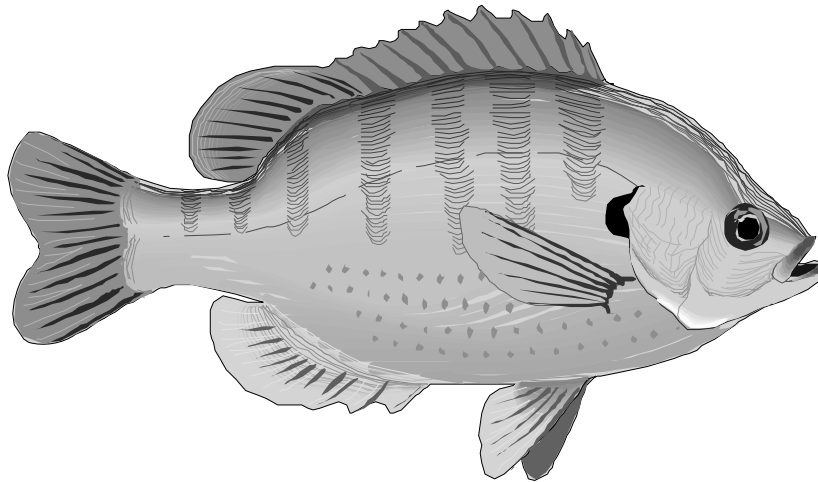


# 2008 Georgia River Fishing Prospects



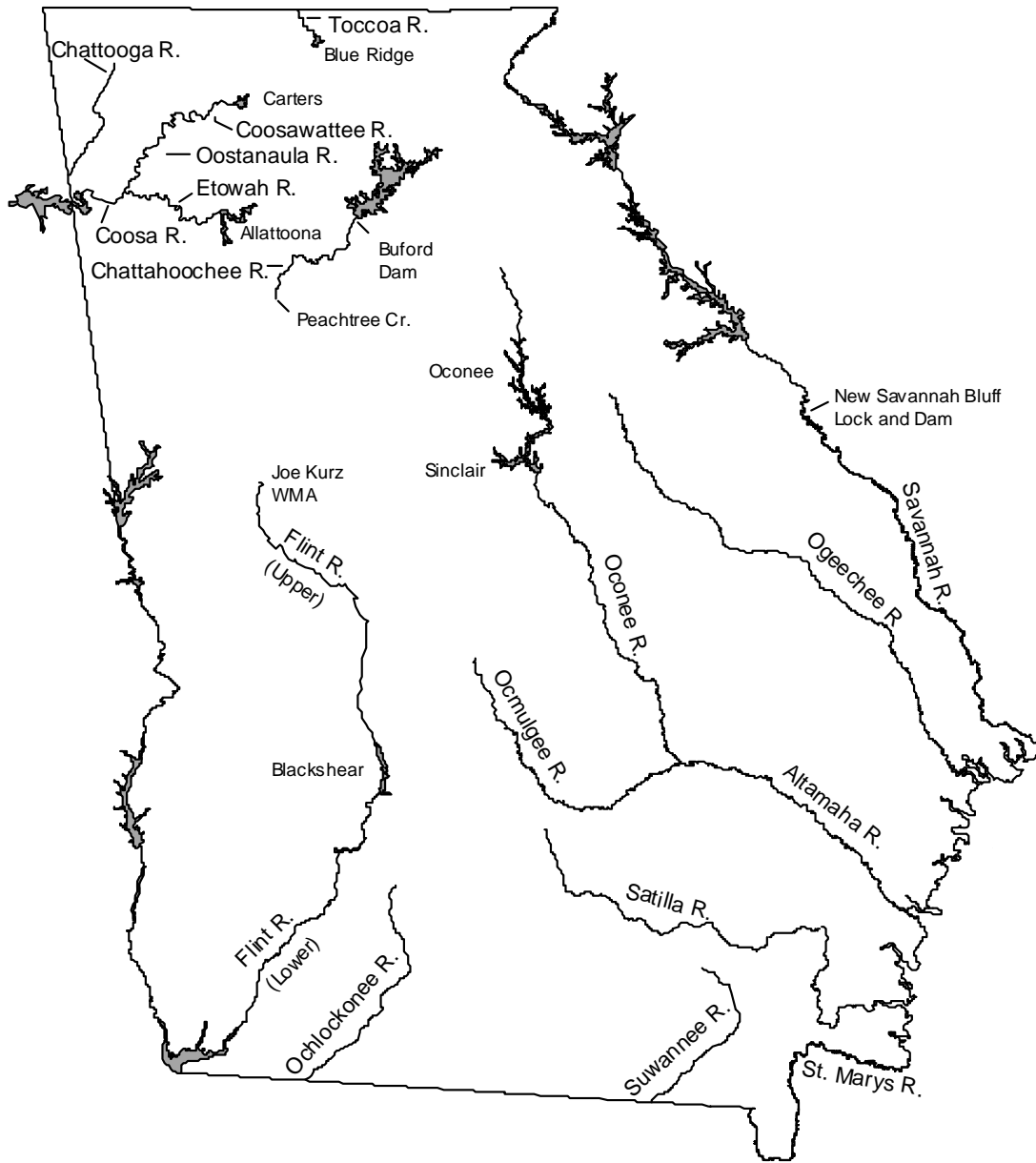
*Bluegill* – A member of the sunfish family. Along with redbreast sunfish, redear sunfish and other bream, this group of fish are often the “first-ever” catch for many a young angler. Help foster a lifelong passion for fishing and environmental stewardship – take a kid fishing!

Find out the best places to hook a bream – and a multitude of other species – in this guidebook.

## “take me fishing”



A publication of the  
Georgia Department of Natural Resources  
Wildlife Resources Division  
Fisheries Management Section



Your purchase of fishing equipment and motor boat fuels supports Sport Fish Restoration and boating access facilities

River	Page	Best Bets in 2008	Office
Altamaha	2	largemouth bass, flathead catfish, crappie, bream	Waycross
Chattahoochee	3	brown & rainbow trout, shoal & largemouth bass, bream, catfish	Walton
Chattooga	4	bream, striped bass, channel catfish, drum	Summerville
Conasauga	5	redeye bass, trout, bream, drum	Summerville
Coosa	5	white and largemouth bass, striped bass, catfish, drum	Summerville
Coosawatee	6	catfish, bream, striped bass, spotted & redeye bass, drum	Summerville
Etowah	7	bream, catfish, striped bass, drum	Summerville
Flint	7	Shoal & largemouth bass, bream, catfish, hybrid & striped bass	Fort Valley or Albany
Ochlockonee	10	Redbreast sunfish, Suwannee & largemouth bass, catfish	Albany
Ocmulgee	10	Largemouth/shoal bass, bream, catfish, stripers & hybrids	Ft Valley or Bowens Mill
Oconee	13	catfish, largemouth bass, bream, redbreast	Metter
Ogeechee	14	spotted sunfish, largemouth bass, black crappie, catfish	Richmond Hill
Oostanaula	14	catfish, striped bass, drum	Summerville
Satilla	15	redbreast sunfish, bluegill, crappie, bullheads	Waycross
Savannah	15	channel & white catfish, bluegill, largemouth bass, striped bass	Richmond Hill
St. Marys	16	redbreast sunfish, bluegill, largemouth bass	Waycross
Suwannee	16	chain pickerel, warmouth, flier, bullheads	Waycross
Toccoa	17	rainbow and brown trout, spotted bass	Summerville

# 2008 Georgia River Fishing Prospects

There are over 12,000 miles of warmwater streams in Georgia. Following are the 2008 fishing prospects for the Altamaha, Chattahoochee, Chattooga (NW Georgia), Conasauga, Coosa, Coosawattee, Etowah, Flint, Ochlockonee, Ocmulgee, Oconee, Ogeechee, Oostanaula, Satilla, Savannah, St. Marys, Suwannee and Toccoa rivers. These prospects are based on sampling efforts conducted by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division (WRD), Fisheries Management Section. Information collected allows Fisheries staff to determine recruitment, growth, condition, sizes, abundance and mortality of important game fishes. We hope this publication will prove useful in planning your fishing trips, as well as inform you about current issues and the status of the fish populations in these rivers. Sampling efforts and the development of this publication are funded through Sport Fish Restoration Funds.

WRD encourages anglers to participate in the Georgia Angler Award Program. All sport fish are eligible, but there are minimum weights or lengths your fish must meet or exceed. The fish must be legally caught on sport fishing tackle, weighed on scales certified accurate by the Georgia Department of Agriculture in the presence of two witnesses, and be verified to species by WRD Fisheries Management Section staff. Recipients will receive a certificate and an angler award cap embroidered with the year, fish species and weight. Check the WRD website at [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com), the current Sport Fishing Regulations, or call a WRD Fisheries Management Section office to learn more about this and other WRD programs.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources routinely tests the tissue of fish collected from rivers and reservoirs across the state. Based on the best scientific information and procedures available, "Guidelines for Eating Fish from Georgia Waters" are developed to help Georgia anglers and their families evaluate the health risks of eating fish from wild populations. To learn more about these guidelines consult the current Sport Fishing Regulations, or the EPD website at [www.gaepd.org/Documents/fish\\_guide.html](http://www.gaepd.org/Documents/fish_guide.html).

Visit the WRD web site at [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com) for fishing regulations, to locate a boat ramp in Georgia, to purchase a fishing license, to register a boat, to find a new place to fish and much more!

## Fisheries Management Section Offices:

Albany..... 229-430-4256	West Point..... 706-845-4290	Social Circle.....770-918-6418
Burton ..... 706-947-3112	Dawson..... 229-995-4486	Summerville.....706-857-3394
Calhoun..... 706-624-1161	Fort Valley ..... 478-825-6151	Thomson .....706-595-1619
Gainesville .. 770-535-5498	Richmond Hill ..... 912-727-2112	Waycross ..... 912-285-6094

Abbreviations: COE - U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; DNR - Georgia Department of Natural Resources; WRD - Georgia Wildlife Resources Division; USGS – U.S. Geologic Survey; TVA – Tennessee Valley Authority; USFS – U.S. Forest Service

## Altamaha River

The Altamaha River is a popular destination for bass anglers. In fact, over 30 largemouth bass tournaments are held here yearly. Comparing bass tournament results on Georgia waters for the last several years shows that the Altamaha River consistently has one of the highest average catch rates in the state. The extremely low water conditions that persisted throughout much of 2007 may lead to reduced catches for bass fishing this year. Expect to catch mainly small-intermediate sized bass, around 10-16 inches, but be ready for an occasional lunker. Oxbow lakes and slack-water areas containing overhanging willows and woody structure are popular fishing locations, especially in the spring. Later in the summer, try fishing eddy pockets, the downstream end of sandbars and heavy cover along the banks. Popular lures include crankbaits, spinnerbaits, plastic worms and lizards.

The Altamaha River is one of the premier flathead catfish rivers in the southeast. Flatheads are an excellent fish to eat, and unlike channel catfish, the flesh of large flatheads maintains a high quality taste. Low water levels persisted throughout 2007 and the numbers of flathead catfish will likely be lower than the previous year. The average size of flatheads should be approximately 4 lbs. However, there are still many fish well over 30 lbs. to be caught. Fishing for flatheads begins in early spring and peaks in the hot summer months

when the river is well within its banks. The better fishing occurs in deep holes located along the outside bends in the river. An electronic fish finder is useful in locating deep holes and fish. If you are using sporting tackle, a minimum of 30 lbs. test line is recommended due to the numerous snags in the river and the flatheads' large size (30-50 lbs. fish are not uncommon!). Live bait is a must. Large worms (Louisiana pinks), shiners and bream are some of the more popular baits. Set lines or limb lines also are a popular and effective way to harvest flatheads. Most anglers fish limb lines or trot lines overnight using hand-sized bream as bait. Since flatheads are more active at night, depth is not as critical with these gear types. For more information on flathead catfish and fishing tips, obtain a free copy of the "Flathead Catfish Fishing Guide" from a Fisheries Section office. Flatheads are prevalent throughout the river, but the highest densities of flatheads are found between Jaycees Landing (river mile 67) and Altamaha Park (river mile 30).

The crappie population has remained relatively stable over the past several years, so angler success will be similar to 2007. The oxbow lakes that lie between US Hwy. 84 and the Seaboard Railroad offer some of the better crappie fishing opportunities.

Historically, the Altamaha River has been known for its outstanding bream fishery. Water levels in the Altamaha remained extremely low for much of 2006 and 2007. This long period of low

flow most likely decreased the abundance of redbreast in the Altamaha. However, the river has recently begun to rise to normal winter time flows and if these higher water levels remain until late spring this will provide favorable conditions for over-winter growth, which should enhance the numbers of quality redbreast present in 2008. Deep holes with cover along the main river channel are some of the more productive fishing areas for this species. Redbreast can be caught using both live bait and artificial lures. Some of the more popular live bait tactics are fishing crickets and worms under bobbers or fishing them on the bottom with split-shot weights. Small beetle spins, rooster tails and popping bugs (on a fly rod) are effective artificial lures for enticing redbreast sunfish to strike.

Due to the low water levels that persisted throughout 2007, anglers may not reel in as many bluegill and shellcracker in 2008. Normal water levels returned in late January 2008 and if these conditions remain until April there should be fair numbers of quality bluegill and shellcracker in 2008. Try fishing for these two species in the still-water (oxbow) lakes off the main river channel. Bluegill and redear fishing picks up in late April when they begin bedding and continues throughout the summer. Overall, it should be a fair year for bream fishing with some quality-sized fish. Bluegill and redear sunfish can be harvested using the same methods as described for redbreast sunfish, but slower moving water is typically more productive.

A guide to fishing the Altamaha River is available. It contains a map, access sites, and helpful fishing tips. Call a Fisheries office for a free copy.

#### **Chattahoochee River (Buford Dam to Peachtree Creek)**

In addition to supplying nearly 70 percent of metro-Atlanta's drinking water, the 48-mile stretch of the Chattahoochee River between Buford Dam and Peachtree Creek offers some of the best trout fishing in North Georgia. The Chattahoochee also supports numerous other fish species including shoal bass, largemouth bass, striped bass, yellow perch, chain pickerel, bream and catfish.

Trout water begins at the base of Buford Dam where cold (50° F), clear water flows from the bottom of Lake Lanier. Although water levels in Lake Lanier have dropped to historic lows due to the drought, water quantity and quality are still good for trout. Water releases from Buford Dam have been reduced, which is good for trout and trout anglers as low flow conditions are easier for wade and boat fishing. We still need a great deal of rainfall for Lake Lanier to refill. It is important that you determine the water release schedule from Buford Dam, so call 770-945-1466 or visit <http://water.sam.usace.army.mil> for water release information before you leave for the river. Call 404-329-1455 for the water release information at Morgan Falls Dam. River water clarity can be obtained from the National Park Service Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area website at [www.nps.gov/chat](http://www.nps.gov/chat). A personal flotation device must be worn at all times from Buford Dam to the Georgia Hwy. 20 Bridge. Water temperatures are normally 50-65 °F year-round, so anglers should plan to wear insulated waders to protect against hypothermia. The section between Buford Dam and Peachtree Creek lies within the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA) and is managed by the National Park Service (NPS). The Wildlife Resources Division (WRD) and NPS work closely to manage the land, river and wildlife. You can learn more about the CRNRA by calling 678-538-1200 or visiting [www.nps.gov/chat](http://www.nps.gov/chat). There are 19 county and federally maintained public access points offering excellent bank and wading access and boating opportunities. Boaters should be cautioned that the river is relatively shallow and rocky during low flow conditions and passage upstream to Buford Dam is limited to shallow drafting boats with jet motors.

**Buford Dam to Roswell Road (Hwy. 9):** This section of the river is managed as "put-and-take" for rainbow trout and for "wild" brown trout. WRD has documented successful in-river brown trout reproduction every year since 1998. WRD ceased stocking brown trout in 2005 for a 3 - 5 year period to determine the true potential of a "wild" brown trout fishery. To date, brown trout make up more than 70 percent of the fall trout population, despite stocking almost 160,000 rainbow trout. This indicates brown trout are doing quite well without stocking. WRD will continue to closely monitor the brown trout population to determine if stocking is needed to maintain a quality brown trout fishery. So chances are, the next brown trout you catch from this river will be a wild, river-spawned fish! The state record brown trout (18 lbs. 6 oz.) was caught from this section of the Chattahoochee and browns up to 9 lbs. are available. WRD will continue to stock 160,000 rainbow trout annually. About 6 percent of the stocked rainbows will be greater than 12 inches, with some larger than 15 inches, so the potential for catching a big rainbow trout also is good! To better serve anglers, WRD stocked rainbow trout after Labor Day through the fall so anglers could have good success during the beautiful fall weather. This was very popular with anglers and WRD plans to stock through the fall again this year. Anglers can help WRD better manage the Hooch's trout fishery by cooperating in a current creel survey by providing accurate information about your fishing experience.

Be aware that the river between the Georgia Hwy. 20 Bridge downstream to the boat ramp at the NPS Medlock Bridge unit is **artificial lures only**. An artificial lure is defined as any lure that is either man-made or made of a natural substance (such as wood or cork), which is not scented or which does not contain chemical attractants. River conditions, water flow and water clarity affect fishing success on the river. Fish the river during clear, low flows for best success. The river can become muddy after rain, which can reduce fishing success. However, bait fishing and spin and fly anglers using in-line spinners can be successful in turbid water.

For fly-fishing, 8½ to 9-foot rods for 5 to 6 weight/forward floating and/or sinking tip lines are recommended. Small nymphs and flies work well. Popular flies for this area include a No.10 or No.12 brown or black bead-head wooly bugger or a No.14 bead-head Prince Nymph. When trout aren't responding, try a dropper rig with flies like a No.16 Elk Hare Caddis with a No.14 bead-head Prince Nymph as the dropper. Cast upstream across the current in runs for rainbows and near logs and overhangs for browns. Five-to-seven foot long rods, with 4 - 6 lbs. test line, are ideal for spin fishing. Consider using 1/8 oz. Rooster Tails in brown, green or yellow. Panther Martin 1/8 oz. spinners in yellow or orange are also popular, as are size 3-5 inch Rapalas with perch, rainbow trout, gold or silver patterns.

**Morgan Falls Dam to Peachtree Creek:** The habitat in this 12-mile stretch of river is much wider and shallower than the reach below Buford Dam. As a result, water levels do not fluctuate as much. Generation from Morgan Falls Dam and storm flows can still make this reach difficult at times, so plan on calling the Morgan Falls Dam (404-329-1455) for river conditions before going fishing. This reach was once considered a world-class trout fishery, but several factors including increased impervious surfaces (roads, parking lots, roofs) in the watershed, siltation and changes in releases from Buford Dam have caused water temperatures to rise above that which is acceptable for trout. The number of trout that survive the summer in the river has declined since the late 1980s. However, some trout do survive the warm water periods; so don't cross the river off your list! Fishing the Delayed Harvest (DH) section from Sope Creek (off Columns Drive) downstream to US Hwy. 41 is popular with anglers. WRD stocks 50,000 rainbow and brown trout during the DH period and large trout

up to 18 inches are part of the mix. Anglers that can catch over 70 trout in 2-4 hours is not out of the question! Anglers must release all trout immediately and use and possess only artificial lures with single hooks from November 1 through May 14 annually. Anglers can keep trout and use natural bait from May 15 through October 31 (see the Georgia Sport Fishing Regulations guidebook for more information on trout fishing regulations or visit [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com)). Anglers can harvest fish other than trout during the DH period, but they must abide by the artificial lure only regulation while fishing in the DH section.

For fly-fishing, consider a Parachute Adams in a No.18-22. A black or olive wooly bugger seems to work well when fish are picky. Bead Head Prince, Hares Ear and Pheasant Tail flies in No.14-18 also work well. During an insect hatch, a small Blue Wing Olive or Griffiths Gnat in a No.18-22 may be a better choice. Winter fishing in the river upstream of the DH section between Morgan Falls Dam and Sope Creek can be very productive for yellow perch, shoal bass, largemouth bass, chain pickerel and striped bass. The days to target for best success are sunny days with low, clear water at 45-55° F. Look for blown down trees in the sun with a deep hole on the downstream side. Cast minnows or worms in the hole with a drop-shot rig and wait. Let the fish take the bait then start reeling. Use extra tough line as chain pickerel up to 28 inches have been caught!

WRD has stocked more than 210,000 fingerling shoal bass over the past five years in an effort to restore the shoal bass population downstream of Morgan Falls Dam. Shoal bass are native to the Chattahoochee and the extensive shoal habitat downstream of Morgan Falls Dam likely sustained a healthy population prior to construction of Buford Dam in 1958. Shoal bass numbers have increased dramatically and are becoming popular with anglers during the warmer months. Survival and growth of these fish will be monitored to gauge the success of these stockings. Angler reports of shoal bass catches have increased steadily and 2007 was the best year yet. These fish appear to grow slower than their cousins in the lower Chattahoochee near Columbus and in the Flint River due to cooler water temperatures, but there are good numbers in the 10-12 inch range. These fish are challenging and exciting on both fly-fishing and spin fishing gear. Keep your eye on this developing fishery!

Large, striped bass in the 15-30 lbs. range are found in this part of the river year-round, especially during the summer months. Striped bass numbers likely will increase as WRD began an annual stocking of this fish in West Point reservoir in 2005. During the summer, striped bass migrate out of West Point in search of the plentiful, cooler Chattahoochee water during the summer. Not many anglers are targeting strippers yet, so this is relatively uncharted territory! Anglers can also catch largemouth bass, spotted bass, chain pickerel, black crappie, yellow perch, bluegill and redear sunfish in the slower moving stretches.

### **Chattooga River (Chattooga County)**

The Chattooga River is a tributary of Weiss Reservoir. It originates just south of the City of Lafayette and meanders approximately 51 miles southwest through Walker and Chattooga Counties. A narrow river channel with numerous navigational hazards makes most of this river floatable only by canoe or small boat. Access to the river is limited to bridge crossings and an undeveloped ramp in Gaylesville, Alabama. Larger prop and/or jet boats can navigate the lower portion of the river below State Hwy. 27, but extreme caution should be exercised. The upper portion of the river is wade-able to anglers at bridge crossings and to those gaining landowner permission on private holdings.

Bream dominate the Chattooga River sport fishery.

Redbreast are more abundant in the upper reaches of the river, while bluegill dominate downstream reaches. Bream 5-8 inches are common with some slabs topping 10 inches in length. These larger bream are most common in the river above the city of Trion. Low fishing pressure has likely contributed to an abundance of these larger sunfish. Skilled anglers will target deep pools, logjams and undercut banks in search of these pan-fryers. During the early summer these fish will bed in slack areas along the shore, behind debris and on the downstream side of sandbars. When it comes to artificial baits, small is the key. Small spinners and natural crawfish imitations, along with crickets and worms will all produce fish.

In contrast to the bream fishery, the Chattooga River black bass fishery is relatively poor. Redeye, largemouth and spotted bass can be found throughout the river, with redeye being more common in the upper reaches of the system. Spotted bass are the most dominant black bass species in the lower portion of the river. Largemouth are present, but are much less common. Most bass will be small and generally well under a pound in size. The largest individuals will be captured nearest to where the river enters Lake Weiss.

A modest catfish population can be found in the Chattooga River. Flatheads and blues are present, but they are greatly outnumbered by channel catfish. Channel cats are generally under a pound with few fish tipping the scales at two pounds. These speckled cats are most often located in moderately deep flowing habitats, especially those found in the outside river bends.

With the approach of spring, white bass will migrate into the lower Chattooga River. Spawning runs will peak in March and April as fish stack up around creek mouths in the river. White bass fisherman will likely find most of these spawn-run fish in the lower sections of the river below Lyerly Dam. The white bass bite will slow in May and become non-existent as the fish return to Weiss Reservoir with the approach of summer. Small jigs and crankbaits are favored lure choices for these “mini-linesides.”

Like the white bass, larger striped bass move into the Chattooga River during the spring months. However, unlike their white bass brethren, strippers stay in the river during the summer searching for cool water refuges. Linesides from 1 - 25 lbs. can be caught, with the average fish weighing 6-7 lbs. Live gizzard shad or cut bait are an angler’s best bet, but aggressive strippers will hit shad imitations and top water plugs under the right conditions. More important than bait choice is fishing the right locale. Strippers will stack-up in spring fed pools, especially around fallen trees and logjams and in the mouths of cool water tributaries or springs. Flowing water near cover is key to catching one of these skinny water monsters.

Carp, drum, suckers and a number of redbreast species are found in the river. Freshwater drum average slightly better than 12 inches in length, and a fair number of larger (17+ inches) “humpbacks” are present. The largest drum are concentrated in the “runs” of the river. These runs are generally 2-3 feet in depth at normal flows and can be characterized as having relatively swift flows. Runs along undercut banks and near fallen trees are ideal places to catch drum. Small jigs fished along the bottom, crayfish, cut mussels and shrimp are all good bets for boating these unique, but common and edible river residents.

### **Conasauga River**

From its confluence with the Coosawattee River, upstream to its origin deep within the Cohutta Wilderness area of Fannin County, the Conasauga River extends approximately 95 miles through rural north Georgia and a small portion of southern Tennessee. The river offers anglers a diverse fishing opportunity from wade fishing for trout in its upper reaches, to boat fishing for catfish on its lower extent.

Public boat access is restricted to a few road crossings and private boat ramps found over the course of the river. Boaters should use extreme caution navigating anywhere on the river as shoals, rocks and debris jams are common. A **"Guide to Fishing the Conasauga River"** is available at [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com). This document contains access and fishing tip information and a printable color map with river-mile designations.

The Conasauga River within the Cohutta Wilderness offers excellent fishing for both redeye bass and three trout species. Reaches downstream of the confluence with Rough Creek are generally considered the transition zone between redeye bass and trout fishing. Rainbow and brown trout generally range from 6-14 inches with "bruiser browns" occasionally topping 22 inches. Native brook trout up to 8 inches are found in the Conasauga headwaters and several smaller tributaries at elevations typically above 2,500 feet. Suggested fishing methods include matching the hatch for fly anglers, or offerings of worms or small spinners. The Conasauga and its tributaries (except the Jacks River watershed) upstream of the Georgia-Tennessee state line are restricted to using only artificial lures from November 1<sup>st</sup> through the last Saturday of March. The Jacks River watershed is only open during the regular trout season and natural baits may be used. A Cohutta Wilderness Area map is available from the U.S. Forest Service for a nominal fee.

Three catfish species lurk the waters of the Conasauga River. Blue and channel cats make up the bulk of "whiskered" fish in the river while fair numbers of moderately sized flatheads round out the family. Blue cats average 20 inches, but anglers should focus their efforts in the lower section of the river below Hwy. 76. Channel cats are smaller than blues and typically measure around 14 inches. They can be caught from the Tennessee state line downstream to Calhoun, Georgia. The average flathead is around 20 inches with "willow cats" topping 30 inches and weighing 20-30 lbs. Like blues, fish for flatheads downstream of Hwy. 76 using live fish to coax strikes from bigger individuals.

Bream fishermen have the opportunity to catch an array of common and even some lesser-known sunfish species on the Conasauga River. Generally, anglers will fish for the larger bluegill, redear and redbreast sunfish. These bream will average 5+ inches, with some larger 8-9 inch fish available. Bluegill and redear are found throughout the river below the Tennessee state line. Redbreast sunfish favor the skinny water upstream of Hwy. 76. Lesser-known bream species such as spotted, longear and green sunfish are relatively abundant, and can make for a diverse outing on the river. Live bait and small jigs fished around the pools of the river near fallen trees should produce bream of all kinds.

Bass fishing would be considered only fair on the Conasauga River. Spotted, largemouth and redeye bass hunt the entire river, with spotted bass the most populous. Spots will strike just about anywhere on the river, with fish over 3 lbs. considered a good catch.

Freshwater drum, smallmouth buffalo, carp and variety of suckers are very common in the river. Freshwater drum are likely the most abundant large fish in the river and their numbers rival those of any river in Northwest Georgia. Drums are silvery-gray and have a pronounced humped back. They average 12 inches in length, with "bull" drum commonly topping the 20-inch mark. Recent age data indicates drum are long-lived and slow-growing so a 20+ inch fish could be an amazing 25+ years in age! Small jigs, live crawfish, cut mussels and shrimp fished on the bottom will entice a drum strike. Once hooked, these powerful bottom dwellers will generate excitement as they use their wide bodies and the river current to stretch lines.

Lake sturgeon, once a resident of the Coosa River system (which includes the Conasauga River), disappeared in the 1960's.

Pollution and over-fishing are believed to have eliminated these archaic fishes from the river system. Thankfully since then, water conditions have improved in the river and WRD has begun to restock lake sturgeon in an effort to re-establish this native fish. Since their first stocking in 2002, more than 67,000 sturgeon fingerlings have been released in the Coosa basin. This long-term reintroduction project will require annual stockings over the next 15 - 20 years. Sturgeon grow slowly and do not mature for 12-15 years. Therefore, it is important to protect them from harvest until they can reproduce and once again support some limited harvest. Anglers accidentally catching a lake sturgeon should immediately release the fish unharmed. Fish hooked deep will often survive if anglers cut the line near the hook and release the fish with the hook. If you catch or see a sturgeon, please contact the Calhoun Georgia WRD office to report the location (706-624-1161). Such "sightings" are extremely helpful to biologists assessing the survival and dispersal of these magnificent fish.

### Coosa River

The Coosa River flows 30.4 miles west-southwest from Rome, Georgia entering Lake Weiss at the Alabama state line. Four concrete boat ramps on the river offer easy access to the upper, middle and lower portions of the river. The river is navigable by prop-boat over most of its length, though care is needed, as floating debris is commonplace on the river. The historic Mayo Lock and Dam, located approximately 7.1 miles downstream from Rome, is impassable to all but canoeists. A **"Guide to Fishing the Coosa River"** containing access and fishing tip information, as well as a color map with river-mile designations is available at [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com).

From late February through early April, white bass pile up in the Coosa River as they make their annual spawning run from Lake Weiss. The river section between the River Road boat ramp near Coosa, upstream to the Mayo Lock and Dam Park is prime territory for catching spawn run white bass. Numbers of white bass will be good this spring. Female fish will commonly run 2 lbs. in size and the smaller males will be around ¾ lbs. Males show up on the spawning ground first, while egg-laden females show up a bit later in the season. Start your spring fishing trips later in the morning - giving the sun time to warm the river shallows. The warming brings the white bass out of the river channel and into the shallows to feed. Key in on creek mouths and fallen trees where hungry white bass wait for food to float by. Anglers targeting white bass should try casting small jigs or ¼ - ½ oz. shad patterned crankbaits. Most likely, anglers will catch a mixed bag of white bass and crappie using these techniques.

The Coosa River is home to one of only a handful of naturally reproducing land-locked striped bass populations in the nation. The average Coosa striper is 5-6 lbs., but linesides exceeding 30 lbs. are often caught during the spring spawning run in the area from the Mayo Lock and Dam upriver to Rome. Live or cut shad is the most popular bait, but a few stripers are fooled using such artificial lures as bucktail jigs, shad colored crankbaits and large jerkbaits fished in swift water near fallen trees. After the spawn, stripers disperse all over the Coosa River basin in search of cool waters to beat the summer heat. These fish can be found hiding wherever there is cool water in the rivers and smaller tributaries of the Coosa River. Find one of these locations and striped bass could be on the menu all summer. When cooler fall temperatures arrive, stripers will begin moving back toward the main lake where anglers can find them chasing shad on the main river. From mid-to-late winter the lower sections of the Coosa River and into Lake Weiss are good bets to find some winter striper action.

Largemouth bass predominate, but spotted bass up to 4 lbs.

occur in fair numbers around the main river's bluff banks and creek mouths. To take advantage of an excellent largemouth bass fishery, anglers must move into the sloughs and backwaters off the main stem of the Coosa River. Areas like Brushy Branch (Big Cedar Creek), Kings Creek and Mt. Hope Creek hold plenty of largemouth, but these stump-laden waters must be boated with care. The average "bucket-mouth" will weigh 1-2 lbs., with larger individuals topping the 7-8 lbs. range.

Blue, channel and flathead catfish of all sizes are abundant. The larger blue catfish can top 50 lbs. Fish for these whiskered behemoths in and around logjams that are common along the river. Cats can be taken with a number of unsavory baits, but anglers should keep in mind most "trophy" cats are after live prey such as shad or bream.

Freshwater drum, smallmouth buffalo, gar and suckers also are abundant in the Coosa. The average drum is slightly over 12 inches, but prepare to hook into some bull drum over 20 inches in length. Recent age data indicates drum are long-lived and slow-growing so a 20+ inch fish could be an amazing 25+ years in age! Bluegill, redbreast sunfish and redear sunfish round out the fishing opportunity in the Coosa River.

A few anglers may encounter an odd-looking fish they have never seen before in the Coosa River or its tributaries. The lake sturgeon, once a resident of the Coosa River system, disappeared in the 1960s. Pollution and over-fishing are believed to have eliminated these archaic fishes from the river system. Thankfully since then, water conditions have improved in the river and WRD has begun to restock lake sturgeon in an effort to reestablish this native fish. Since their first stocking in 2002 more than 67,000 sturgeon fingerlings have been released in the Coosa basin. This long-term reintroduction project will require annual stockings over the next 15 to 20 years to reestablish this native fish. The species grows slowly and does not mature for 12-15 years so it is important to protect them from harvest until they can reproduce and once again support some limited harvest.

Anglers accidentally catching a lake sturgeon should immediately release the fish unharmed. Fish hooked deep will often survive if anglers cut the line near the hook and release the fish with the hook. If you catch a sturgeon, please contact the Calhoun WRD office (706-624-1161) to report the location from which the sturgeon was caught. Such "sightings" are helpful to biologists assessing the survival and dispersal of these magnificent fish. Those wondering what impact sturgeon will have on their favorite game species can rest easy. Because of its low reproductive potential, the fish does not establish itself as a prominent species making its impacts to other fish negligible. In fact, the species poor reproductive potential has caused the species to be listed as rare or endangered throughout most of its original range.

### **Coosawattee River (Below Carters Dam)**

The lower Coosawattee River extends approximately 25 miles from Carters Reservoir to its confluence with the Conasauga River northeast of Calhoun, Georgia. Public boat access is limited, but anglers prepared for an all-day outing can float from the small boat access at Carters dam to the only public ramp, located near Calhoun at Hwy. 225. A "**Guide to Fishing the Coosawattee River**" is available at [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com). This document contains access and fishing tip information, as well as a color map with river-mile designations. Navigation is relatively easy for small boats over the entire river, but care must be given to avoid several shallow shoals and tree-falls in the river. In addition, water levels can change abruptly during periods of water release at Carters dam. Daily generation schedules for the dam can be obtained by contacting the COE office at

Carters Reservoir (706-334-2248).

Catfish are extremely abundant in the waters of the lower Coosawattee River. Channel and blue cats dominate, with flatheads being far less common and are generally found in the extreme lower portion of the river near Calhoun. Channels and blues are found throughout the river. However, blue cat numbers tend to increase going downstream. Anglers tossing chicken liver and cut bait below shoals, undercut banks and logjams will produce fish, but most "bragging cats" will hold out for live offerings such as bream or shad. The average channel cat will run about ½ lb., while the average blue will near 1¼ lbs. These "deep fryers" are numerous and anglers are encouraged to harvest fish in this size range. Harvesting average size fish will help improve growth rates of those remaining, resulting in larger cats for the future.

A number of bream species call the Coosawattee home, with bluegill and redbreasts the most plentiful. Both are found in good numbers throughout the river, but are most abundant in the three-mile river stretch below Carters dam. The average fish will be 5-6 inches, but plenty of 7-9 inch fish are swimming these waters. Crickets, worms and small artificials fished in areas of deep slack water behind river obstacles, root wads and tree-falls are all potential hangouts for these species.

Three species of black bass patrol the Coosawattee River, with spotted bass dominating more than 50 percent of the population, followed by redeye and largemouth bass. The spot fishery is better than most large rivers in the immediate area, affording anglers the opportunity to catch a fair number of spots in an outing. Coupled with good numbers, spotted bass up to 6 lbs. may stretch lines in and around the numerous logjams and deep pools found in the river. Redeye bass are smaller than spots, but what they lack in size they more than account for in aggressiveness and power. Most redeye will be under a pound, which is typical for the species. However, anglers hooking into large redeye with light spinning tackle will have their hands full. Largemouth are generally rare in the river, as would be expected given habitat more suited for the previously discussed bass species. Nevertheless, a few "bucket-mouths" potentially could round out an angler's day on the water.

Striped bass inhabit the Coosawattee River, especially during the summer and early fall months when they are seeking cool water to beat the summer heat. Stripers will generally range in size from 1 - 30 lbs., with the average lineside tipping scales in the 5-6 lbs. range. Most striper fishing is done in the river below Carters dam. However, fish can be found in deep holes or in the mouths of feeder creeks throughout the river. Since striped bass feed heavily on shad - live or cut shad is a recommended bait, though artificials have their place on the river.

The Coosawattee is once again home to a fish that disappeared from the river nearly 40 years ago. Since 2002, 67,000 plus lake sturgeon have been re-introduced to the Coosawattee and surrounding rivers in the greater Coosa River basin. Pollution and over-fishing are believed to have eliminated most of these archaic fishes from the river system in the 1960's. Thankfully since then, water conditions have improved in the river. Through long-term annual stocking it is hoped the species will reclaim much of its historic inhabitation within the river. The species grows slowly and does not mature for 12-15 years so it is important to protect them from harvest until they can reproduce and once again support some angler harvest. Anglers accidentally catching a lake sturgeon should immediately release the fish unharmed. Fish hooked deep will often survive if anglers will cut the line near the hook and release the fish with the hook. If you catch a sturgeon, please contact the Calhoun (706-624-1161) WRD office to report the location from which the

sturgeon was caught. Such “sightings” help biologists assess the status of these magnificent fish.

Rounding out the Coosawattee fishing experience is a host of often over-looked rough fish species. Suckers, redhorse, carp and freshwater drum are found throughout the river in large numbers. In fact, freshwater drum is one of the most abundant fish species in the river. These silver, hump-backed fish range in size from just a few inches to over 20 inches in length, though the average drum will be 11 inches. Recent age data indicates that drum are long-lived and slow-growing so a 20+ inch fish could be an amazing 25+ years in age! While drum can be found throughout the river, the few hundred-yard stretch below Carters dam is a hot bed. The species prefers moderately deep flowing river sections in which to feed. Small hair jigs bumped along these areas, live crawfish, cut mussels, worms and even shrimp fished on the bottom are an angler’s best approach to “drumming up” one of these unique fish.

### **Lower Etowah River (Below Allatoona Reservoir)**

Extending nearly 49 miles from the Lake Allatoona Dam downstream to Rome, Georgia is the lower Etowah River. Water flow in the Etowah is greatly influenced by water releases from Allatoona Dam. During dam operation the waters of the Etowah can rise as much as 3-4 feet in a short period, creating potentially dangerous boating conditions. The water release schedule is variable. However, information about the weekly generating schedule can be obtained from the United States Army Corp of Engineers (COE) office at 678-721-6700. For the most part, public access is limited to portages at bridge crossings, but the lower stretch of river is boat accessible from the concrete ramp at Heritage Park in Rome and at the newly constructed boat ramp located at the Hwy. 1 (Rome Loop) bridge crossing. A "Guide to Fishing the Lower Etowah River" is available at [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com). This document contains access and fishing tip information, as well as a color map with river-mile designations. Boaters should use extreme caution as fluctuating water levels and rocky shoals throughout the river make navigation a challenge.

Bluegill, redbreast and redear sunfish dominate the Etowah River bream fishery. The average fish approaches 6 inches with some larger fish in the 7-8 inch range being present. Sunfish numbers are greatest in the river above state Hwy. 411. Fallen trees and logjams are the key if anglers want to catch these species in number. Small jigs and spinners will work, but live bait is probably an angler’s best approach for catching “dinner” numbers of these fish.

Do not overlook the “whiskered” resources of the lower Etowah River. Catfish likely offer one of the best fishing opportunities in the area, and anglers will find channels, blues and flatheads available. Channel catfish are the most abundant species, but what the blue cat lacks in numbers, it more than makes up for in size. The average blue tips the scales at nearly 3 lbs., with 8-10 lbs. fish commonplace. More excitingly, blue cats over 40 lbs. in size are caught every year from the lower Etowah. These aren’t your typical chicken liver cats. While this approach will boat catfish, trophy individuals will hold out for offerings of live or cut shad. Hunt these behemoths in the Etowah’s deep flowing pools, especially those associated with some type of structure.

Striped bass are the lower Etowah’s crown jewel for fishermen. Stripers move into the Etowah in April and reside there through October. The average summer fish will be 6-7 lbs. with “pole-benders” approaching 30 lbs. lurking in the depths. These fish congregate in the numerous coldwater refuges the Etowah offers during the summer heat. Good concentrations of stripers are typically found in the river above and below state Hwy. 411. Severe drought conditions last summer may result in fewer than normal 15+ lbs.

stripers returning to the river this year. Best fishing is from a small boat, as public access is limited. Live bait is key, though artificials have their place on the river. Anglers throwing large surface lures at dawn and dusk may be rewarded with some awe inspiring surface strikes from these powerful fish.

Three black bass species can be found in the Etowah, with spotted bass comprising approximately 80 percent of the population. Largemouth and redeye bass make up the difference. Overall the black bass population would be characterized as “fair.” The bulk of the population is made up of fish less than 12 inches, with some spots potentially reaching 20 inches. The largest spots are often boated using live bait fished in deep water. Work baits near cover, especially cover associated with flowing water. This approach may also land the occasional striper or catfish.

Smallmouth buffalo, freshwater drum and several sucker and redhorse species can be found in the Etowah. Buffalo and drum are two of the most abundant species residing in the river. Anglers do not often pursue freshwater drum, but these hard fighters offer a unique angling opportunity and are fine table-fare. Atop large numbers of 12-inch fish, the Etowah produces some extremely large “humpbacks”. Drum over 20 inches can be found in the best river habitats. Recent age data indicates drum are long-lived and slow-growing, so a 20+ inch fish could be an amazing 25+ years in age! These bottom feeders will concentrate in the runs of the river. Water 2-3 foot deep moving at a good clip will hold the greatest number and largest drum. Small jigs bumped along these areas, live crawfish, cut mussels and shrimp fished on the bottom will entice a strike. Some of the best drum water can be found in the mile or two stretch of river above the new Hwy. 1 (Rome Loop) boat ramp in Rome.

The Etowah is once again home to a native fish species that disappeared from the river nearly 40 years ago. Since 2002, 67,000 plus lake sturgeon have been re-introduced to the Etowah River and other rivers in the greater Coosa River basin. Pollution and over-fishing are believed to have eliminated most of these archaic fishes from the river system in the 1960’s. Thankfully since then, water conditions have improved in the river. Through long-term annual stocking it is hoped the species will reclaim much of its historic inhabitation within the river. The species grows slowly and does not mature for 12-15 years so it is important to protect them from harvest until they can reproduce and once again support some angler harvest. Anglers accidentally catching a lake sturgeon should immediately release the fish unharmed. Fish hooked deep will often survive if anglers will cut the line near the hook and release the fish with the hook. If you catch a sturgeon, please contact the Calhoun (706-624-1161) WRD office to report the location from which the sturgeon was caught. Such “sightings” help biologists assess the survival of these magnificent fish.

### **Flint River (upper)**

The upper Flint River is one of Georgia’s most treasured natural resources and home to a unique and productive sport fishery. Its scenic qualities provide an opportunity to combine fishing with an experience of natural beauty that few rivers in the southeast can surpass, and all only a short drive from Atlanta, Macon or Columbus. The upper sections are especially suitable to the canoe and kayak float trips that are increasingly popular with all age groups. Although it is fair to say that the upper Flint River has been “discovered,” there are times of the year you can still have this river almost to yourself.

The Flint River originates near the bustle of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, but the noise rapidly subsides as the stream winds south, passing west of Griffin before flowing along the eastern edge of Joe Kurz WMA. Conditions permitting, the river is

navigable by canoe as far north as Woolsey, but the section between Joe Kurz WMA and Atlanta receives little fishing pressure due to limited access, shallow water and obstructions such as fallen trees and a low head dam just below Hwy. 92. Within this section those with access and determination may be rewarded with some good redbreast fishing and the occasional shoal bass or largemouth bass.

From the first major public access at Joe Kurz WMA, the river flows 27 river miles through a series of major rapids and shoals interspersed with slow moving flatwater sections, and even past "mountains" up to 1,200 feet before reaching Sprewell Bluff State Park. From Sprewell Bluff the river's untamed and scenic character continues for another 37 river miles, passing Big Lazer Creek WMA before crossing the Fall Line in the vicinity of Hwy. 128 near the city of Roberta. At this point the river becomes a sandy, meandering stream with only occasional rock outcrops. It continues for another 63 river miles before entering Lake Blackshear, the first of three impoundments along the river's length.

The entire 128-river mile reach of the Flint River from Joe Kurz WMA to Lake Blackshear provides excellent fishing, but many anglers prefer the upper Piedmont section from Joe Kurz WMA to around Hwy. 128 because of its scenic qualities and numerous shoals. A favorite technique involves floating or motoring to a major shoal and then wade-fishing the pools and swift runs with spinning tackle or fly rod. These shoals are the favored habitat of the aptly named shoal bass and this is by far the most popular species among Flint River anglers. Local names for notable fishing shoals include Waddell, Dripping Rock, Goat Mountain, Pasley, Sprewell Bluff, Owens, Yellow Jacket, Hightower, Daniels and Snipes. Although most of these shoals are easily navigated by canoe, occasional whitewater near the Class III level requires caution, especially in the area between Sprewell Bluff and Po Bidy Road. Major access points in the Piedmont section of the Flint River are at Joe Kurz WMA, Hwy. 18, Sprewell Bluff State Park, Hwy. 36, Po Bidy Road, Hwy. 80, and Hwy. 128. WRD recently has constructed new boat ramp facilities at Joe Kurz WMA and Hwy. 128.

Shoal bass are the signature species of the Flint River. They resemble smallmouth bass but are actually a completely unique species native only to the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers and their major tributaries, as well as the Chipola and Apalachicola rivers of northwest Florida. They were stocked into the Ocmulgee River, Georgia in the 1970s. Shoal bass can reach weights of over eight pounds and are an exciting challenge in the swift water. Preferred spinning gear is in the light to medium category since many shoal bass caught in the Piedmont section of the Flint River will be in the 11 – 15 inch range, but you should always be prepared for the 18 - 22 inch tackle buster. A shoal bass weighing 7 lbs., 5 oz. was caught in the Flint River in 2004.

Shoal bass can be caught on a wide variety of lures, and some of the favorites are small swimming minnows, spinner baits, top water poppers and Texas-rigged worms and lizards. Wading the shoals is particularly suited to fly-fishing. Just bring your six to eight weight bass or trout rod and plenty of wooly buggers and poppers. A bronze flash will often follow a cast into the clear runs and pools as a shoal bass strikes your lure or fly. All serious Georgia anglers should experience this truly unique fishery.

Flows in the upper Flint River were at or near record lows throughout most of 2007 and this has had a significant impact on characteristics of the fish community. Shoal bass were abundant in recent WRD samples from the Piedmont section, but the average size was significantly smaller than in 2003 and 2005. Currently, about 70 percent of shoal bass are between 6 and 12 inches and the remainder are about equally distributed among the larger size classes up to about

20 inches. Although average size is presently smaller than in recent years, the overall size distribution is within the range for the period of record dating back to the 1980s. Fewer shoal bass that are larger than 12 inches could possibly mean two things; that they were more vulnerable to angler harvest while waters were lower or the possibility that difficult navigation issues (due to low flows) created a biased sample towards smaller fish.

The large number of shoal bass in the 6 – 12 inch range predicts good fishing for the next couple of years as smaller fish move into the larger size classes, especially if flows return to normal in 2008 and growth rates improve. As a cautionary note, condition of shoal bass and other species was lower than average for most of 2007 due to low flows and increased competition for food. This could possibly affect the fitness of spawners as well as the number and quality of eggs produced during the 2008 spawning season. The outcome of this scenario will depend on the persistence of drought conditions into the spring of 2008.

Although you can catch shoal bass in the Flint River year-round, the best months are May and June followed by the September through November period. On a good day you can expect to catch over 20 shoal bass. Please remember that Flint River shoal bass less than 12 inches must be released and the practice of catch and release is generally encouraged.

Spotted bass were apparently introduced into the upper Flint River by anglers several years ago and have now colonized the entire Piedmont section of the river from above Joe Kurz WMA downriver to at least Hwy. 128. In some sections spotted bass are now at least as abundant as shoal bass and largemouth bass. An investigation into the effects of competition and possible hybridization between shoal bass and spotted bass will be one of the objectives of a comprehensive shoal bass study recently initiated on the upper Flint River by WRD and Auburn University. Other objectives of the study include food habits, movement patterns, habitat use, age and growth, genetics and angler exploitation. The studies will involve tagging with both radio transmitters and anchor tags and since one of the objectives of the study is to investigate competition among shoal bass, spotted bass and largemouth, all three species will be radio tagged. Only shoal bass will receive anchor tags to determine angler exploitation rates. Radio tagged fish can be recognized by the small wire antennae visible ventrally and if caught these fish should be released immediately. The orange anchor tags will be visible on the left side and these tags should be clipped off and kept. Please call the Auburn University phone number that is visible on the tag to participate in the study and receive a \$5 – \$50 reward and a cap.

Shoal bass may win the popularity contest, but redbreast sunfish remain the favorite of many. These colorful little fighters are fun to catch on ultra light gear and are excellent eating. Since they are found in the same areas as shoal bass it is easy to target both species on the same trip. In addition to the shoals, redbreasts are also found along the banks around snags in moderate to slack current. Favorite lures are very small spinners such as roostertails, small curly-tail grubs with spinners, beetle spins and the smallest crank baits. Crickets may at times produce better than artificial lures. Fly fishermen should bring small poppers and wet flies that resemble spiders or caterpillars. The Flint River is noted for its hand-size redbreast and you can typically expect about 30 percent of your redbreast catch to be in the 6-7 inch class. The present size distribution indicates good reproduction and if flows return to normal good fishing can be expected for at least the next couple of years. As with shoal bass, condition of redbreast declined in 2007 due to low flows and competition for food and this may lower reproductive success in the spring of 2008, especially if low flows persist.

Although seldom specifically targeted, largemouth bass, bluegill, shellcracker and crappie are common in the Piedmont section of the Flint River. These species are typically found in slack water areas and will rarely be caught in the shoals favored by shoal bass and redbreast. Fishing for these species requires a boat and the best method is drift fishing in slack water areas, casting deep into snags along the bank with the same tackle used for these species in lakes and ponds. The result can be a relaxing and often productive day of fishing.

Catfish round out the Flint picture and both channel and flathead catfish are popular with anglers. Many catfish anglers use set hooks or trotlines, but both species can be caught with rod and reel as well. Channel catfish are most abundant in deep areas around shoals and in deeper river bends, particularly near snags. Preferred baits are earthworms, prepared baits, liver, catalpa worms and crayfish. Flathead catfish are abundant in the Piedmont, but are generally smaller than in the Coastal Plain areas below Hwy. 128. Regardless of location or method, you must use live bait to catch flatheads. Most flathead fishermen use live bream, but large minnows, shad or even small catfish will also produce. Flatheads are most abundant in deeper river bends around snags, and patience is required since they seem to feed actively for only short periods during the day. Flathead catfish can reach over 40 lbs. in this river and stout gear is required to keep the powerful fish out of the snags where they hide and ambush their prey.

The character of the Flint River is altered dramatically after it passes over the Fall Line in the vicinity of Hwy. 128. Bottom substrate changes from the diverse mixture of sand, bedrock, boulders, gravel, and cobble of the Piedmont to predominantly sand with only occasional boulders and gravel deposits. The river channel also begins to meander creating the typical pattern of steep, eroded banks that alternate with sand point bars and willow thickets. A few small oxbows are also found along the river in the upper Coastal Plain. The character of the fish community is altered by these habitat changes.

It is often assumed that the shoal bass population declines as shoal habitat disappears below the Fall Line. Our data indicate, however, that shoal bass are common in the Coastal Plain section of the upper Flint River from Hwy. 128 to Montezuma, and the average size is larger than in the Piedmont. About 40 percent of Coastal Plain shoal bass will be in the larger 14 - 20 inch class with about 5 percent in the trophy category over 20 inches. Shoal bass in Coastal Plain areas prefer swifter water near the banks, almost always in association with larger snags. Few shoal bass will be found in other habitat types. Largemouth bass are equally abundant in Piedmont and Coastal Plain sections and they typically outnumber shoal bass below the Fall Line. Although largemouth bass potentially grow much larger than shoal bass, average lengths of the two species are similar in the Flint River.

Redbreasts are about equally abundant in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain and sizes are similar. Bluegill outnumber redbreast below the Fall Line and they are exceptionally abundant in the area between Hwy. 96 and Lake Blackshear. Good channel and flathead catfish populations are found from the Fall Line to Lake Blackshear, and are generally associated with accumulations of snags in the well defined, deeper outside bend areas. Major access points in the upper Coastal Plain are between Hwy. 128 and Lake Blackshear are at Hwy. 128, Hwy. 96, Macon County Ferry Road, Montezuma Bluff, Hwy. 49 between Montezuma and Oglethorpe and Reeves Landing.

In summary, on the Flint River you can have your choice - the picturesque shoals and rugged, forested hills of the Piedmont, or the lazy meandering river of the upper Coastal Plain. There is plenty of good fishing to experience in both areas, and 2008 should be a typical year for the Flint River if flows return to near normal levels.

Continuation of drought conditions could result in further temporary declines in the quality of the fishery. Drought cycles have occurred often in the past and associated declines in sport fisheries are always followed by fairly rapid recovery.

Please contact the Fort Valley office of the Fisheries Management Section (478-825-6151) for more information on planning your fishing trip on the upper Flint River.

### **Flint River (lower)**

The Flint River is renowned for its outstanding shoal bass fishery. This unique species of black bass is native only to a few rivers in Georgia, Alabama and Florida. The current Georgia record shoal bass, caught on the Flint River in 1977, weighed an impressive 8 lbs. 3 oz. This long-standing record was nearly broken in the summer of 2006 when one fortunate angler landed an amazing 8 lbs. 2-1/2 oz. shoal bass on the Flint between Albany and Lake Blackshear. This catch was certified as a line class (12-lbs. test) world record! The best time of year to catch shoal bass is the summer (May-July) and fall (Sept.-Oct.) and some of the best action can be found in the shoal areas below Newton (Baker County) and upstream of Hwy. 32 in Lee County. In addition, the small islands found upstream from the mouth of Ichawaynochaway Creek are good places to find shoal bass. Anglers should encounter an abundance of feisty 12+ inch fish this year. Relatively low water conditions during spawning in 2006 and 2007 resulted in excellent recruitment of shoal bass and anglers will have good opportunities for shoal bass over the next several years. 2008 fall sampling efforts by WRD staff showed good numbers of larger fish. Shoal bass feed heavily on crawfish, so jigs and soft plastics in crawfish patterns are favorites among anglers. Crankbaits and topwater lures can be very productive as well in the shallower shoal areas. Fly-fishing is a challenging and increasingly popular way to fish for shoal bass. Woolly buggers and large surface poppers should be a standard in any fly box.

Although largemouth bass don't receive the same attention as shoal bass, fishing can be good in certain areas along the Flint. Numbers of largemouth caught during fall surveys continue to increase and a large number of young-of-the-year largemouth were captured this past fall indicating good recruitment and prospects for the future of this fishery. Anglers should encounter an abundance of quality-sized largemouth this year from the strong year class in 2006. For quality largemouth, anglers should try the two-mile stretch of river below Warwick dam and from Lake Chehaw to Abrams shoals. Bass fishing is often overlooked during the winter months. However, this can be a good time to fish, as bass often will congregate around the many springs in the river, which remain a constant 68°F.

Beginning in late February, striped bass and hybrids begin their run up to the Albany dam. Most people cast bucktails for hybrids and striped bass, but crankbaits like shad raps and rapalas also work well. Most stripers will be in the 14-20 inch range and weigh less than 4 lbs., yet a few fish over 20 lbs. are caught each year. Striped and hybrid bass abundances are fair, and should provide anglers decent spring fishing opportunities below the Albany dam. Anglers should also expect to catch good numbers of hybrid and striped bass (less than 10 lbs.) in the tailrace below the Warwick dam during the spring and summer of 2008. Any tagged striped bass caught should be reported to the Albany Fisheries Management Office (229-430-4256) to help aid in the management of this species. In the spring, anglers may encounter Alabama shad in the tailrace. Other than being slightly smaller, Alabama shad are almost identical in appearance to the American shad on the east coast and their flesh and roe is comparable. These shad are an anadromous species that is being restored to the Flint River through fish passage efforts at Jim Woodruff Lock and

Dam. Alabama shad readily accept small jigs and can provide fast and feisty fun on lightweight tackle.

Flathead catfish are a favorite among Flint River anglers. The number of flatheads larger than 20 inches caught during fall 2007 was fair, with fewer large fish observed than during the previous year. This result may indicate that angler catches of large fish has been good during the low water conditions experienced over the last few seasons. WRD fisheries staff captured several fish during fall 2007 surveys that exceeded 20 lbs.- with the largest weighing 50 lbs! Most of the flatheads caught in 2008 should range from 20-28 inches and weigh less than 10 lbs. The best fishing usually takes place during spring (prior to spawning) during rising water conditions, and again during summer months when flatheads occupy the deeper holes in the river. Live bait is a must, with bream being the bait of choice. Although noodling for catfish became legal in Georgia in 2006, we have not received any word of success. If you noodle for catfish please report your luck hand-fishing! Some very productive areas can be found downstream of Hwy. 32 in Lee County and the river section above Newton in Baker County.

Based on angler creel data and WRD surveys, channel catfish are abundant and available to Flint River anglers. Many young-of-the-year channel catfish were observed during fall surveys indicating successful spawning during the low water conditions of 2007. The portion of the Flint River below the Warwick dam is very productive and popular with local anglers. This area, as well as the entire Flint River, should have good numbers of harvestable-sized channel catfish available to anglers in 2008. Anglers should try bottom fishing with baits such as worms, chicken liver or dead shrimp and concentrate efforts immediately above and/or below the numerous shoals found throughout the lower Flint River.

Low water conditions during 2006 and 2007 may have resulted in slower growth and more fishing pressure for bream on the Flint, yet bream populations have remained relatively high and constant over the last several years. Increased numbers of 5 – 6 inch bluegill were seen during fall sampling in 2007 as well as a slight increase in 8 – 10 inch bluegill. Snags and blowdowns in the river section above Lake Blackshear and upstream from Lake Worth to Abram Shoals offer good fishing spots for bluegill. Redbreast sunfish are more abundant in and around the shoal areas of the river. Redear sunfish can be found throughout the lower Flint River from Lake Blackshear downstream to below Newton.

### **Ochlockonee River**

The Ochlockonee River may not be as familiar to anglers as other major rivers in South Georgia – but is still worthy of a visit. Unfortunately, due to the small size of this river and last year's drought conditions, the WRD Fisheries Management Section was unable to sample this river. However, historical data and collected information allows WRD to share the following tips and prospects.

This slow-moving, black water stream offers good fishing for redbreast sunfish. Past surveys have revealed an abundant class of large redbreast greater than 8 inches and this species traditionally is more numerous in the lower portions of the river, from Hwy. 93 to Hadley's Ferry Road. Anglers will usually fare better using live crickets and worms during early spring and switching to artificial lures, such as beetle spins and popping bugs, as spring progresses and water temperatures rise. Although not as abundant as redbreast, anglers can expect to catch several other panfish including redear sunfish, black crappie, spotted sunfish and warmouth.

The Ochlockonee River has a fair largemouth bass population. Good locations to fish include the backwater areas near Thomasville and the section of the river upstream from Hwy. 93.

Anglers fishing the Ochlockonee often will encounter a unique member of the sunfish family, the Suwannee bass. The Suwannee bass is generally smaller than its cousin, the largemouth bass, and is found in only a few streams in South Georgia and north Florida. Several heavy Suwannee bass were collected or reportedly caught by anglers during 2006. The overall population of Suwannee bass in the Ochlockonee is relatively small, but it did provide the current state record Suwannee bass (3 lbs. 9 oz.) in 1984. Suwannee bass typically prefer swifter water, but as the summer progresses and the river recedes they can be caught in the deeper pools using small crankbaits, spinner baits and soft plastics.

Anglers looking to catch a mess of catfish would be wise to try the Ochlockonee during warmer months. Any favorite catfish bait fished on a simple bottom rig should be effective on a variety of species including channel catfish, white catfish and bullheads. Thankfully, there are no confirmed reports of non-native flathead catfish in the Georgia portion of the Ochlockonee. Anglers who suspect they have caught a flathead should keep the fish and call the Albany Fisheries Management Office (229-430-4256) as soon as possible.

### **Ocmulgee River (upper)**

The Ocmulgee River begins its long journey through central Georgia under the waters of Lake Jackson at the junction of the Yellow, South and Alcovy Rivers. From Lloyd Shoals Dam at Lake Jackson the Ocmulgee River flows southeast through the scenic shoals of the Piedmont for 36 miles before crossing the Fall Line just above Macon. Below Macon the character of the river changes dramatically as the floodplain widens to produce river bottom swamps and the shifting channel meanders between sand bars, willow thickets, steep banks and backwater sloughs. The Ocmulgee River from Lloyd Shoals Dam to Hawkinsville has two characters, delineated by the Fall Line and providing distinctly different fishing opportunities. Anglers in central Georgia have the unique opportunity to experience each within a short drive from Macon, Warner Robins or Perry.

Lloyd Shoals Dam is one of Georgia Power Company's oldest hydroelectric dams and provides the backdrop for a fishing trip to the productive tailrace area. A metal weir has been constructed across the channel just below the dam to improve dissolved oxygen levels. A turbine venting system recently installed in three of the turbine bays will provide even better tailrace oxygenation and has replaced the functioning of the weir, most of which will eventually be removed. A long catwalk was built along the west bank adjacent to the weir to provide a comfortable fishing area for bank anglers. Expect to catch bluegill, crappie, catfish, striped bass and hybrid bass here throughout the year, with the best catches in the spring.

Striped bass were stocked in Lake Jackson in 2005 in combination with hybrids for the first time in many years to provide added trophy potential to the reservoir fishery and to help improve the status of the striped bass population in the Altamaha River system. Escapement from the reservoir has always provided hybrids to the Lloyd Shoals Dam tailrace fishery, but the added presence of striped bass will now result in a new and exciting opportunity for Ocmulgee River fishermen. In the spring of 2008 expect the striped bass stocked in Lake Jackson in 2005 to average 22 – 24 inches and 4 – 6 lbs., but some of the stripers that escape into the river below Lloyd Shoals Dam may reach 30 lbs. in the next 5 – 8 years.

Georgia Power has provided an excellent boat ramp and picnic area on the east bank just below the dam and motorboat anglers launching here have access to about 0.7 miles from the weir to a major shoal at Hwy. 16. Hybrids have traditionally stacked up at the base of the weir and in 2008 you also can expect to catch striped bass at this

location. Largemouth bass, bluegill and shellcracker are numerous in the calmer waters along the banks. Expect excellent catches of redbreast and a few shoal bass during the April – June period as the current picks up near the shoal at Hwy. 16. Spotted bass were apparently stocked into Lake Jackson by fishermen in the 1990s and are now found in the upper Ocmulgee River as well. They are especially abundant near Lloyd Shoals Dam in areas with moderate current.

Canoes can float over the shoals and continue downriver to a takeout location at the Wise Creek Recreation Area while motorboats are limited to the deeper water above Hwy. 16. The section from Lloyd Shoals Dam to Wise Creek (5.3 miles) is normally an easy one-day float, but a couple of shoals in the lower reach contain whitewater sections that require caution. Be sure to scout these areas before proceeding and watch for the take out location on the east bank at the mouth of Wise Creek just below the last shoal. It is probably no exaggeration to state that the area of alternating shoals and flat water reaches between Hwy. 16 and Wise Creek may provide one of the best angling experiences in Georgia. Your biggest problem with fishing this area may be deciding if you had rather fish for shoal bass or redbreast, but you might catch a limit of both on a good day in May or June. Most shoal bass will be in the 12 – 16 inch range, with about 10 percent between 16 and 18 inches and the occasional lunker from 18 to over 20 inches. Expect to catch a few of the recently introduced spotted bass in this section as well, and these will average slightly smaller than the shoal bass. Redbreast will average 5 - 6 inches.

Preferred shoal bass lures are small to medium swimming minnows, spinner baits, poppers and artificial worms. The fly fisherman should bring plenty of wooly buggers and medium poppers. Crickets are the traditional redbreast bait, but ultra light tackle with small spinners or fly-fishing with small poppers or spider imitations can sometimes be just as productive. As an added incentive for a trip to this area, the U. S. Forest Service has upgraded the canoe access facilities at the Wise Creek Recreation Area located on the east side of the river on the Oconee National Forest. The recreation area can be reached off of Clay Road between Hwy. 83 and Hwy. 16. Excellent wade fishing for shoal bass and redbreast is available for anyone willing to tackle the one half mile upstream paddle to a large shoal area.

Access is relatively limited for the remainder of the Piedmont section of the Ocmulgee River from Hwy. 83 to Macon. The longest reach accessible to motorboat anglers is a 10-mile section both up and downstream of the ramp at Hwy. 83, but sand flats and obstacles at low flows require caution. A private developer has recently purchased a primitive boat ramp site previously open to the public just above the Juliette Dam. This site will remain open to the public until a new launch site is constructed by Monroe County just below the old boat ramp and downstream of Juliette Road on the west bank. It is anticipated that this site will open in the spring of 2008 and at that time the road to the old boat ramp will be closed. A one-mile section in the vicinity of Popes Ferry is the only other area currently accessible to motorboats between Hwy. 83 and Macon. A new public boat ramp scheduled for opening in the spring – summer of 2008 at the old Macon Waterworks plant will improve access for motorboats between Arkwright and Macon.

Anglers should consider that most of the reach between Hwy. 83 and Macon is essentially canoe or kayak country. For an easy float trip try the four-mile section between Hwy. 83 and the take-out point located just above the Juliette Dam on the west bank. For the more adventurous, consider the nine miles from the canoe launch site just below the Juliette Dam to Popes Ferry, or the 14 miles from Popes Ferry to Spring Street in Macon. Although there are no major

whitewater challenges in this reach, shoals are numerous and could easily capsize a kayak or especially a heavily loaded canoe. Carefully scout the major drop just below Dames Ferry at Hwy. 18 prior to heading out in this area.

For those without a boat the shoals just below the Juliette Dam can be accessed for wade fishing from a canoe launch site just below the dam on the east side. The quarter mile area below the dam provides excellent shoal bass and redbreast fishing and as an added bonus the American shad, striped bass, and hybrids concentrate at the base of the dam during March – May. The Juliette Dam is the first barrier on the Ocmulgee River encountered by American shad on their long spawning runs up from the Atlantic Ocean. The dam is a frustration for the shad but a boon for anglers since it concentrates the fish in numbers large enough to be caught on spinning tackle using “shad darts” or on a fly rod with small streamers. American shad fishing is as popular as bass fishing in some parts of the country, but they receive little attention in Georgia. For a new fishing experience try the American shad below the Juliette Dam. They will average 20 inches and a little over 2 lbs. and are sporting on light to medium tackle. Many consider them excellent eating and there is a generous eight fish daily creel limit. American shad are found below the Juliette Dam in most years from March through early May but are most abundant during the peak of the spawning run in April.

Historically a modest spring run of striped bass and hybrids has existed below the Juliette Dam with a few stripers caught in the 10 to 20 lbs. class and the hybrids averaging 5 – 6 lbs. Escapement of striped bass stocked in lakes Jackson, Tobesofkee and High Falls beginning in 2005 should improve the striped bass fishing in the Ocmulgee River below the Juliette Dam. Hybrid stockings in these lakes were gradually phase out during 2005 – 2007 and have been replaced with equal numbers of striped bass. Additional sources of striped bass to the Ocmulgee River are from Lake Juliette where they have been stocked for over 10 years and from more recent stockings in the lower Altamaha River. The Ocmulgee River fisherman should definitely benefit from these WRD efforts to improve the status of striped bass in the Altamaha River system. Imagine battling A 30 lbs. striped bass in the swift waters of the Ocmulgee River – it could happen within a few years.

Expect to find shoal bass and redbreast near any shoal throughout the lightly fished area between the Juliette Dam and Macon. Although most fishermen in this section favor shoal bass; largemouth bass, redbreast and bluegill are often abundant in the calmer sections along the banks. While paddling between shoals searching for your next shoal bass, it often pays to cast a spinner bait, topwater plug or worm next to a snag in one of the slack water sections. About 25 percent of the largemouth bass in this area are 12 – 15 inches, over 15 percent are between 15 and 20 inches, and about 10 percent are in the 20 – 25 inch category. Increasing numbers of recently introduced spotted bass in the area from Lake Jackson to Macon have contributed to the black bass population and total bass numbers are presently the highest on record.

The bedrock outcrops and shoals of the Piedmont come to an abrupt end about seven miles above Macon near Arkwright. A relatively unproductive transitional zone of shallow sand flats forms below the last shoal near the River North Bridge and continues down to the vicinity of Spring Street in Macon. The true upper Coastal Plain section of the Ocmulgee River begins at Macon and continues for about 70 miles to near Hawkinsville where the character of the river begins a transition to the lower Coastal Plain. In any given year, the quality of fishing below Macon to Hawkinsville can range from fair to excellent, with year class strength of most sport fish dependent on good spawning flows followed by periods of floodplain inundation

during the summer to early fall growing season.

Although shoal bass are found below the Fall Line and are fairly common as far down as Warner Robins, largemouth bass are the predominate black bass below Macon and good catches are possible using the right techniques. Most of the larger snags along the bank, particularly in areas of low current velocities, are home to one or more largemouth bass and they can be fooled with a lightly weighted plastic worm or lizard cast as close to the structure as possible. Spinner baits, medium rapala-type crank baits, plastic jerk baits and topwater plugs are also effective, but the key is getting the lure deep into the cover.

Although largemouth bass can be caught at any time of the year, periods of low to moderate flows in the late spring or fall are best, followed by the summer period. At least moderate water clarity is critical for success, and flows are usually too high and muddy in winter and early spring. Please remember that the largemouth bass length limit is 12 inches above the Spring Street Bridge in Macon and 14 inches below. WRD sampling has found that about 30 percent of the largemouth bass below Macon were in the 8-12 inch range, 35 percent between 12 and 15 inches, and 15 percent between 15 and 20 inches. A few monsters in the 20 – 25 inch class can also be found hanging close to the snags.

Redbreast and bluegill are popular targets in this section of the Ocmulgee River, and although May and June are the most productive months they can be caught in good numbers from spring through fall. Shellcracker can provide some fine fishing during the late April – early May spawning season, if you can locate their spawning beds in the shallow, calmer water near the main channel. Expect redbreast to average about 5 inches, bluegill 5 – 6 inches and shellcracker 8 – 9 inches. The exotic longear sunfish has been increasing in abundance for the last several years and is now found throughout the length of the Ocmulgee River. In some locations it has become the dominant sunfish species. Although one of the most colorful of all sunfish, most are under 4 inches in length and can generally be considered a nuisance. This is an example of the undesirable effects of exotic fish introductions.

Channel catfish are abundant throughout the length of the river and although rod and reel fishing can be effective, most use trotlines or bushhooks baited with prepared baits, liver, crayfish and a variety of “home recipes”. Flathead catfish have colonized most of the Altamaha River system since their introduction in the 1970s, but until recently they were not found above East Juliette because the Juliette Dam blocked upstream passage. WRD sampling now has documented the presence of flatheads above the Juliette Dam and their numbers in this area likely will increase in the next several years. Flatheads are most abundant below Macon where they may reach weights of over 80 lbs. and these are by far the largest sport fish found in the Ocmulgee River. They can be caught with rod and reel as well as bushhooks and trotlines, but regardless of the gear, live bait must be used and the most effective is probably a medium size redbreast or bluegill.

In summary, the upper Ocmulgee River is one of middle Georgia’s most valuable natural resources and a premier fishing destination. Although recent extreme drought conditions will probably result in short-term declines in the populations of some sport fish species, rapid recovery can be expected if flows return to near normal in 2008. Whether it’s an exciting kayak float trip for shoal bass in the Piedmont, fishing for American shad below the Juliette Dam, or a jon boat excursion along the meandering channel to a secret spot below Macon, the Ocmulgee River will draw you back time and again. Anglers can contact the Fort Valley office of the Fisheries Management Section (478-825-6151) for a map of access points and other information on planning your fishing trip on this river.

### **Ocmulgee River (south of U.S. Hwy. 280)**

Whether you prefer casting for that lunker bass, pitching a cricket for redbreast or bluegill, or maybe even setting a trotline for catfish, you should try fishing the lower Ocmulgee River. Due to record drought conditions, fishing should be a little below average for most species this year.

2007 was an extremely low-water year, which has kept the river from entering the floodplain. Fishing is typically best in years after the river has entered the floodplain. If there is any extended flood event in the winter and spring of 2008, expect better fishing than these prospects indicate.

The Ocmulgee River below Abbeville is large and sluggish with many meandering bends and some oxbow lakes. One such lake, Montgomery Lake, produced the current world record largemouth bass (22 lbs. 4 oz.) in 1932 – a record for more than 75 years! It is unlikely this lake will produce another world record bass, but the opportunity to fish this area still awes and excites many bass anglers. Anglers unfamiliar with the river should obtain the free brochure, *A Guide to Fishing the Lower Ocmulgee River*. This guide contains a map of the river showing locations of improved boat ramps and is available from any WRD Fisheries Section office.

Bluegill fishing will be slightly below average this year, but some fish will tip the scales at nearly a pound. If there is a period of high water in the river this spring, the smaller fish should grow rapidly and contribute more to the fishery. The best time to fish for bluegill is between mid-April and mid-June. Popular baits include crickets and catalpa worms fished near the bottom below a light cork. Try pitching your bait around cover along the shoreline in oxbow lakes, sloughs, slack-water areas or eddy pockets.

The number of redbreast sunfish collected last fall by WRD biologists was higher than in 2006, but still below average; most likely due to the lack of high water over the past two years and predation by flathead catfish. Expect redbreast fishing to be slightly below average this year. Popular techniques for catching redbreast include fishing crickets or worms in flowing water around structure along creek and river channels. Also, try the head and tail ends of sandbars. Fish your bait suspended below a float just above the bottom or straight-lined on the bottom.

The redear sunfish (shellcracker) population remains remarkably stable from year to year. However, due to the same low water conditions, the numbers are below average for this year. The Ocmulgee produces fish in the 9-12 inch range that tip the scale at 1-2 lbs., and this trend should continue in 2008. Shellcrackers are not as abundant as redbreast and bluegill, but they make up for it with their larger size. The best fishing will occur in early spring when they move into shallow water in sloughs and oxbow lakes to spawn. Favorite baits include red wigglers or crickets fished near the bottom under a cork. Later in the summer, fish around woody debris and overhanging vines along the riverbank. In the fall, try fishing around flooded grasses and vegetation near the mouths of oxbow lakes and creeks.

The number of largemouth bass collected last fall was down from last year, and was below average. Anglers should expect bass catches to be slightly below average, with most of the catch in the 14-16 inch range. Be ready for an occasional lunker, since WRD sampling efforts consistently locate a few fish in the 7-10 lbs. range each year. Oxbow lakes and slack-water areas containing overhanging willows and woody structure are popular fishing locations, especially in the spring. Later in the summer, try fishing eddy pockets, the downstream end of sandbars and heavy cover along the banks. Popular lures include crankbaits, spinnerbaits, plastic worms and lizards.

Fishing for catfish in the Ocmulgee River should be good this year. There are a good number of quality channel catfish in the river,

but expect most to be in the ½ - 2 ½ lbs. range. The flathead catfish population has been increasing in recent years and there are good numbers of fish in the 4-10 lbs. range. Since flatheads have reduced the abundance of sunfish populations, WRD encourages anglers to fish for and harvest them. Remember, it is illegal to move flathead catfish from one river to another. All sizes of flatheads make good table fare. Anglers commonly catch flatheads on heavy-duty sporting tackle and on limb or trotlines. Live bait works best. Try fishing shiners, bream or Louisiana pinks around snags in the deep holes along outside bends of the river channel during the day. Flatheads tend to move into shallower water to feed after dark and you will have to move with them to be successful. You can catch flatheads year-round, but the best time is from late winter to late summer. For more information on flathead catfish, including additional fishing techniques and tips, obtain a free copy of *A Flathead Catfish Fishing Guide* from your nearest WRD Fisheries Management Office.

Regardless of your preferred species and fishing method, a trip to the Ocmulgee River should be an enjoyable fishing experience. Fishing should be fair in 2008, especially for catfish, redear sunfish, bluegill and largemouth bass, so get out there and take advantage of the varied fishing opportunities available on the Ocmulgee River.

### **Oconee River**

The Oconee River headwaters begin in Hall and Gwinnett counties northwest of Athens and flows southwest for about 265 miles where it joins the Ocmulgee to form the Altamaha River. The Oconee River is regulated through two major dams. The upper Wallace Dam was constructed in 1980 creating Lake Oconee and below is Sinclair Dam constructed in 1953 forming Lake Sinclair. Fishing opportunities are somewhat different, along with the river appearance, above and below these dams. Above, the upper Oconee River flows through the Piedmont Region where you will find bedrock outcroppings, stable bank cover and a gravel or sand bottom. Shortly below the Sinclair Dam, the lower Oconee River finds itself flowing through the Upper Coastal Plain. Cutaway sand banks/bluffs, fallen woody debris, and a river bottom consisting of primarily sand and silt define this area. Fishing opportunities and tactics between the upper and lower Oconee River will vary due to unique habitat differences. Therefore, the following predictions for the Oconee will be region specific.

At certain times of the year, the upper Oconee River may offer the best opportunity to catch a stringer of fish. Most notable is the excellent white bass and crappie fishing opportunities in the stretch of river above Lake Oconee to Barnett Shoals Dam below Athens. The best time to fish this area is between mid-February to late-April. Small chartreuse screw-tail jigs are the preferred bait for both white bass and crappie and live-minnows are always a good bet when jigs are not working. Popular boat ramps in this area are located at Hwy. 15 and Dyar Pasture (both locations are between I-20 and Athens).

Bass and bream fishing opportunities are available on the upper Oconee River. Redeye bass can be found in the swifter water sections having bedrock outcroppings and largemouth bass in slacker water areas around woody cover. Small soft plastics, large spinners and shallow diving crankbaits are always good choices. Panfish anglers should expect to catch plenty of colorful sunfish using ultra light gear rigged with a small rooster tail or beetle spin. In areas of the Upper Oconee that have bedrock shoals, a popular tactic for catching both bass and bream involves wading the shoals with a 6- to 8-weight fly rod rigged with a small popper. Regardless of tactics or type of fish you are targeting, a fishing trip on the Upper Oconee will result in a pleasant outdoor experience.

With good fishing and relatively little angling pressure the lower Oconee River may be just what you are looking for. Anglers fishing for lower Oconee panfish might find harvest rates lower than average in 2008 due to last year's drought. Fish samples collected by WRD in 2006 revealed that about 30 percent of the overall fish collections were comprised of bluegill and most were greater than 6-inches and one-fourth of them ranged from 7 - 10 inches. Almost 20 percent of the fish collections were composed of redbreast, with the majority greater than 6 inches and one-fourth of them between 7 - 10 inches. Longear sunfish are about 13 percent of the fish collections the majority of them hand size (5-6 inches). Anglers wishing to target lower Oconee panfish should try fishing close to cover with catalpa worms or crickets with split-shot and a float. The best locations can generally be found near creek mouths or deep eddy pools near swift current.

The largemouth bass population in the lower Oconee River generally is comparable if not better than most rivers in the upper and lower coastal plain, yet receives the least amount of bass fishing pressure. WRD sampling efforts showed more bass this year than in previous years, with the majority of those collected being young fish (less than 12-inches), but 20 percent of them were greater than 14-inches, and a small percentage greater than 20-inches (or 4-5 lbs.). Classic baits for fishing these swift-water bucket mouths are a chartreuse/white snagless sally, plastic jerk baits, spinnerbaits or a pig and jig. For a good start, try fishing the shoreline near fallen trees with moderate current and gradually work your way into slacker water areas having good cover.

Crappie may provide a good fishing opportunity in the winter and early spring before the bream and bass fishing picks up. Crappie comprise a small percentage of WRD fish collections, but a large percentage of them were quality fish greater than 8-inches and some even greater than 10-inches. Anglers will be most successful by fishing woody cover in slack water areas with live minnows and artificial jigs.

Although catfish are not targeted in WRD sampling efforts, staff did observe a large number of channel catfish ranging from 2-4 lbs. and several flathead catfish. The flathead catfish grow to a very large size, presenting an opportunity to catch a trophy-sized fish. Most success for flatheads comes from fishing limb lines or trot lines set overnight and baited with a hand-sized live bream. Flathead catfish are an introduced predator to the Oconee River, and anglers are encouraged to harvest any flatheads they catch.

Overall, 2008 fishing conditions in the Oconee River likely are negatively impacted by the severe drought in 2007 and anglers may catch fewer and smaller fish than in previous years. In general, fishing for most species in the lower Oconee is better in the river below I-16 (south of Dublin), and fishing in the upper Oconee River should remain good in most areas depending on the time of year.

### **Ogeechee River (upstream of U.S. Hwy. 17)**

Unlike most Georgia rivers the Ogeechee is not regulated by dams. Rather, the river rises and falls according to the amount of rainfall in its watershed. This natural fluctuation in river level plays an important role in fish growth, reproductive success and ultimately fishing. Georgia experienced below average rainfall in the Ogeechee river basin in both 2006 and 2007.

Traditionally, the Ogeechee River has had an excellent redbreast sunfish fishery. The low flows of the past two years have resulted in excellent redbreast reproduction. However, the growth of these and other adult redbreast sunfish has been poor because of the inaccessibility to food resources in the river flood plain during high flows. The drought would not allow for the river to rise into the flood

plain long enough to stimulate good redbreast sunfish growth. Consequently, the redbreast fishery will be poor for Ogeechee standards until the river level rises.

Other panfish species present include bluegill, redear sunfish (shellcracker), black crappie and spotted sunfish (stump-knockers). Scattered pockets of black crappie provide exciting cold-weather fishing from Hwy. 204 upstream as far as Jenkins County. Live bait works well. However, grubs and small screw-tail jigs also can produce nice size crappie. Although smaller than other popular panfish, the spotted sunfish is plentiful in the backwaters of the Ogeechee and should not be overlooked. There is a reason they call them a stump-knocker as they stay very tight to cover.

Although not viewed as a major largemouth bass stream among coastal anglers, the Ogeechee River has a plentiful and healthy largemouth bass population. Look for some excellent bass fishing in the spring as water temperatures rise. April is usually the month when the largest numbers of bass are caught. Effective fishing techniques include spinner baits along the banks and flipping jigs and worms into the tight cover along the banks. One of the better river areas is the railroad trestle upstream of the boat ramp on Hwy. 56 in Midville, with largemouths up to 6 lbs. commonly caught.

White catfish, channel catfish and bullheads are plentiful in the Ogeechee River. Like redbreast sunfish, catfish are usually concentrated where there is a combination of swift water and heavy cover, although bullheads are numerous throughout the river. Effective fishing techniques for the other two species include cut bait or live minnows fished along the outside bends of the river. White catfish abundance increases as you get closer to the estuary, but most of the large catfish are channel catfish.

Flathead catfish are not native to the coastal river drainages of Georgia and are not established in the Ogeechee River. An illegal introduction of flathead catfish into the Ogeechee would be devastating to the fish populations. Anglers need to be aware of the consequences of an illegal introduction of flathead catfish. Once introduced, flathead catfish are impossible to completely remove. The redbreast sunfish and bullhead populations, in particular, are negatively affected by flathead catfish. It is very important that flatheads **not** be introduced into the Ogeechee River. If you have any information about anyone moving flathead catfish, please call the TIP number 1-800-241-4113, 24 hours/day, 7 days/week.

### **Oostanaula River**

The Oostanaula River is a major tributary to the Coosa River system in northwest Georgia. Originating northeast of Calhoun, Georgia at the confluence of the Conasauga and Coosawattee Rivers, it winds southward approximately 49 miles to Rome, Georgia where it merges with the Etowah River to form the Coosa River. A map of boat ramp locations is found in the "**Guide to Fishing the Oostanaula River**" at: [www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com). This document contains a map, boat access and fishing tip information ideal for planning a trip. The Oostanaula is definitely a small boat river and care should be taken when navigating, especially in the low water period during the summer.

The Oostanaula is once again home to a sportfish that disappeared from the river nearly 40 years ago. Since 2002, 67,000 plus lake sturgeon have been re-introduced by WRD to the Oostanaula River and other rivers in the greater Coosa River basin. Once a native to the Coosa River watershed, pollution and overfishing are believed to have eliminated these archaic fishes from the river system in the 1960's. Thankfully since then, water conditions have improved in the river. Through long-term annual stocking the species will hopefully reclaim much of its historic inhabitation within the river. The species

grows slowly and does not mature for 12-15 years, so protection from harvest is important until they can reproduce and once again support some angler harvest. Anglers accidentally catching a lake sturgeon should immediately release the fish unharmed. Fish hooked deeply will often survive if anglers cut the line near the hook and release the fish with the hook. Should you catch a sturgeon this year, please contact the Calhoun (706-624-1161) WRD office to report the location of your unique catch. Such information is very useful to biologists assessing the status of these magnificent fish.

Anglers will likely be most successful in the pursuit of catfish on the Oostanaula. Channels, blues and flatheads inhabit its murky recesses year-round. Fishermen often find the largest individuals in deep pools, undercut banks and in logjams, especially those with good flow around them. All-sized cats will move from these hideouts in the morning and evening to feed around shoals and other shallow habitats. Blue and channel cats occur in similar numbers, with blues averaging 2-3 lbs. and channels nearing ¾ lb. Larger blue cats in the 5-8 lbs. range are somewhat common, with individuals over 10 lbs. being more rare. Flatheads are present, yet in much lower numbers than either blues or channels. Live bait is a must for those looking to boat flatheads with regularity.

The muddy waters of the Oostanaula do not provide the best black bass fishing opportunity. Nearly 80 percent of the black bass population is made up of spotted bass averaging 7-8 inches long. The less common largemouth has an average length of 12 inches and weighs in at just over a pound. Largemouth are more common in the lower reaches of the river while spots, despite being found throughout, are more numerous in the 4-mile stretch above and below state Hwy. 140. Target these fish around creek mouths, debris jams and around overhanging vegetation and fallen trees. Small numbers of redeye bass are resident to the river section above Hwy. 140. However, redeye fisherman will have greater success targeting these natives in the smaller tributaries feeding the Oostanaula.

Bream anglers will find low to moderate numbers of bluegill, and still fewer numbers of redbreast, redear (shellcrackers) sunfish and crappie. Bluegill fishermen will typically find fish averaging 5 inches, with "gills" over 7 inches being rare. Target bream in slow water areas around creek mouths and the slack-waters behind debris jams. Crappie are best sought by anglers during their spring spawning run.

Stripers migrate annually into the lower Oostanaula around Rome, Georgia to spawn. These fish make the run from Lake Weiss to Rome beginning in April and continue pouring in through May. Egg laden females up to 40 lbs. are present, but the bulk of fish will be in the 10-15 lbs. range. Bucktails and live or cut shad can be effective patterns for the spring striper fisherman. Stout fishing gear is a must to prevent these behemoths from breaking you off around the log-jams and tree canopies they frequent in the river. After the spawn, stripers disperse throughout the Coosa River system seeking cool water in which to beat the summer heat. In summer, small stripers may be caught in the Oostanaula, but the premier fishing will be in April and May.

Spring also brings white bass into the Oostanaula to spawn. However, success during this time can be sporadic for the inexperienced. A better bet would be fishing downstream in the Coosa River below the historic Rome Lock and Dam during March and April to take advantage of a superior run of mature white bass. Boats can be launched from the Lock and Dam Park or downstream at the Old River Road boat ramp off state Hwy. 20 west of Rome. These concentrated spawn-run fish can be caught using small jigs and ¼ oz. shad patterned crankbaits such as Rattle Traps. Another trick to white bass success is to hit the water later in the morning. This allows the sun to warm the river shallows, which brings the "whites" out of the river channel and

into the shallows to feed.

Rough fish like smallmouth buffalo, freshwater drum, carp and suckers dominate the relatively slow moving waters of the Oostanaula. Drum average 12 inches in length with larger "bull" drum exceeding 20 inches. Recent age data indicates that drum are long-lived and slow-growing so a 20+ inch fish could be an amazing 25+ years in age! Those wishing to catch drum should target the swifter waters and shoals of the Oostanaula using crayfish, cut mussels, shrimp or small white jigs bumped along the bottom.

### Satilla River

The Satilla River is one of the premier redbreast sunfish rivers in the Southeast and is your best bet for catching a redbreast sunfish weighing over one pound. Low water levels were present throughout 2007 and if these conditions persist throughout the winter and spring of 2008 anglers can expect lower catches than last year. WRD sampling efforts in the spring of 2007 revealed lower than average numbers of redbreast. However, fish 6 inches and above made up a high proportion. This winter the Satilla River has remained relatively low, but has recently risen to near normal flows. If rain events begin arriving on a regular basis the river will push back into the floodplain, providing optimal conditions for growth and anglers will see a few larger redbreasts in 2008. The best redbreast fishing will be in the section of river above the US Hwy. 82 Bridge near Atkinson. In spite of WRD's flathead catfish removal program, flatheads have become well established below US Hwy. 82 and have noticeably reduced the abundance of redbreast sunfish in this section of the Satilla.

If you are looking for a cure for your "cabin fever," a few redbreast can be caught in March by fishing worms or crickets on the bottom. For anglers who prefer to wait for peak fishing, April and May are typically the best months. Fishing usually peaks when the water warms and recedes well within the banks (usually about 4½-5 feet at the Waycross river level gauge). The best method is fishing with crickets and worms under bobbers or on the bottom with split-shot weights. As water temperature increases into the 70s, anglers often switch to artificial lures such as small beetle spins and rooster-tail spinners. Fly-fishing can be very effective after the water warms. Try popping bugs on a fly rod to lure some true "rooster reds."

Although other bream species such as bluegill and spotted sunfish (stumpknockers) receive less attention than redbreast, they are plentiful. These populations also need high water conditions in the winter and spring to produce large numbers of quality sized fish. Therefore, anglers will not likely have as many large stringers of bluegill and other bream in 2008, unless water levels rise into the floodplains. Oxbow lakes and beaver ponds off the main river channel are prime locations for catching a good mess of panfish. Oxbow lakes in the lower sections of the river around the Burnt Fort area provide some of the better bluegill fishing. Crickets and worms are productive baits.

When conditions are too cold for good catches of bream, largemouth bass and catfish, try fishing for crappie, which are present throughout the river. Anglers should try fishing woody cover in slack water away from the main channel. Live minnows and small artificial jigs are top producers for crappie.

While not known for its bass population, the Satilla usually contains sufficient numbers of largemouth bass to provide an enjoyable outing. As with the sunfish species, largemouth bass populations thrive when high water levels are present. Therefore, anglers will probably not see as many bass in 2008. The majority of the bass on the business end of the anglers line will probably be fairly small (10-12 inches). However, anglers will occasionally set the hook

on a lunker bass. Largemouth bass fishing peaks in late winter and early spring when river levels are too high for successful bream fishing. Typical bass lures work, but it is hard to beat a shallow-diving minnow plug in the spring of the year.

Catfish fishing should remain good this coming year. The river supports healthy populations of snail, yellow and brown bullheads and channel catfish. Use worms, chicken livers, cut bait or your own secret bait fished on the bottom in deeper holes (usually on outside bends in the river).

Thus far, the flathead catfish does not appear to have affected the redbreast sunfish population in the prime redbreast habitat of the upper river (above US Hwy. 82) because flathead numbers still remain low. However, the flathead catfish population in the Satilla is steadily gaining dominance as has occurred in other southern rivers. Flathead catfish are captured (by electrofishing), data is collected, and the fish are donated to local food banks. **Please harvest all flathead catfish you catch. Do not release any.** They are very good to eat.

It is illegal to move fish from one lake or stream to another. Moving fish can cause unexpected and irreversible changes to the fish populations. If you have information about anyone moving flathead catfish please call **1-800-241-4113** (24 hours/day, 7days/week).

*A Guide to Fishing the Satilla River* is available. It contains a map, access sites, and helpful fishing tips. Call a Fisheries office for a free copy.

### Savannah River

#### (Downstream of New Savannah Bluff Lock & Dam)

Flows in the Savannah River below the New Savannah Bluff Lock & Dam are heavily influenced by releases from Clarks Hill (Strom Thurmond) Dam. The 2007 drought drastically reduced the water levels in Clarks Hill Lake and the flows in the Savannah River. Fishing is usually best when river levels drop within 5-6 feet on the USGS flow gauge at Clyo. Check local forecasts for river stage information. Many anglers find that numerous oxbow lakes along the river provide excellent fishing opportunities. River oxbows created by COE channel modifications in the late 1950s and early 1960s are recognized as shared waters under the agreement between Georgia and South Carolina. State boundaries did not change as a result of these channel modifications, but run down the middle of these old oxbows. Anglers should refer to USGS topographic maps and carefully identify these man-made oxbows. Some of the old natural oxbow lakes exist totally within the boundaries of South Carolina and are not covered by the reciprocal fishing license agreement. More information about reciprocal agreements can be found in the current fishing regulations.

The Savannah River basin had below average rainfall and corresponding flows in 2006 and 2007, which has affected the abundance and distribution of some species. Catch rates during fall 2006 standardized sampling were poor for all species except largemouth bass. One species that particularly has suffered from the low flow conditions is the redbreast sunfish. Redbreast abundance will rebound as soon as rainfall returns to normal and the river gets back in the floodplain. Regardless of the low water conditions, many of the redbreast sunfish in WRD samples were large fish over 7 inches. In addition to live bait, small, curly tail jigs are effective for redbreast sunfish. Try fishing around the sand bars in two to four feet of water.

Largemouth bass continue to do well in the Savannah River. The population contains a higher percentage of large fish. About 30 percent of the fish in WRD fall samples were over 15 inches long and one in 12 were over 18 inches long. Look for good bass fishing this spring as water temperatures begin to rise and water levels begin to fall. Concentrate your fishing effort near creek mouths and around heavy structure. The largemouth bite starts to improve in February as

fish prepare to spawn.

The catfish fishing in the Savannah River is great! While the majority are white catfish, most of the larger ones are channel catfish. Catfish spend most of their time in deep swift-flowing water along the last third of an outside bend. Catfish are more active at night and will often move out of these daytime hiding places into shallower water to feed. Try fishing these outside bend areas during the day with live bait and when darkness approaches, fish on shallow bars and flats where baitfish congregate.

Striped bass over 27 inches in the Savannah River have been legal to harvest since October 2005. The daily limit is two. The total number of striped bass, and the number of legal fish have rebounded sharply thanks to the WRD stocking program that began in the early 90's. It is important for anglers to realize that most of the strippers that they catch are stocked and that the number of naturally reproduced striped bass remains low. Twenty-pound striped bass are not uncommon and WRD staff are starting to see the occasional 40-50 lbs. fish! It is just a matter of time before the current state record of 63 lbs. will fall.

The 2007 drought drastically reduced the flows in the Savannah River, which in turn, has increased the influx of saltwater in the lower portion of the river. Basically, the saltwater has moved further upstream because of the lack of sufficient freshwater coming downstream. Consequently, some freshwater species have been forced to move further upstream to avoid the salty conditions and some saltwater species have been able to move further upstream. This change in the water structure affects sport fish distribution and angler success for many species. The drought also affects the production and distribution of prey for sport fish such as white shrimp and menhaden. The result is that anglers may have to adapt to these drought conditions in order to continue catching their favorite species. Once the drought is over fish distributions should be back to normal.

### **St. Marys River**

As with most of the other southeastern rivers, low water levels over the last year have likely stressed the St. Marys River fish populations. Redbreast sunfish are not as numerous as in the Satilla River. However, the chances of catching fish 6 inches or larger are excellent. Fishing methods used on the Satilla River also work well on the St. Marys. Crickets and worms are good baits. Small lures, such as beetle-spins, work well when the water warms. If you are looking for a wilderness fishing experience and do not mind camping on the river bank for a night or two, try launching a canoe or small jon boat at the St. George Landing and floating downstream approximately 30 miles to Traders Hill. This section of river has some excellent redbreast fishing.

The St. Marys River supports a healthy bluegill population and catching bluegill weighing  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. or larger should be fairly common this year. The better bream fishing can be found in the lower half of the St. Marys River, from the Trader's Hill Recreational Area downstream. Using worms or crickets around cover in the creeks and oxbows of the lower river are your best bets for catching a stringer of bluegill.

The St. Marys River is considered to be a trophy bass river by some anglers. Although bass are not as plentiful as in other rivers, anglers frequently land wall-hangers. The better bass fishing can be found in the Kings Ferry area of the lower river. Try casting spinner baits and pitching jigs or worms around heavy cover in current breaks or backwater areas.

**The St. Marys River is one of the few coastal plain rivers in southeast Georgia that has not been colonized by flathead catfish.** Anglers are urged not to release this, or any other fish, into the

St. Marys River unless it was caught there. Moving fish from one water body to another is illegal, and can have profound harmful effects on native fish populations.

### **Suwannee River**

The 33-mile portion of the Suwannee River in Georgia offers a unique fishing experience. The dark "tea stained" waters contain several different species than most anglers are used to pursuing. Chain pickerel, warmouth, flier and bullheads (catfish) are the main components of the catch. Due to the highly acidic waters the river offers little in the way of bass, bluegill, redbreast sunfish or channel catfish fishing.

As with the other southeastern rivers, fish populations in this portion of the Suwannee have likely declined due to the presence of below normal water levels. Anglers should see fair numbers of pickerel on the end of their line in 2008. Shallow running crankbaits like the Rapala Minnow or Rooster Tail are particularly effective on chain pickerel (jackfish). Jointed, colorful lures with their increased action also work well.

While there will not be as many warmouth in 2008, there should still be a fair number of larger fish ready to eat a crawfish. Warmouth fishing should peak in late April and May. They are distributed throughout the river with a slight increase in number as you travel downstream to Fargo. Live crawfish are a favorite bait of warmouth.

Flier can be caught year round in the upper reaches of the Suwannee River near the Okefenokee Swamp. They are the most abundant fish sought by anglers in the Suwannee and setting the hook on a flier should be common in 2008. Anglers targeting flier should concentrate their efforts in sloughs and backwater areas. The "yellow sallie" is the favorite artificial bait among flier anglers.

Anglers may notice a decrease in the excellent bullhead fishing that occurred the last few years, but they should still be able to fill the frying pan in 2008. Bullheads can be caught using worms, chicken livers, dead shrimp and crickets off the bottom in deep water along the bank edges.

### **Toccoa River (Below Blue Ridge Dam)**

Below Blue Ridge Reservoir, in Fannin County, Georgia, lies the cold, clear water of the lower Toccoa River. Flowing approximately 18 miles through scenic north Georgia and southeast Tennessee, the Toccoa offers anglers perhaps some of the best year-round trout fishing in the state. Water flow in this tailrace fishery is greatly influenced by operations at Blue Ridge dam. Since water flows can become treacherous rapidly, fisherman should check TVA's daily- automated generation schedule (1-800-238-2254) for the dam before heading out on the river. The river is floatable by canoe, tube or small boat, and wade-able at a number of locales. Popular access points include Tammen Park immediately below Blue Ridge dam, several road crossings, a TVA public access point downstream of Curtis Switch Rd., Horseshoe Bend Park and a concrete boat ramp in McCaysville, Georgia.

Trout account for nearly 75 percent of the game fish population of the lower Toccoa River. WRD stocks the Toccoa annually with a generous number of rainbow and brown trout adults and fingerlings. In a normal water year, some 20,000 catchable trout find their way from state hatcheries to this coldwater fishery. The Toccoa is anything but your typical "stocker" trout stream as it supports some natural reproduction and trout survive year-round in the river and its tributaries. These wild and holdover fish offer anglers trout exhibiting more natural behavior and finer table fare; an attribute often lost on "stockers." Trout of both species average around 9

inches, but plenty of 12-16 inch fish and an occasional 20+ inch bruiser can be hooked in the river. Trout can be taken with spinners, live bait and flies throughout the river. Fly-fisherman often consider the lower Toccoa as a dry fly enthusiasts dream because of the prolific hatches of caddis, mayflies and midges. Wet flies and streamers have their place too, especially in the winter months.

Checking TVA water release schedules for Blue Ridge Dam is not only important for safety reasons, but also can be informative for the resourceful angler. Water release affects not only river flow, but also trout feeding times. Both browns and “bows” actively feed on falling water levels. That is to say, wet your line for hungry trout as the waters of the Toccoa drop at the tail end of a daily water release. Anglers “leapfrogging” from access point to access point on the river can sometimes keep up with these falling water conditions further extending this golden fishing time.

Besides trout, the lower Toccoa is home to a few smallmouth, largemouth, spotted bass, rock bass, yellow perch, bream and even a few catfish. Generally, abundance of these other species is low, but nonetheless they provide anglers with different fishing opportunities. Anglers are encouraged to harvest their limit of spotted bass in 2008. Spots compete with, and can hybridize with, smallmouth bass, resulting in the collapse of the smallmouth fishery as has occurred in other Georgia water bodies. Harvesting spots will help reduce competition with smallmouth and help sustain a unique Georgia fishery for years to come.

***[www.gofishgeorgia.com](http://www.gofishgeorgia.com)***

***Other Publications available from the  
WRD Fisheries Management Section  
(in both hard copy and online):***

2008 Georgia Reservoir Fishing Prospects

Trout Streams of Georgia (map)

Introduction to Georgia Trout Fishing

Small Lakes Open to Public Fishing

Guidelines for Eating Fish from Georgia Waters

2008-2009 Sport Fishing Regulations