

Northern Virginia's "Other" Fishery

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by Marc N. McGlade

Northern Virginia's Occoquan Reservoir lies in the shadow of the Potomac River— but it shouldn't.

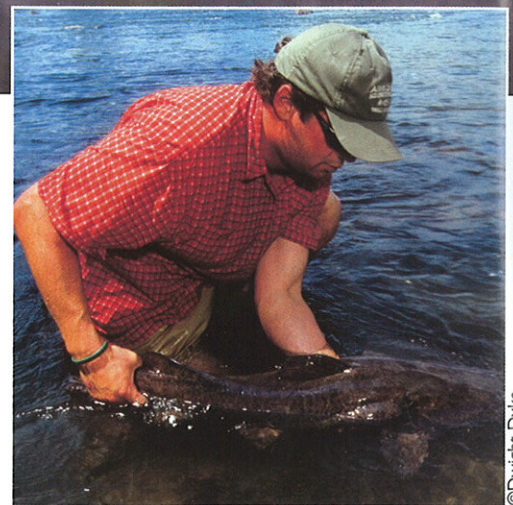
My white spinner bait landed alongside the blowdown on the craggy shoreline with nary a splash. A crank or two of my bait-casting reel's handle set the baitfish imitator in motion. Before I realized what was happening, a vicious strike and street fight ensued.

The bursting colors of towering trees gave reassurance that fall is indeed a beautiful time of year in Virginia. Catching a fish this strong helped reinforce my love of autumn, as well. When it was all said and done, the 37.5-inch northern pike weighed 12.5 pounds, and reigned as Occoquan Reservoir's record for

three years. Monroe Parker, the legendary ranger at Fountainhead Regional Park, informed me that it was the de facto lake record until three years later when a 16-pounder usurped my catch.

While this story is not about northern pike, it is about Occoquan Reservoir. Pike are rarely stocked at the reservoir straddling Fairfax and Prince William counties, but other species abound, and this body of water is a don't-miss spot in Northern Virginia for anglers of all types.

Occoquan Reservoir is among the top-producing lakes in the region for largemouth bass and crappies, most

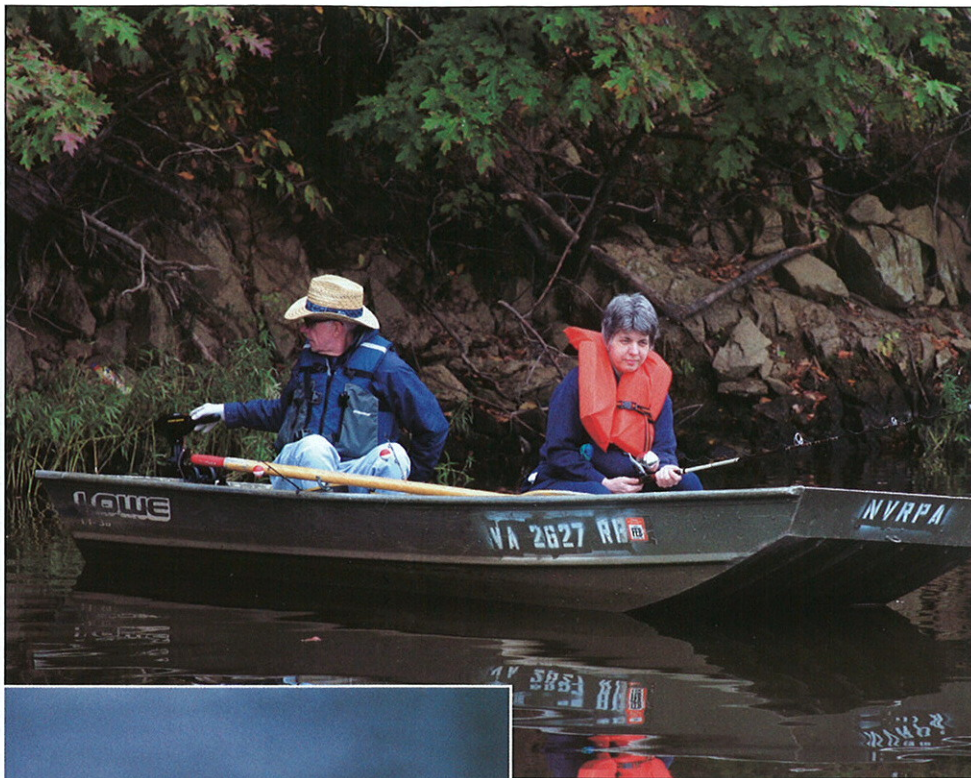


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Flathead catfish are plentiful at Occoquan, as are whitetails and other wildlife.



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Anglers can rent boats at the reservoir and enjoy beautiful scenery.



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Crappie (shown here) and largemouth bass are favored by anglers.

notably in the spring. Additionally, this reservoir holds the current state record for flathead catfish. A whiskered beast of 66 pounds, 4 ounces reigns supreme as the commonwealth's champion flathead.

Formed by the confluence of Bull Run and Occoquan River, this 2,100-acre reservoir is a steep-sided, deep body of water that can present fishing challenges. When crafty anglers unlock the secret here, it can be a dynamite place to catch trophy-sized fish of a variety of species.

While most anglers in the northern portion of the commonwealth pursue bass on the famed Potomac River, a growing cluster of them con-

centrate their efforts on this scenic reservoir. Officials at the reservoir enforce a 10-horsepower maximum limitation for outboards, which is still a viable choice for larger boats that have efficient trolling motors. There are plenty of productive spots to target close to each of the marinas.

The historic town of Occoquan nestled at the base of the Occoquan Reservoir dam overlooks the Occoquan River. Above the dam is a veritable gold mine for anglers.

Just the Facts

According to John Odenkirk, a fisheries biologist with the Department (DGIF), very few flathead catfish were stocked into Occoquan in the late 1960s.

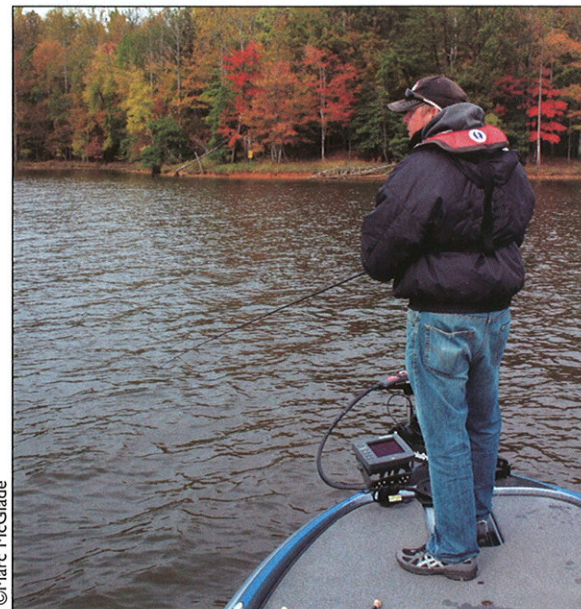
The flathead catfish (*Pylodictis olivaris*) has nicknames such as yellow cat, mud cat, and shovelhead cat. This large species sports a broad and flat head. Its lower jaw protrudes beyond the upper. Flatheads have a slightly rounded tail and a yellowish or cream-colored background, highlighted with black, dark brown, or olive mottling on their backs and sides.

Flatheads are omnivorous but feed primarily on live fish. They will venture into very shallow waters at times. They are found in large rivers and lakes and prefer deep, slow stretches near strong currents. These solitary specimens use riprap, brush piles, sunken logs, and other debris for cover. Seventy-two to 84-degree water temps represent the optimal spawning time for flatheads.

"For some reason," Odenkirk said, "this population never 'exploded' like many other populations in the Southeast outside its native range. This population has persisted at a relatively low level for many decades." Odenkirk explained that when a small population exists—especially a non-native one—a competitive advantage may occur, allowing those individuals to reach trophy proportions. This, he adds, is a similar situation to Lake Orange's world-record white bass.

"That, coupled with good forage and productivity, probably had the most to do with growing that flathead catfish," he said.

Mike Willems was the angler who caught the trophy on May 6, 1994. Catches of flathead catfish weighing 25 pounds or measuring 40 inches in length qualify for a trophy fish certificate from the DGIF.



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Former Fairfax resident Kurt Dove fishes for largemouth bass.



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There are plenty of boats available to rent at Fountainhead Regional Park and other nearby facilities.

"The angler (Willems) brought that flathead to Locust Shade Park during a fishing dedication to have it checked (certified)," Odenkirk said. "He carried it down live in an upside down roof-top car carrier, and returned it alive to the reservoir after it was checked and weighed."

Anything Else to Catch?

Other than flatheads, there indeed are more species to conquer at Occoquan.

"This is mostly known as one of the district's best largemouth bass waters," claimed Odenkirk. "It also has great crappie fishing (whites and blacks), and a good channel cat population. It receives surplus northern pike from time to time, but I would not recommend it for that."

Of course, whenever a body of water coughs up a state record, thoughts immediately turn to ques-

tions if another monster could be lurking, regardless of the species.

Odenkirk replied, "Yes, there could, but probably only for flatheads and perhaps crappie or a channel cat."

The main draw here is not flatheads. While occasional giant flatties do show their whiskered faces, the largemouth bass fishery is the real deal.

"When we were keeping tournament records (for largemouth bass), Occoquan Reservoir had the highest catch rate for largemouth tournaments over any other state water," Odenkirk explained. "Even more than Anna, Smith Mountain, Buggs Island, etc. I have heard anglers complain that they only catch 2- to 5-pounders all the time."

While Odenkirk acknowledges there aren't many trophy fish certificates issued for bass (22 inches in



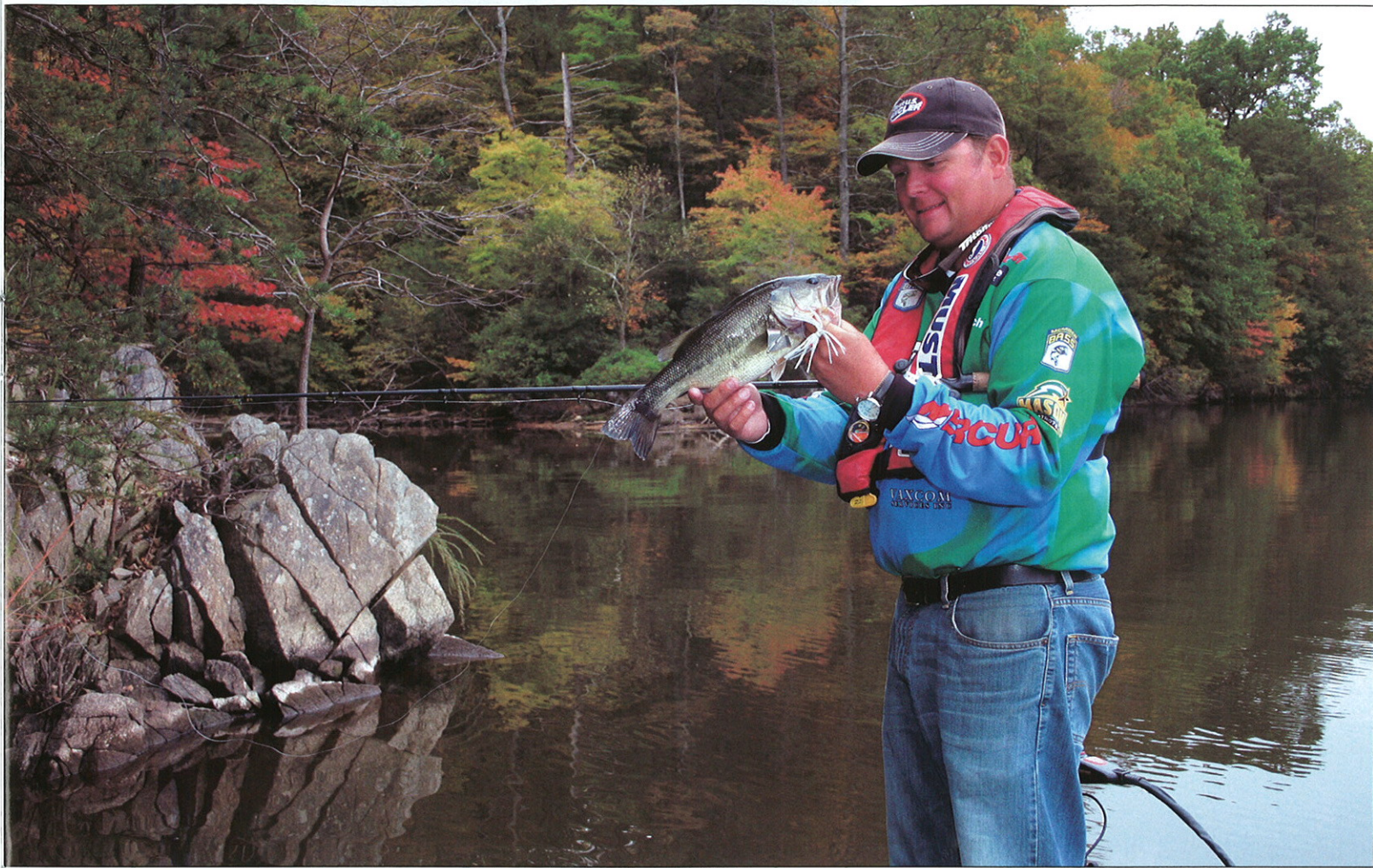
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Opportunities abound for pier fishing at Occoquan Reservoir.

length or weighing 8 pounds or more) at Occoquan Reservoir, there are loads of fish in the 2- to 5-pound category.

Worth the Trip

Not to take anything away from the famed Potomac River, but anglers in the northern portion of the commonwealth—or visitors to the region—would be doing themselves a great



Kurt Dove, a professional bass fisherman, hefts a chunky largemouth bass.

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disservice by not casting a line in Occoquan Reservoir. Crowds, when compared to other area waters, are significantly less. The fish are cooperative, the scenery is beautiful, and perhaps another state-record flathead is swimming around. Maybe a crappie or channel cat, as well.

I wonder if I head back up there and burn a white spinner bait alongside a blowdown if I could catch another northern pike... □

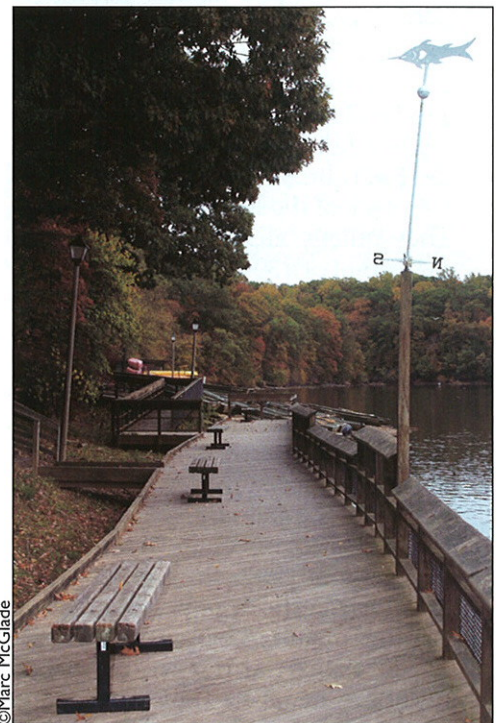
Marc N. McGlade is a writer and photographer from Midlothian, who in the past frequented Occoquan Reservoir whenever he got the chance when he lived in Northern Virginia.

For More Information

- For fisheries information and regulations regarding Occoquan Reservoir, contact the DGIF Region 5 office in Fredericksburg by phone at (540) 899-4169. For even

more information, visit online at www.HuntFishVA.com.

- Boat launch ramps and rental boat facilities include Fountainhead Regional Park, (703) 250-9124; Lake Ridge Park, (703) 494-5288; and Bull Run Marina. Currently, Bull Run Marina is not staffed, but boaters who desire to launch watercraft at the marina may purchase a season pass and gate key from Fountainhead Regional Park.
- There is a 10-horsepower maximum limitation for outboard engines at Occoquan Reservoir.
- For an updated, quality map, refer to "GMCO's Pro Series Map of Occoquan Reservoir." Contact them by phone at (888) 420-6277 or (540) 286-6908, by e-mail at gmcomaps@comcast.net, or visit their Web site at www.gmcomaps.com.



A walkway and fishing pier provide convenient access to landlubbers.