



# COOSA RIVER FISH GUIDE

*Everything you need to know to catch and eat fish safely.*

102-B Croft St Birmingham AL 35242 | (205) 981-6565 | [CoosaRiver.org](http://CoosaRiver.org)



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## PREFACE

Coosa Riverkeeper made this guide to be informative about all things fishing on the Coosa River in Alabama. This was created as a part of the Coosa Riverkeeper Fish Guide program and is intended to be a one-stop-shop to get you out fishing safely! Tons of information is included in this guide on fish consumption advisories, detailed maps, and of course—the game fish guide! Feel free to visit our website to learn more about our organization, donate, or to learn more about the Coosa River community.

**As the fishers and anglers in our river community, you serve an important role in protecting the health of the Coosa River.** Of course, you must abide by Alabama regulatory laws concerning wildlife such as having a fishing license, registering your boat, and creel limits. However, beyond the law, you have a responsibility to the river and community to protect it.

You are encouraged to be a friend of nature. Because you are on the river so much, please help report pollution, overfishing, and other fishy situations that just don't look right. **Help us keep our river clean and healthy!**

## HOW TO REPORT POLLUTION

When you see fishy situations or pollution on the Coosa River, do us a favor and report it! You can anonymously report pollution several ways email, call, or submit a form on our website. Try to include details, the location, and if possible, photos/videos/recordings.

- Email: send an email to [info@coosariver.org](mailto:info@coosariver.org)
- Call our office: (205) 981-6565
- Fill out our online form

Visit our website to learn more about pollution on the Coosa River and what you can do to help at: [CoosaRiver.org/Report-Pollution](https://coosariver.org/Report-Pollution)

## CONTACT US



<https://coosariver.org>



[info@coosariver.org](mailto:info@coosariver.org)



[@coosariverkeepr](https://twitter.com/coosariverkeepr)



(205) 981-6565

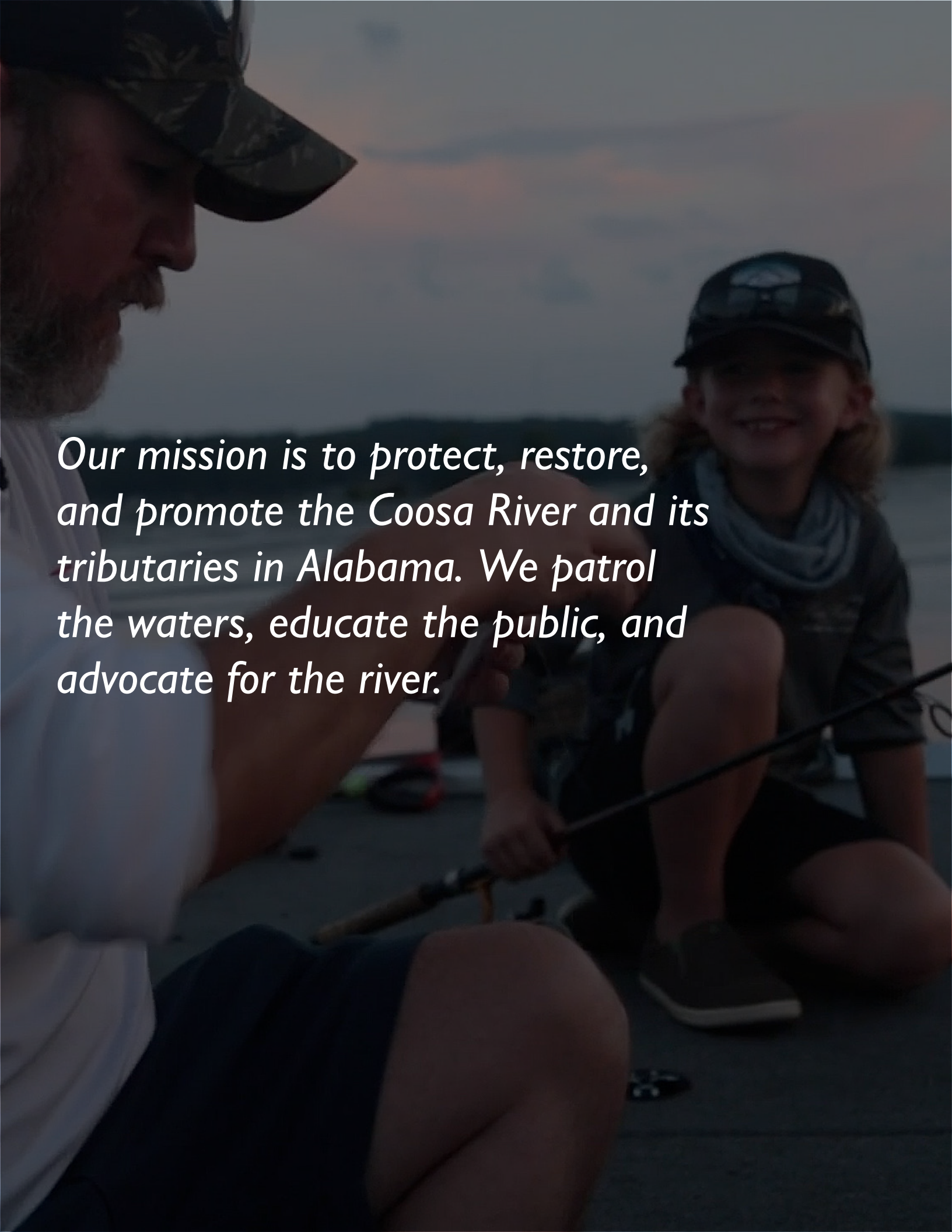


[@coosariverkeeper](https://www.instagram.com/coosariverkeeper)



[@coosariverkeeper](https://www.facebook.com/coosariverkeeper)





*Our mission is to protect, restore, and promote the Coosa River and its tributaries in Alabama. We patrol the waters, educate the public, and advocate for the river.*

## ABOUT US

*We **PATROL** the waters, **EDUCATE** the public, and **ADVOCATE** for the river.*

Coosa Riverkeeper is a community based non-profit organization focused on conserving the Coosa River. Our organization works to answer the simple questions like “is it safe to swim?”, “are the fish safe to eat?”, and “what can I do to make the Coosa healthier for my community?” to ensure the public is aware of issues that impact the river, recreation, public health, and property value.

**Our approach to river conservation is driven by the river and its needs, not by politics and self-interest.** We supplement our passion for the river with science and an understanding of policy. We get out on the water to see the river and the people who depend on it first hand. When there’s a lack of data or information about an issue on the river, we go collect samples or conduct research. In an age where major decisions made by lawmakers are based mostly in politics and not in science, we speak up for our river and ensure it is protected from greed and ignorance.

We take a watershed approach; we don’t just look at what’s happening on the lakes, we look at what’s happening on all the creeks because it all matters in the scope of a healthy river. **Because the Middle and Lower Coosa River Basins in which we work are so expansive at 5,000 square miles and 220 miles of the river, we prioritize our work based on the most urgent issues where we believe our approach to conservation will be most effective.** The data that we collect helps guide us to the restoration and conservation efforts that will have the greatest impact.

To fulfill our mission of protecting, promoting, and restoring the Coosa River, our organization has developed four core programs. These programs engage the many people who live, work, visit, and recreate on the Coosa River, its tributaries, and lakes. Through our Fish Guide, Swim Guide, Riverkeeper Patrol, and environmental education programs, Coosa Riverkeeper encourages everyone to enjoy the river, lakes, and “skinny water” or creeks, while providing information about water quality conditions and fish consumption advisories for both sport and leisure.

Our organization relies on the generosity of people like you to keep our boat afloat. If you’re interested in getting more involved in our work, volunteering with us, or becoming a member, please swim over to [CoosaRiver.org](https://CoosaRiver.org) to learn more!

• KEEPING WATCH OVER OUR WATERS SINCE 2010 •



PROTECTING  
**5,000+**  
square miles of  
basin &

**220+**  
miles of river



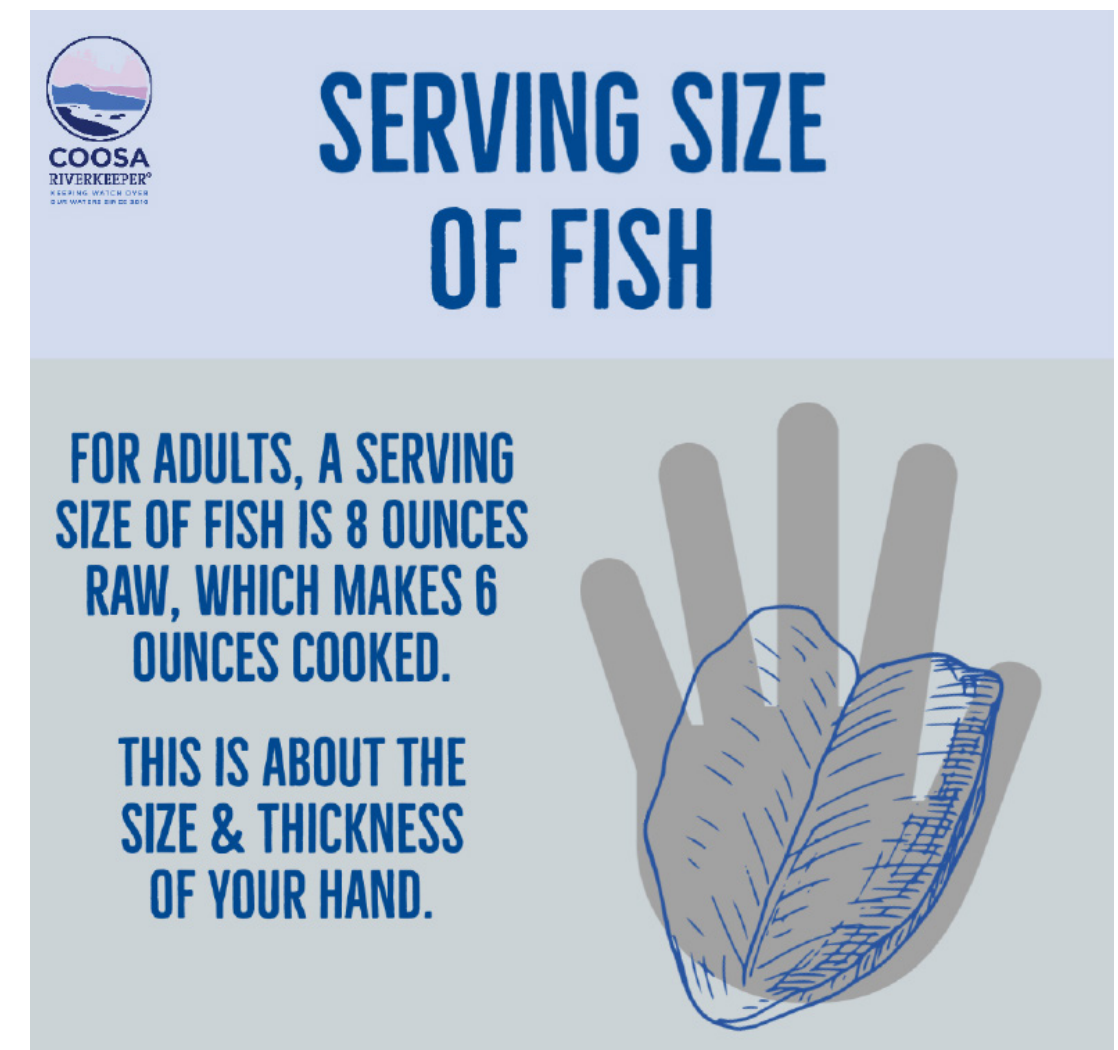
# THE COOSA RIVER BASIN OF ALABAMA



## SUMMARY OF FISH CONSUMPTION ADVISORIES

*There currently are fish consumption advisories on the Coosa River, so what does that mean?*

The Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) issues fish consumption advisories for specific species of fish at specific locations throughout Alabama. These consumption advisories suggest limits on how much of a specific fish you should eat from a specific location in a certain time frame due to the presence of known contaminants in fish tissues.



ADPH issues these consumption advisories using a recommended portion size of 8 ounces of raw fish, or 6 ounces of cooked fish, and using an adult of 150 pounds. For example, on Logan Martin Lake, there is an advisory for 1 meal a month for blue catfish, which means that a 150 pound adult should only eat 6 ounces of blue catfish once that month to avoid unhealthy amounts of contaminants.

While these consumption advisories do not directly impact your ability to fish, they DO affect how much fish you should eat. If you want to know more about the contaminants in the Coosa River, check out the "About the Contaminants" section of this document.

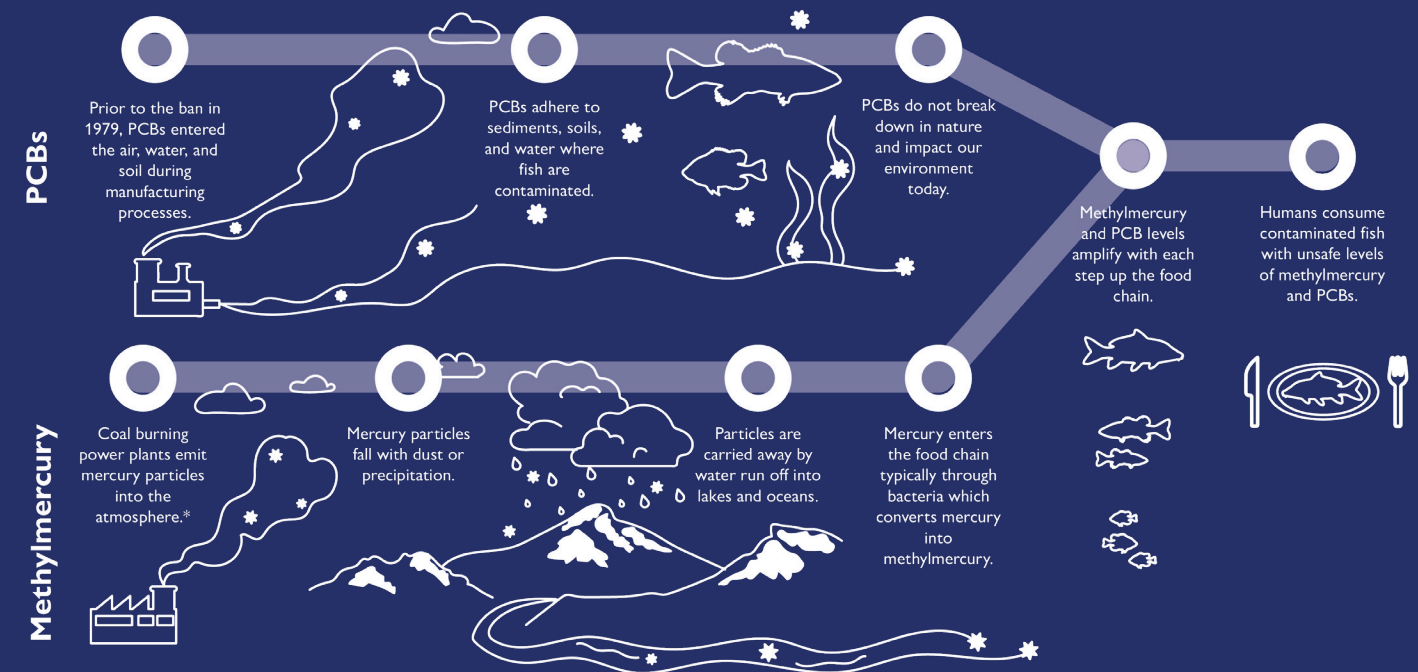




# ABOUT THE CONTAMINANTS

Along the Coosa River, there are currently fish consumption advisories issued because of the contaminants polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and methylmercury. Contaminants get into the water from stormwater runoff, permitted industrial and municipal wastes, non-point source pollution, agricultural runoff, and many other sources. From there, they move up the food chain to fish and eventually find their way to us!

Just like in our bodies, contaminants collect over time in fish tissue. It is important to note that larger, older fish collect contaminants for a longer time and may have higher concentrations of contaminants.



*\*Coal burning power plants are one of the largest contributing factors of methylmercury.*

## Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs):

PCBs are chemicals that were created for industrial use and later outlawed in 1979. They do not break down in nature, so we are still dealing with their toxic legacy today. PCBs can interfere with your hormones, cause skin conditions like chloracne, and lead to developmental issues in offspring. Because PCBs build up in fish's fatty tissues, you can significantly reduce your exposure by filleting and cooking your fish in a way that removes fat.

## Methylmercury:

Methylmercury is an organic form of mercury frequently produced by coal-fired power plants that tends to stick around in nature and our bodies. We are able to absorb it pretty easily, but our bodies get rid of methylmercury very slowly which allows it to build up over time. Long term effects of methylmercury include kidney problems, central nervous system issues, and decreased intelligence. Unfortunately, you can NOT reduce your methylmercury exposure by altering your cooking or preparation—just by reducing how much you eat!



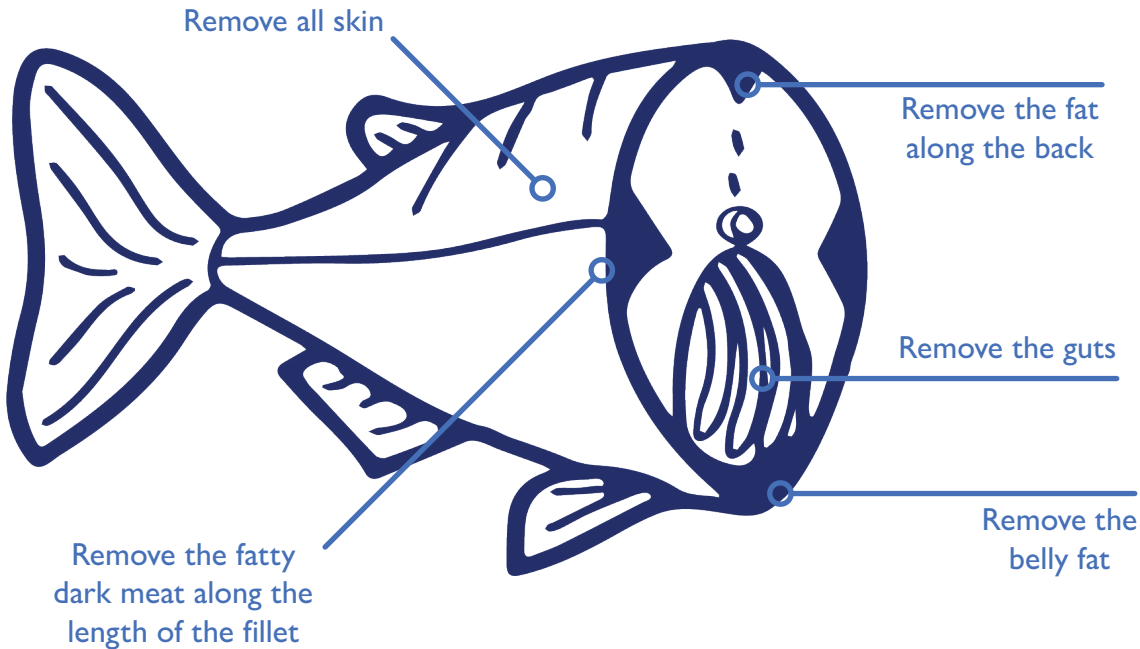
# COOKING METHODS & RECIPES

We know that deep frying fish is the traditional Southern way to eat your catch, but did you know you may be exposing yourself to more contaminants by cooking it that way? **The way you prepare and cook your catch matters!** Of the two known contaminants in the Coosa River, PCBs and methylmercury, you can significantly reduce your exposure to PCBs by paying attention to your preparation and cooking methods. **Unfortunately, the only way to reduce your exposure to methylmercury is just by reducing the amount of fish that you consume.**

## Here are some helpful tips for reducing your exposure to PCBs!

**PCBs gather and concentrate in the fatty tissues of fish as they swim in polluted waters throughout their life. In general, you want to remove as much fatty tissues as possible and discard any drippings that come from cooking PCB-contaminated fish.**

1. Rinse your fish and fillets under cool, running water, if possible. If not, use a clean bowl of water to rinse your fish and fillets, changing the water frequently.
2. Fillet your fish, as shown in the graphic below, by removing the skin, belly fat, guts, and back fat. Discard these tissues and avoid feeding them to pets.
3. Once you have cut your fillets out, rinse them again under cool, running water to further dislodge PCBs in the fish.
4. Optimal cooking methods for fish that are contaminated with PCBs are ways that will draw fat away from the fish, which conveniently are also the healthiest cooking methods! **Broil, grill, or bake your fish on a rack that allows fat to leave the fish and discard drippings.**
5. If you must deep fry your fish (and we can't convince you otherwise!), **discard your cooking oil after one use to avoid bathing anything else you fry in leftover PCBs.**



For more tips, recipes, and cooking videos, visit the Coosa Riverkeeper website and look under the Fish Guide program's Cook page: [CoosaRiver.org/FishGuide/Cook](https://CoosaRiver.org/FishGuide/Cook)

For more information on fish consumption advisories in the entire state of Alabama, feel free to call our free hotline!

## Alabama Fish Consumption Advisory Hotline

# CALL (844) 219-7475

to hear the fish consumption advisories on your local waterways (toll-free)!

- Press 1 for the Coosa River
- Press 2 for the Tallapoosa River
- Press 3 for the Alabama River
- Press 4 for the Mobile Bay & Delta
- Press 5 for the Tombigbee River
- Press 6 for the Black Warrior & Cahaba River
- Press 7 for the Tennessee River
- Press 8 for the Choctawhatchee River & Coastal Plain

*Llamar para avisos de consumo de pescado en español.*

Escuchar  
en español!

This free public service is brought to you by Waterkeepers Alabama and the Coosa River Fish Guide program. Learn more and find your local Waterkeeper at: [waterkeepersalabama.org](https://waterkeepersalabama.org)!





# LIVEWELL CARE

Selective catch and release is an important practice for fish conservation and allows others to enjoy your catch again and again. However, anglers must ensure that fish are safely caught and released to avoid stressing the fish to death. Stress gradually increases while the fish is in captivity until it reaches a point that the fish can't recover from that stress. You must practice both safe handling techniques and keep a functioning livewell.



### Handling your catch:

- Try to handle fish as little as possible.
- Land the fish by hand or with a rubber or soft nylon mesh landing net.
- When handling bass, grasp the lower jaw and hold the fish horizontally. Larger bass should be held with one hand on the lower jaw and the other hand supporting the weight under the belly. DO NOT hold a bass by the lower jaw vertically with one hand.
- Remove hooks as quickly as possible, needle-nosed pliers make this easy.

### Maintaining your livewell:

- Run aerators frequently when fish are held in livewells, and when water temperatures are over 70 degrees F, run the aerators constantly.
- Do not crowd fish in livewells, this will increase stress faster.
- The larger, the better. The depth should be deep enough that the fish are able to remain upright and submerged.
- Ensure that your livewell is filling and draining properly before each use.
- Fill your livewell as soon as you get out in some clean cool water; don't wait until you catch a fish to fill it up!
- Make sure your livewell is clean and dry before storing your boat. Thoroughly rinse the interior to remove leftover stomach contents, fish slime, or lake gunk. Wash periodically with antibacterial soap and rinse until all bubbles are gone.

# BLACK BASS

The Coosa River is known for having some of the fiercest black bass fishing around the world! Around these parts, we love bass fishing so much there are usually tournaments everyday of the week in the summer. Black bass are definitely the most sought after game fish as they tend to be aggressive fighters and attack bait explosively. Surprisingly, black bass are actually not a member of the true bass family and are more closely related to sunfish. Their meat is tasty and firm, but many have existing fish consumption advisories that should be taken into consideration.



# LARGEMOUTH BASS

*Micropterus salmoides*



Fig. 1

The most popular game fish on the Coosa and most commonly found in lakes. It is also Alabama’s official state freshwater fish. Around here, they are at the top of the food chain.

**Coosa River Consumption Advisories:**

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# SPOTTED BASS

*Micropterus punctulatus*

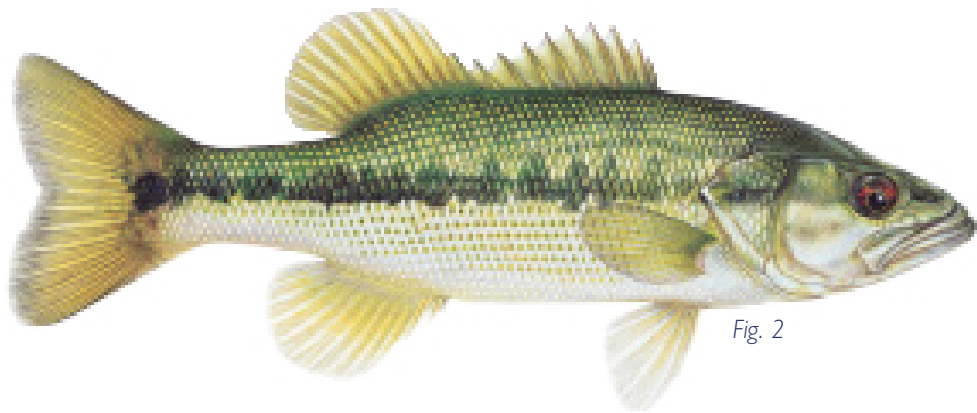


Fig. 2

The Coosa River’s spotted bass are some of the meanest fighting fish in the nation! They are found in lakes and in creeks. They tend to be more slender and shaped like a football than a largemouth bass. Because they fight so hard, many a fisher have been duped into thinking they’ve hooked a monster largemouth only to find a smallish spotted bass with a lot of energy.

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## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 12-30 inches
- Coloring is olive green to brown with a broad black band down the back & a white belly
- No teeth on their tongue
- The largemouth: when closed, their jaw juts out past their eye
- A slight bridge, if any, between the spiny and soft dorsal fins (on top!)



### Habitat:

Largemouth bass occupy almost all aquatic habitats in Alabama. They prefer non-flowing, warm water, like lakes and reservoirs. They tend to flourish in water temperatures around 80 to 90 degrees F with an abundance of aquatic vegetation and water that is clear. They’re found in rivers, lakes, and ponds, but they prefer lakes!



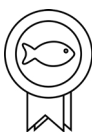
### Diet:

Largemouth bass prey upon bluegills and redear sunfish in stocked ponds. In natural habitats, they prey upon shad, minnows, smaller bream, crawfish, and frogs.



### Spawn:

Largemouth bass usually reach sexual maturity and begin spawning when they are about a year old. Spawning takes place from April to late May, when water temperatures hold steady between 63-68 degrees F.



### Alabama State Record Catch

16lb 8oz Largemouth Bass caught on 11/3/1987 at Mountain View Lake by Thomas Burgin.



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 12-17 inches
- Coloring is mostly olive green with scattered dark mottling
- Smaller jaw: when closed, their jaw does not extend past the eye.
- One tooth patch on their tongue
- A significant bridge between their spiny and soft dorsal fins (up top!)
- Reddish eyes, but not as bright as the redeye bass



### Habitat:

Spotted bass tend to be found around aquatic vegetation, submerged logs, and rock or riprap walls in moving water bodies. Spotted bass tend to be found in areas with more current than the largemouth, but they usually inhabit areas that are too warm, turbid, and sluggish than small mouth.



### Diet:

The adults feed on the same food as other bass, which tends to be worms, leeches, crawfish, fathead minnows, gizzard shad, golden shiners, and other aquatic insects.



### Spawn:

Spotted bass usually spawn around April to May, when water temperatures hold steady around 63 to 68 degrees F, often in the mouths of tributary streams. The male guards the nest until the fry have hatched.



### Alabama State Record Catch

8 lbs 15 oz Spotted Bass caught on 3/18/1978 at Smith Lake by Phillip C. Terry.



# REDEYE BASS

*Micropterus coosae*

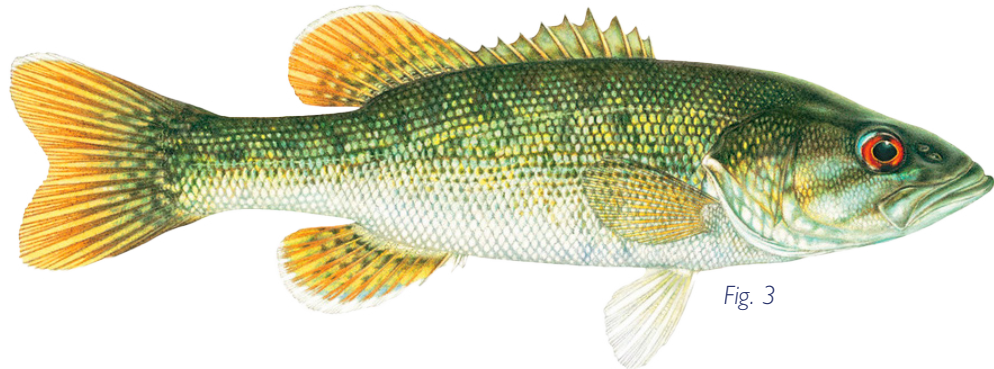


Fig. 3

## Coosa River Consumption Advisories:

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The redeye, or Coosa bass are a crowd favorite among game fishers. They're quite small, with the state record redeye bass weighing in at 3 pounds. Redeye bass are recognized by their white caudal fins, something no other Coosa bass exhibits.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 14-17 inches
- Coloring is generally olive green to brown with darker brown mottling
- One tooth patch on the tongue
- Caudal fins (bottom) are edged in white, a useful feature for separating redeye bass
- A significant bridge between the spiny and soft dorsal fins
- DO NOT have a horizontal black band down their sides like spots and largemouth, tend to have a visual appearance more similar to a smallmouth bass



### Habitat:

Redeye bass love moving water and are only found in medium-sized upland streams and creeks. They tend to hang out around water willow or other aquatic vegetation like submerged stumps, boulders, or along undercut banks.



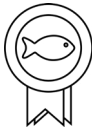
### Diet:

Redeye bass feed on very small bait fish, insects, crawfish, and aquatic and terrestrial insects.



### Spawn:

Redeye bass tend to spawn from April to June, when water temperatures hold steady around 63 to 68 degrees F.



### Alabama State Record Catch

3 lbs 2 oz Redeye Bass caught on 3/8/2000 at Choccolocco Creek by Terry Johnson.

# TEMPERATE BASS

Temperate bass are sometimes referred to as “true” or “sea” basses. They are also a popular game fish on the Coosa River. All species of temperate bass are school fish, which means they travel and feed in groups. Temperate bass are deep bodied when viewed from the side and quite compressed when viewed from the front. There are a total of six species of temperate bass, of which three exist in the Coosa River.



# STRIPED BASS

*Morone saxatilis*



Fig. 4

**Coosa River Consumption Advisories:**

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Striped bass populations in Alabama are a mixture of Gulf Coast and Atlantic Coast fish. Striped bass are the most notorious gamefish of the temperate bass. On the Coosa, striped bass angling is best during cool months and in tailwaters of locks and dams. In the summer, striped bass seek cooler water from spring-fed tributaries.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 20-24 inches
- Coloring is dark gray to green on the back with light green to silver sides
- Two tooth patches on their tongue, compared to one on a white bass
- Horizontal black lines along the length of their body, which are continuous and occasionally broken.



### Habitat:

Striped bass are anadromous fish, meaning they spend most of their life in saltwater and return to freshwater for spawning. On the Coosa, of course, they are stuck between two dams and live their entire life in freshwater, which can make it hard to maintain their numbers. However, up on Weiss Lake, where striped bass have a large territory to roam, they now spawn naturally.



### Diet:

Striped bass largely feed on shad, specifically gizzard and threadfin.



### Spawn:

Striped bass reproduce in rivers and brackish areas of estuaries. Spawning occurs from late March through April, with the greatest activity occurring when the water warms to about 65 degrees F.



### Alabama State Record Catch

69 lbs 9 oz Striped Bass (landlocked) caught in 2/28/2013 at Bankhead Reservoir by Dora James Bramlett.

# WHITE BASS

*Morone chrysops*

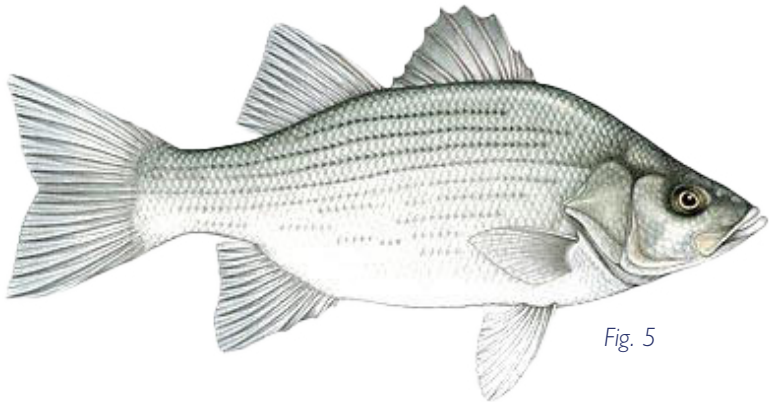


Fig. 5

**Coosa River Consumption Advisories:**

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The Coosa River's white bass is quite similar to the stripe in many ways, but they do not grow nearly as large. They are known to grow faster in the Coosa River basin than in Lake Martin or Lake Eufaula.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 10-15 inches
- Coloring is a dark back with silver sides and a white belly
- One tooth patch on their tongue
- Quite similar to the striped, but white bass do not grow nearly as large
- Stocky, football shaped bodies with faint stripes
- First stripe below the lateral line is broken



### Habitat:

White bass inhabit surface and midwater areas of rivers, reservoirs, and large streams. They are found along riprap, downed trees, and other structures below dams. When mating in spring, they are more often found in shallow rivers, creeks, and streams. White bass are typically found in high densities in the upstream segment of rivers.



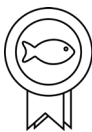
### Diet:

White bass are aggressive predators that feed mostly on shad, specifically gizzard and threadfin shad.



### Spawn:

White bass tend to spawn in mid-March to late May, when the water temperatures reach 54-68 degrees F. They are known to find their home spawning ground even if it is moved to a different part of the same lake. Spawning occurs between one or more males and one female at midwater depths, and then the fertilized eggs drift down to the river bed.



### Alabama State Record Catch

4 lbs 9 oz White Bass caught on 2/14/1987 at Warrior River by Ben DeMott.



# HYBRID BASS

*Morone chrysops x saxatilis*

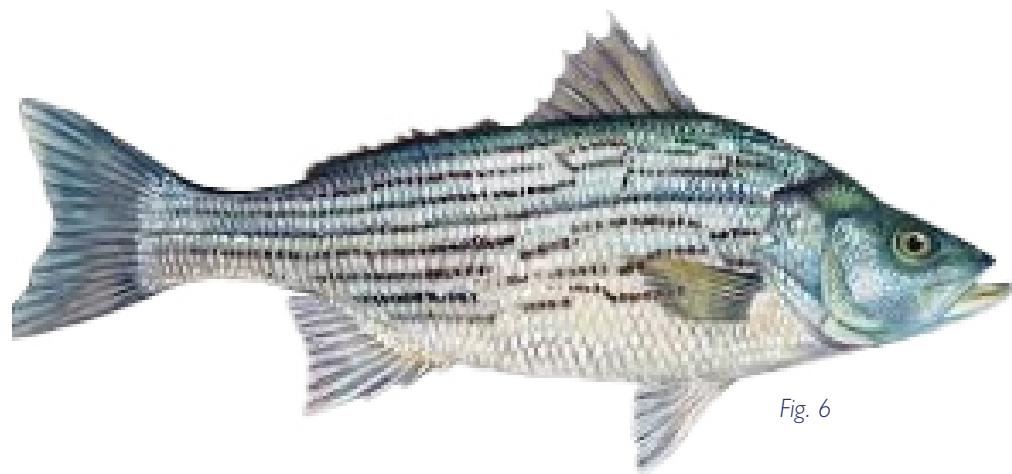


Fig. 6

This striped bass and white bass hybrid is not a natural species. It is created by artificially spawning a male white bass with a female striped bass. The offspring display a wide variety of color pattern, which can make them hard to distinguish.

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## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 15-20 inches
- Coloring is quite variable
- Like their striped bass mother, they have two tooth patches on their tongue
- Short and stocky body
- Lateral stripes on the lower half of the body are very broken.



### Habitat:

Hybrid striped bass are stocked into a variety of lakes, ponds, and reservoirs for fishing purposes. Hybrids do well in slow moving streams, large reservoirs, lakes, and ponds. They are seldom found in extremely shallow areas or areas with dense growth of aquatic weeds.



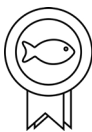
### Diet:

Like both their mother and father, shad is their primary sustenance.



### Spawn:

Hybrids are stocked by the millions by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. They are a common catch, especially below any of the Coosa's dams. They rarely reproduce naturally.



### Alabama State Record Catch

25 lbs 15 oz Hybrid Striped Bass caught on 9/13/1996 at Sipsey Fork by E. H. Hodges.

# CATFISH

Freshwater catfish are widely known for their delicious meat. Demand for catfish has grown so much that they are now farmed and available in supermarkets. While they range across every continent except Antarctica, catfish in Alabama are known to be monster mega-fish. Catfish are bottom feeders that naturally sink down into water due to their heavy head. They are known for their great sense of smell and taste, but that does not stop them from eating everything they can! Most species will feed on living and dead things found along the river bottom.



# CHANNEL CATFISH

*Ictalurus punctatus*



Fig. 7

## Coosa River Consumption Advisories:

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The Coosa River’s channel catfish are the most commonly caught and eaten catfish. When trying to land one, be sure to use a tasty, smelly bait. They are known for their amazing tasting ability and can smell with their entire body!

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 15-24 inches
- Coloring of brown and gray back, with small dark spots along its body & a light belly
- Wedge-shaped head
- Forked tail
- Curved anal fin



### Habitat:

Channel catfish like the lake life, but are also at home in larger rivers and ponds. They prefer slow to moderate moving currents over sand, gravel, and silt.



### Diet:

Channel catfish have a strong sense of smell and taste, but it doesn’t bother them too much— they’ll eat just about anything! They enjoy aquatic insect larvae, crawfish, and small fish along with bait of cheese, chicken, dough balls, redworms, and cut bait.



### Spawn:

Channel catfish spawning begins in May and continues throughout the summer until August. Channel catfish spawn anywhere from 70 to 84 degrees F, but 80 to 81 degrees F is considered best.



### Alabama State Record Catch

40 lbs Channel Catfish caught on 6/17/1967 at Inland Lake by Donald R. Cox.

# BLUE CATFISH

*Ictalurus furcatus*



Fig. 8

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The Coosa River’s blue catfish are similar to the channel cat, but it can grow larger. Like most catfish, they are opportunistic predators that will consume most anything they can get their mouth around.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 18-24 inches
- Coloring of pale blue to gray body
- White whiskers on the chin
- Their anal fin is straight, not curved
- Forked tail like a channel cat, but usually more deeply



### Habitat:

Blue catfish like large waterbodies, such as lakes and reservoirs, even better if they are clear with moving water. They tend to congregate in the tail waters below dams and around submerged treetops.



### Diet:

They love to feed below the dams on the Coosa and scoop up whatever smells good that day. They will feed on both living and dead fish and other aquatic animals.



### Spawn:

All of the major catfish species spawn during spring or summer when the water warms up to an optimal temperature. Blue catfish spawn anywhere from 70 to 84 degrees F, but 80 to 81 degrees F is considered best.



### Alabama State Record Catch

120 lbs 4 oz Blue Catfish caught on 3/9/2012 at Holt reservoir by John Paul Nichols.



# FLATHEAD CATFISH

*Pylodictis olivaris*



## Coosa River Consumption Advisories:

The Alabama Department of Public Health issues fish consumption advisories annually. In order to learn if this specific fish species has a state-issued fish consumption advisory in your area, please visit [CoosaRiver.org/FishGuide](https://CoosaRiver.org/FishGuide) or call 844-219-7475 for the most up to date information for the Coosa River.

The flathead catfish is quite distinct from a blue or channel cat. They live their life generally in the same types of places and feeding on the same things as blue and channel cats.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 18-24 inches
- Coloring is a mess of browns, yellows, blacks, and whites—very mottled
- Recurved tooth patches on either side of the upper jaw
- Flattened head—kind of looks like the backside of a shovel, the only catfish with a head that is flattened between the eyes
- Tail is not forked



### Habitat:

Flathead catfish like large waterbodies, like lakes and reservoirs, even better if they are clear with moving water. They like flowing water over sand, gravel, and mud, but fathead catfish love hanging out around fallen trees, stumps, rock ledges, and riprap.



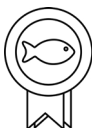
### Diet:

Just like other catfish species, flathead catfish are opportunistic predators that will eat anything they can get—alive or dead! They like insect larvae, crawfish, and small fish.



### Spawn:

Flathead catfish spawn over excavated pits occurring in June and July. The young flatheads tend to school, but they soon separate to be solitary for the rest of their lives.



### Alabama State Record Catch

80 lbs Flathead Catfish caught on 6/22/1986 at Alabama River, Selma by Rick Conner.

# BREAM

Bream is a catch-all term for a wide variety of sunfish. In Alabama, there are more than 20 species of bream. According to Alabama’s Chief of Fisheries, Nick Nichols, “From our standpoint, anything that is not in the bass family, a crappie, or in the catfish family is considered a sunfish.” These fish exist in a rainbow of colors, shapes, and patterns, so telling them apart can be a bit of a challenge. In general, bream have white and flaky meat, and some consider the skin and tail to be a delicacy — just be sure to check for PCB advisories in the region it was caught!



# BLUEGILL

*Lepomis macrochirus*



Fig. 10

Bluegill are the iconic bream species that many of us have fond memories of catching at a kid and still enjoy to this day. The world record bluegill, at 4 pounds 12 ounces, came from Alabama in 1950.

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# REDBREAST SUNFISH

*Lepomis auritus*



Fig. 11

The Coosa River's redbreast sunfish, big surprise, has a red breast... A shiny treat to the eyes.

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## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 6-10 inches
- Coloring is a blue, even purple, face with a light olive to gray back and yellow to orange bellies
- A large black dot on the bluegill's 'ear'
- Dark vertical bands evenly spaced down their sides



### Habitat:

Bluegill live in the shallow waters of lakes and ponds, along with slow-moving areas of streams and small rivers. They prefer water with heavy aquatic vegetation, and hide among fallen logs and water weeds. They can often be found around weed beds, where they search for food or spawn



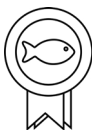
### Diet:

In the wild, they feed on insects, zooplankton, worms, and small fish. They will eat almost any human food scraps thrown into the water, such as bread, corn, and crackers.



### Spawn:

Bluegill spawning season lasts from April into September, which results in millions of bluegill each year. They prefer to nest in shallow backwater areas of rivers and reservoirs, often near largemouth bass nests. Bluegill are density dependent.



### Alabama State Record Catch

4 lbs 12 oz Bluegill caught on 4/9/1950 at Ketona Lake by T.S. Hudson.



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 6-8 inches
- Coloring is of red breast, long black ear flap, bluish green stripes, olive green back
- Teeth are present in the roof of the mouth
- Edges of soft dorsal fin and tail fin are yellow to orange



### Habitat:

The redbreast prefers vegetated and rocky pools and sloughs for its habitat, but they are found in a wide variety of habitats from small streams to rivers and reservoirs.



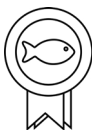
### Diet:

In the wild, they feed on insects, zooplankton, worms, and small fish. They will also eat almost any human food scraps thrown into the water, such as bread, corn, and crackers.



### Spawn:

The redbreast sunfish is a spring spawner in sand-gravel substrate and prefer to have their nests near flowing water and around aquatic vegetation.



### Alabama State Record Catch

1 lbs 4 oz Redbreast Sunfish caught on 6/12/2010 at Choctawhatchee River by Archie Russ.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



# REDEAR SUNFISH

*Lepomis microphus*

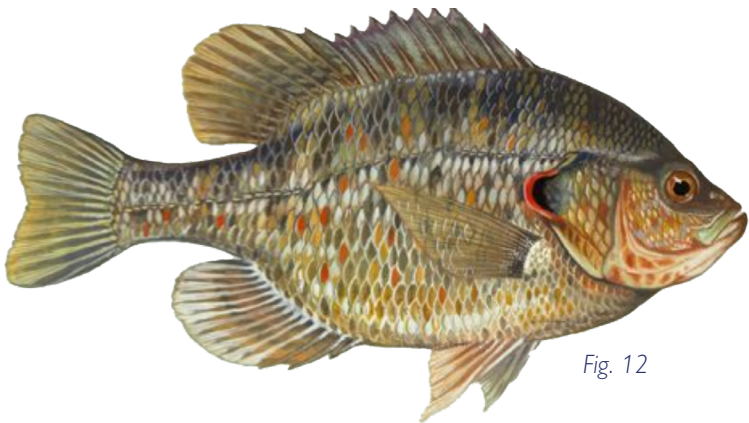


Fig. 12

**Coosa River Consumption Advisories:**

The Alabama Department of Public Health issues fish consumption advisories annually. In order to learn if this specific fish species has a state-issued fish consumption advisory in your area, please visit [CoosaRiver.org/FishGuide](http://CoosaRiver.org/FishGuide) or call 844-219-7475 for the most up to date information for the Coosa River.

The redear sunfish is more commonly known as the shell cracker because they fancy snails as part of their diet. Redears can be stocked in ponds with bluegill without competing with them for food.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



**Distinguishing Facts**

- Adult size of 8-11 inches
- Coloring is overall pretty dull with light green to brown back and a few scattered darker spots
- Black ear flap with a bright red or orange edge



**Habitat:**

You'll find redear sunfish in moderate to large streams, rivers, reservoirs, lakes, and other standing water habitats.



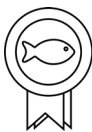
**Diet:**

Redear sunfish feed on aquatic insects, and smaller fish, but, like the nickname shell cracker suggests, they love to feed on snails.



**Spawn:**

Redear sunfish typically spawn from late April to early June. Male redear are in charge of their nests and eggs.



**Alabama State Record Catch**

4 lbs 4 oz Redear Sunfish caught on 5/5/1962 at Choctawhatchee River by Archie Russ.

# GREEN SUNFISH

*Lepomis cyanellus*



Fig. 13

**Coosa River Consumption Advisories:**

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Green sunfish do not grow very large, the state record is 1 lbs 9 oz. In ponds, they are undesirable because they grow to compete with bluegill for food, but never reach a good size for consumption.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



**Distinguishing Facts**

- Adult size of 4-8 inches
- Coloring is a brownish green back with orange to yellow tipped fins
- Dark ear flap



**Habitat:**

Compared to most bream, they are pretty tolerant of poor water quality conditions and can live almost anywhere (that has water of course).



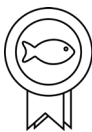
**Diet:**

Green sunfish feed on aquatic insects and larve, insects that fall into the water, crawfish, snails, turtle food, some small fish, zooplankton, and other small invertebrates—whatever they can get ahold of!



**Spawn:**

Green sunfish spawn in mid-April and can continue throughout the summer. Males will make and guard nests in shallow water, often near rocks and submerged structures.



**Alabama State Record Catch**

1 lbs 9 oz Green Sunfish caught on 8/10/2005 at McLamore Pond by Caleb Miller.

# LONGEAR SUNFISH

*Lepomis megalotis*



Fig. 14

Longear sunfish are a beautiful, brightly colored bream. They are very small with the state record being only 8 oz!

## Coosa River Consumption Advisories:

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## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 5-7 inches
- Long ear flap that is black with a lightly colored edge
- Dark colored back which transitions to a bright yellow or orange belly



### Habitat:

Longear bass prefer moving water. They are common in small to moderately flowing streams, rivers, reservoirs, and oxbow lakes.



### Diet:

Longear are mostly carnivorous fish that eat aquatic insects, small crustaceans, fish eggs, young bass, and even young sunfish.



### Spawn:

Longear spawn from March into August. These fish tend to group together and create communities of nests on sand and gravel shoals, at the mouths of streams. Male longear guard the nest and watch over the eggs until they hatch.



### Alabama State Record Catch

8 oz Longear Sunfish caught on 5/12/1990 at Yellow River by Jerry Jones.

# CRAPPIE

Crappie are popular game fishing throughout the United States with Alabama being home to some of the top crappie fishing spots. In fact, Weiss Lake is known as the “Crappie Capital of the USA.” The best crappie fishing is in early spring when crappie school in deep waters to feed, and a bit later in March when schools break up to move into the shallows for breeding. They go by a variety of pseudonyms such as specks, papermouths, white perch, calicos, sac-a-lait, and lamplight. Crappie tend to be small, with the record for both black and white crappie being under six pounds, but they are quite delicious.



# WHITE CRAPPIE

*Pomoxis annularis*



Fig. 15

## Coosa River Consumption Advisories:

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White crappie are a bit more tolerant of muddy waters than black crappie. You'll often hear fishers refer to good size crappie as "slabs." Weiss Lake is known as the "Crappie Capital of the World," but you'll find crappie in any of the Coosa's lakes. The most popular method of catching crappie is using live minnows. Finding a school of crappie is so fun, you likely won't care if they're white or black crappie, but knowing the difference makes you a smarter angler.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 12-20 inches
- Coloring is light gray to green back with silvery sides and a white belly
- Up to 10 dark vertical bars along its sides, which are sometimes faint
- Dorsal fin with five or six spines, while black crappie will have seven or eight



### Habitat:

You can find white crappie in large reservoirs, rivers, and lakes. White crappie are more tolerant of turbid (murky) waters than black crappie. Around spawning season, adults group into schools and move into shallow water to heavily feed on threadfin shad and other small fish. They like to hang out around aquatic vegetation, submerged logs, and other underwater structures.



### Diet:

Young crappie feed on invertebrates such as zooplankton and insects. When they reach a size of about 7 inches, fish become a larger portion of their diet.



### Spawn:

White crappie will begin spawning in April, or when water temperatures reach about 56 to 59 degrees F, and continues into early June. Crappie congregate into large schools for spawning season



### Alabama State Record Catch

4 lbs 9 oz White Crappie caught on 5/8/2000 at Lake Martin by Jeremy S. White.

# BLACK CRAPPIE

*Proxomis nigromaculatus*



Fig. 16

## Coosa River Consumption Advisories:

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Crappie are a popular gamefish because of their great taste! They stay in groups so once you catch one, you're likely to catch several more in the same spot. They largely act the same and grow to similar sized, so the difference is largely in appearance.

## IDENTIFICATION & FACTS



### Distinguishing Facts

- Adult size of 12-18 inches
- Darker than white crappie, but quite similar
- Black spots down its side
- Seven or eight spines on the dorsal fin



### Habitat:

You can find black crappie in large reservoirs, rivers, and lakes. Black crappie prefer clearer, cleaner waters.



### Diet:

Young crappie feed on invertebrates such as zooplankton and insects. When they reach a size of about 7 inches, fish become more prevalent in the diet.



### Spawn:

Black crappie will begin spawning in April and continue into May, or when water temperatures reach about 56 to 59 degrees F.



### Alabama State Record Catch

4 lbs 5 oz Black Crappie caught twice, once on 6/2/1997 at Jefferson Co Pond by William D. Webb, and again on 3/27/2007 at Fort Payne Res by Shelley Meadows/Mentone.

# NON-GAME FISH

Here is a quick collection of other fish commonly spotted in the Coosa River that are not considered game fish. This list is by no means exhaustive but is meant to give a bit more info about what else is out there in our waters!

## CARP

*Cyprinus carpio*



Fig. 17

Carp found in the Coosa River can be considered a nuisance at times. They are a member of the minnow family. Carp are typically thick with broad bodies and light green to gray coloring. Because of their ability to compete with other more desired species of fish, no one is allowed to stock carp without a special permit. One species, the grass carp, will compete with native species for space and food and even destroy their own habitat.

## SHAD



Fig. 18

**Alabama Shad**  
*Alosa alabamae*

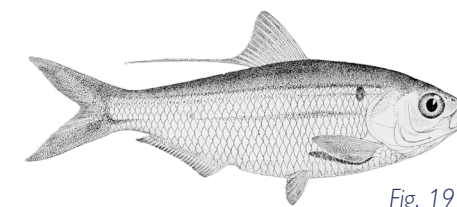


Fig. 19

**Threadfin Shad**  
*Dorosoma petenense*

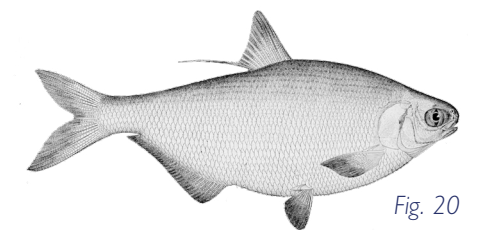


Fig. 20

**Gizzard Shad**  
*Dorosoma cepedianum*

Shad is a type of small bait fish that are commonly snacks for larger, more appealing game fish. Gizzard and threadfin shad are some of the favorite snacks for sunfish, bass, and crappie. These fish spend their lives schooling in large numbers and prefer quiet clear waters. Catch these guys with a net and place in a livewell for yummy bait!



# LONGNOSE GAR

*Lepisosteus osseus*



Fig. 21

Longnose Gar are native to and occur in every river system in Alabama. While seen as a nuisance fish by many sport anglers, blamed for eating game fish, they are an important part of every freshwater ecosystem in the state. As an apex predator they help thin the population of true nuisance/invasive species. The body is olive green to light brown on the back. The fins are light gray to clear with black spots spread throughout. A unique characteristic of gar is that the width of the snout at the nostril is less than the eye diameter. Longnose gar prefer habitats with flowing water.

# SPOTTED GAR

*Lepisosteus oculatus*



Fig. 22

Spotted gar are also native to and occur in every river system in Alabama. Often held in the same light as longnose gar by sport anglers, but serve an important role to the ecosystem as a native species and apex predator. The head, back, and sides are light brown with round, dark brown spots. The fins are light yellow to brown with brown or black spots throughout. Spotted gar prefer habitats of little to no current. Alabama DCNR sampling indicates that due to its adaptable and broader range of habitats than other gar species, it is the most widespread and abundant gar species in Alabama.

# PADDLEFISH

*Polyodon spathula*

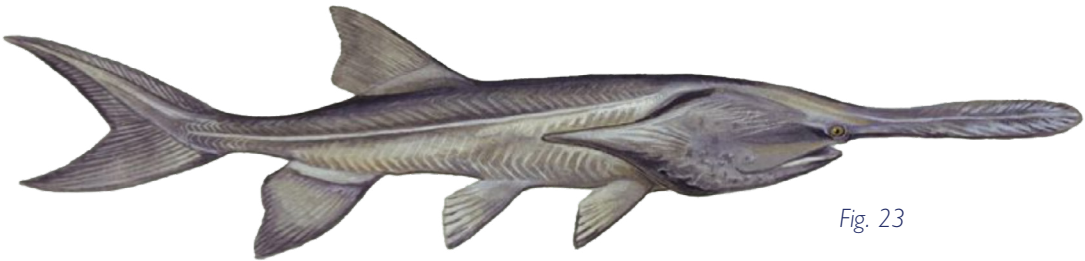


Fig. 23

Native to Alabama, paddlefish occur below the fall line in the Mobile Basin, excluding coastal rivers. This includes the Tombigbee, Alabama, Black Warrior, Tallapoosa, Coosa, Cahaba & Mobile Rivers. Also known as spoon-bills, paddlefish populations declined rapidly due to poaching and habitat destruction such as damming the rivers as they are a migratory species. **State and federal regulations prohibit harvesting of paddlefish in most states in the US (including Alabama), and is strictly enforced.** The long, paddle shaped snout of the spoon-bill accounts for 1/3rd of it's body length and helps to stabilize the fish as it swims. The snout also contains specialized cells that assist the fish in detecting clumps of plankton, which it feeds on. The body color changes from bluish gray on the back to cream on the underside. On the underside of the snout are two barbels in front of a large but toothless mouth.

# FRESHWATER DRUM

*Aplodinotus grunniens*



Fig. 24

The freshwater drum is native to Alabama and can be found in most every river system in the state, excluding coastal rivers. Their body color varies from dusky gray to a silvery white, with fins being dark gray to black. A unique characteristic of freshwater drum is that their heads contain marble-sized bony structures known as otoliths, or "head-rocks," in its head that assist in maintaining balance. Drum habitat varies from skinny water to large channels of river. Larger individuals prefer swift water below dams. They are bottom-feeders, consuming aquatic insects, small fish, crayfish, mollusks, and amphipods.





## REPORT POLLUTION

When you see pollution, the first step is to document it with photos and videos. If you'd like to file a pollution complaint, please call our office at **205-981-6565** or visit: [CoosaRiver.org/Report-Pollution](https://coosariver.org/Report-Pollution).

*We're here to help!*

## WATER QUALITY DATA

Want to get the skinny before you dip? We've gotcha covered. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, our team collects, processes, and analyzes water quality at popular recreation sites along the Coosa River weekly. Visit [CoosaRiver.org/SwimGuide](https://coosariver.org/SwimGuide) to see our data and sign up for our free text message alerts.

## VOLUNTEER WITH US

Are you looking to cast an impact in your community? Our organization always needs help with field work, administration support, and at events! Sign up to volunteer with us at: [CoosaRiver.org/Take-Action](https://coosariver.org/Take-Action).

## CONTACT US



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Fig 14 - Raver, Duane. Longear Sunfish - Images - USFWS National Digital Library. <https://digitalmedia.fws.gov/digital/collection/natdiglib/id/25321/rec/13>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2023.

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