

## Florida Fish Busters

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### Florida's Top Bass Fishing Opportunities

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(special thanks to Wes Porak and John Cimbaro, FWC)

For anglers of all abilities and experience, nothing beats the opportunities for landing freshwater bass in Florida's 10,550 miles of rivers, streams and creeks or in its 7,000 plus lakes.

The latest national statistics indicate there are 30 million anglers, and 10 million of them specifically pursue freshwater bass, compared to 6.8 million fishing for trout and 2.1 million fishing for flatfish (the most popular saltwater group).

Florida has four species of freshwater or black basses: the largemouth, spotted, Suwannee and shoal. Of those, largemouth are by far the most common, since they live in almost every body of fresh water in Florida. The native subspecies, the Florida largemouth bass is also the official Florida freshwater fish. Their popularity is the driving force behind many popular magazines, fishing shows, tournament series and billions of dollars worth of tackle and boat sales each year, all because they represent a great challenge to anglers wishing to refine their skills, while still being attainable to the novice. At either level, the thrill of a bass hitting a topwater lure is one to get the juices flowing and make you glad to be outside.



*Joey shows off his "Big Catch" Florida largemouth from a small lake in St. Cloud.*

Each year Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) fisheries biologists select a list of Florida lakes and rivers as top black bass fishing destinations. Their choices are based on local experience, creel surveys, electrofishing data and the site's ability to handle fishing pressure with adequate ramps and fishing access. This year's list follows, in no particular order. For more details about how and where to fish these lakes, the location of local facilities, where to find quarterly updates throughout the year and information about fish consumption advisories or special regulations, visit [MyFWC.com/Fishing/Forecasts](http://MyFWC.com/Fishing/Forecasts).

- Lake George is the second largest lake in the state with 46,000 acres and is located 18 miles northwest of Deland. Extensive vegetation provides excellent bass habitat, and wade fishing in eel grass with plastic worms or topwater lures is productive. Live golden shiners are well known here and throughout the state for catching trophy bass especially during spring.

Hot spots on the lake include Juniper, Salt and Silver Glen spring runs. In winter and early spring, look for bass at jetties on the south end of the lake. Casting deep-diving crankbaits near old docks along the northeast shore and off Drayton Island can also produce good results.

- Lake Tohopekaliga (18,810 acres), also known as Lake "Toho," is located adjacent to the City of Kissimmee in Central Florida. It is an outstanding fishery, and its close proximity to Central Florida vacation attractions places Lake Toho among the elite fishing destinations in the nation. The lake received national attention during 2001 when the all-time B.A.S.S. tournament record for total weight was eclipsed by professional angler Dean Rojas with a total catch of 108

pounds. Numerous professional and amateur tournaments continue to be held each year at the lake, highlighting its popularity.

In spring 2004, the FWC conducted an extreme drawdown and habitat enhancement project on the lake to improve critical shoreline habitat for fish and wildlife utilization. Today, the lake boasts an extensive and diverse vegetation community that provides essential spawning and nursery habitat for fish and wildlife.

Plastic baits (worms, crawfish and lizards) flipped along grass edges will catch quality-sized bass. Spinnerbaits, soft jerkbaits and chugging baits also work. Eight FWC fish attractors located in deep water produce good stringers of bass.

- Lake Kissimmee (35,000 acres) is nationally renowned for consistently producing high quality fishing. In 1996, the FWC coordinated an extreme drawdown and habitat enhancement activities to remove excessive organic material and improve fishing. Following a lake refill, enhanced areas were dominated by beneficial native vegetation creating critical spawning and nursery areas. Lake Kissimmee's extensive and diverse plant community consists of both submersed and emergent vegetation, which allows anglers to try different bass fishing techniques. Fly fishermen have access to miles of outstanding wade fishing, and consistently catch bass on popping bugs during spring and summer.

- Rodman Reservoir, east of Gainesville and south of Palatka, covers 9,500 acres of prime largemouth bass habitat. Since its creation in 1968, Rodman Reservoir has been known for trophy largemouth bass. The fishery's success is attributed to abundant habitat in the form of stumps and submersed aquatic

vegetation, and periodic drawdowns occurring every three years. Drawdowns on Rodman are used primarily to control invasive aquatic vegetation, but biologists have demonstrated the drawdowns produce strong largemouth bass year-classes that provide the majority of angler catch. Beginning in December 2007, a planned reservoir drawdown will eventually lower water levels 7 feet for approximately three months. The reservoir should refill by April 1. Temporary boat ramps will be located at Kenwood Landing, Orange Springs and Hog Valley. Anglers should be aware of the rule that requires mandatory catch-and-release of all largemouth bass from Dec. 1, 2007 to April 1, 2008, for the duration of the drawdown. To prevent boating accidents, boaters are cautioned to watch their wake and be courteous to anglers fishing along the Barge Canal and river channel.

- Lake Tarpon (2,500 acres) is located near Tampa/St. Petersburg in Pinellas County. Most bass range from 12 to 16 inches long; however, quality and trophy fish are present in good numbers, including an occasional 10-pounder.

Anglers are most successful flipping or pitching plastic worms along canal and bulrush edges. Offshore bass fishing is productive around ledges, coontail, and eel grass beds using shad-imitating jigs, crankbaits, jerkbaits and topwater baits.

- Lake Weohyakapka, commonly known as Lake Walk-in-Water (7,500 acres), is located south of Orlando and east of Lake Wales. Anglers catch up to 25 bass a day with several ranging from 4 to 8 pounds. The lake also produces many trophy bass exceeding 10 pounds each year. A 15- to 24-inch slot limit regulation and a three-bass daily bag limit help maintain quality fishing. Anglers may keep three

bass per day, either under or over the protected slot range, of which only one bass greater than or equal to 24 inches is allowed.

Typically, the best technique to catch trophy bass is to drift live wild shiners over hydrilla beds; however, the 2004 hurricanes cleared most of the hydrilla from the lake. Pitching live wild shiners and flipping soft plastic baits in bulrush (“buggy whips” or “round rush”) should be successful through spring 2008. Bass were also found in maidencane grass and knotgrass (Kissimmee grass) stands along the shoreline during spring and fall sampling. Soft jerkbaits are a must when fishing these areas.

Topwater lures are also effective, particularly chuggers or walk-the-dog type baits. Although topwater baits catch fish throughout the year, summer months offer the best action when schools of bass roam deep-water areas. Bass move offshore when the shallow water temperature heats up during summer.

- Lake Istokpoga (28,000 acres) is situated in Highlands County between U.S. 27 and U.S. 98 south of Sebring. Istokpoga has an average depth of only 6 feet. Past angler surveys have estimated more than 1,000 bass over 8 pounds being caught in less than a year’s time. Bass angler catch rates were relatively slow last year, but are improving.

Although bass fishing is excellent throughout the year, April and October are the best months for anglers looking for cooler weather and lots of bass. From January through April, bass can be found spawning in bulrush, cattail, and other vegetation over sandy lake bottom areas that were enhanced during the 2001 drawdown. Bass also spawn around Big Island and Bumblebee Island. Flipping

dark-colored, soft plastics in bulrush patches and in pockets of submerged vegetation can be productive during this time of year. Red shad and June bug colors are popular for soft plastics.

In spring and summer, topwater lures and jerkbaits worked over the top of hydrilla and pondweed in the southern half of the lake are often successful. Weedless spoons tipped with grub tails and spinnerbaits fished over pondweed south of Bumblebee Island are deadly on bass during early morning. Rattling lures (silver, gold and “Tennessee shad” are excellent colors) can also be effective during summer and fall as baitfish school in open water areas along the northern end of the lake. Classically, a live shiner fished a few feet under a popping cork is the most reliable bait for catching trophy bass.

Lake Istokpoga has a 15- to 24-inch protected (no-harvest) slot limit for bass with a three fish daily bag limit, of which only one bass may be 24 inches or longer. All residents between 16 and 65 years of age and all non-residents are required to have a fishing license on this designated Fish Management Area.

- Deer Point Lake is a 5,000-acre impoundment located north of Panama City and is fed by natural freshwater streams. Although bass fishing typically slows down during winter months in Deer Point Lake, it picks up again in mid-February and March, and becomes red hot in April and May.

Try fishing for largemouth in the old creek channels of Bear, Cedar and Econfina creeks with plastic worms, diving crankbaits or Rat-L-Traps. Bayou George and the flats area at the confluence of Bayou George and Deer Point Lake

are also popular largemouth spots. Anglers should exercise caution while boating due to flooded cypress stumps and snags found in the lake.

- The Suwannee River is a pristine, black-water stream which flows 213 miles within Florida from a swampy region near the Georgia border to the Gulf of Mexico. Rocky bluffs and shoal areas occur in the upper reaches of the river. Floodplain cypress tree/hardwood swamp borders, lined with lily pads, are found throughout the middle reaches of the Suwannee River.

Although the Suwannee River is not known for trophy largemouth bass, good numbers of bass can be expected, and quality-sized largemouth bass are frequently caught. The smaller, but feisty, Suwannee bass species also occurs in much of the river system. Suwannee bass over 16 inches (two pounds) can be caught by anglers especially in the Santa Fe River, a tributary of the Suwannee River. They prefer moderate to fast current flowing around cypress trees. When water levels are low, mid-river is a better bet for catching Suwannee bass, particularly in vegetated areas or around structures.

Crawfish are the main food item for bass throughout the river system, so anglers should fish accordingly. Plastic worms, lizards and crawfish; jigs with orange skirts and pork rinds; and metallic crankbaits all catch fish here. While the scenery may change every 20 or 30 miles, the key to catching bass is the same - look for deep structure or shallow structure that has deep water nearby. The lower Suwannee River moves more slowly, and bass utilize shoreline cover such as fallen trees and cypress trees on the outer bends of the river. Plastic baits, rigged weedless, yield bass from shallow banks where lily pads are present. Live shiners

can be fished into brush piles from upstream areas by letting them float downstream. Small bass will hit a fly or a small floater-diver fished along banks.

The estuary is also productive. Fishing can be outstanding during fall when shrimp migrate into the river. Tidal creeks provide a unique fishing experience near the Gulf of Mexico.

- The Everglades Water Conservation Areas (WCAs) are South Florida marshlands intersected with over 200 miles of canals. Originally designed for flood control and water supply, the area provides some of the best largemouth bass fishing in the country. Daily catches of 50 or more bass are not uncommon during peak season.

The best fishing usually occurs in spring when declining water levels concentrate fish in canals. During April, catch rates can be as high as 4.1 bass per hour in the L-67A Canal. This past year in the L-67A Canal a peak season creel survey recorded an average catch rate of 1.8 bass per hour, with more than 20 percent of those fish 14 inches or longer. Catch rates for are also excellent in the L-35B and L-38E canals.

Most anglers fish in canals rather than the marsh. Anglers work canal edges with plastic worms, soft jerkbaits and minnow imitations. Flipping the vegetation is also a popular technique. During high water, some anglers fish marsh areas where bass can be found in the open sloughs. The L-67A and Alligator Alley canals have trails that are specifically cut to provide boat access to adjacent marsh areas.

A special bass fishing regulation is in effect in South Florida, including WCAs. Only one bass, of the five-bass daily bag limit, may be 14 inches or longer. This

gives anglers an opportunity to harvest smaller bass, but prevents overharvest of fish over 14 inches in total length.

- Crescent Lake is a 15,725-acre lake near Crescent City on the Putnam/Flagler county line. Past electrofishing samples for largemouth bass revealed one of the highest catch rates recorded for areas on the St. Johns River. Largemouth bass up to 20 inches long were well represented in the sample and good numbers of larger fish (8 pounds or larger) were collected.

Fall and early winter fishing tends to be best near deep-water structures such as dock pilings. Preferred artificial baits include plastic worms, spinnerbaits and crankbaits. Live golden shiners are always popular.

- The 7,300-acre Tenoroc Fish Management Area near Lakeland provides a special opportunity to bass fish in Florida's famous phosphate pits. These 7- to 227-acre lakes were created years ago by draglines during phosphate surface mining operations. As a result, lake bottoms have irregular contours with depths ranging to 35 feet.

The fishing experience in these pits can rival any natural lake when bass are biting well. Bass fishing is best from mid-November through March. Lake 3, Shop Lake, Hydrilla Lake, Butterfly Lake, Fish Hook Lake, Half Moon Lake and Lost Lake West offer some of the best bass fishing opportunities on the property.

Probing deeper waters with chrome-colored rattling lures and chartreuse or "firtiger" color diving crankbaits are a good bet in phosphate pits. Plastic worms are often the best all-around lure for these lakes - try red shad or June bug colors.

Locate submersed islands or sandbars off points to find concentrations of bass.

During spring, flipping worms or soft plastic baits in thick brush is the best bet.

Tenoroc lakes are managed with a variety of catch-and-release harvest regulations, including total catch and release (no harvest) and 15-inch maximum size limits.

Call Tenoroc at 863-499-2422 for more information or to make reservations. These lakes are only open to the public four days a week. Anglers must check in and out at the Tenoroc Headquarters, deposit their valid fishing license and purchase a daily fishing permit for \$3.

- Mosaic Fish Management Area (1,000 acres) includes 12 phosphate pits from 10 to 200 acres each, with depths down to 30 feet. This area is not very well known because it just recently opened. As a result, fishing pressure is low, and bass fishing can turn on at a moment's notice.

Topwater baits around dawn and dusk, white or chartreuse spinnerbaits, plastic worms and chrome or "firedtiger" (chartreuse and orange) colored crankbaits can be successful. Fishing shoreline brush and vegetation works well in spring. Lakes LP2 West, SP11, SP12 North and SP12 South offer some of the best bass fishing opportunities on the property.

Mosaic lakes are managed with a variety of catch-and-release harvest regulations, including total catch and release (no harvest) and 15-inch maximum size limits.

Mosaic Fish Management Area is located near Ft. Meade in Polk County. The fish management area is only open to public fishing from Friday through Monday.

No reservations can be made. Lake permits are allocated on a first-come-first-serve basis. Call 863-499-2421, ext. 104, for more information about fishing at Mosaic.

NOTE: Missing for 2008 from this list of top bass fishing destinations is 450,000-acre Lake Okeechobee. Recently revered by largemouth bass and crappie anglers nationwide, the “Big O” is imperiled by environmental consequences of prolonged high water levels, agricultural runoff and 2004 and 2005 hurricanes that wreaked havoc on Okeechobee’s aquatic plant communities. FWC biologists continue to assist the South Florida Water Management District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Florida Department of Environmental Protection and others in restoring the lake and its fishery to its glory days. New, more restrictive regulations will take effect on July 1 for both bass and crappie to help the lake recover. Contact local marinas and tackle stores for current conditions.

With all those “top sites” to choose from, don’t overlook the smaller lakes and ponds in your area. Many of these provide some awesome fishing as illustrated by the largemouth that Jeffrey Smith caught in a relatively small Polk County orange grove lake during January 2008. It weighed 18.50 pounds, according to this famed big-bass hunter, who was featured recently on the ESPN Bassmaster Insider Show. Had the bass’ weight been taken on a certified scale and witnessed by an FWC biologist, it would have been a new certified state record, surpassing the 17.27 pound hawg caught by Billy O’Berry in



*Jeffrey Smith with an 18.5 pound Florida largemouth from a Polk County orange grove pond.*

Polk County in 1986. Fritz Friebel's 20.13 pounder out of Pasco County in 1923 was weighed on certified scales but was not witnessed by a biologist.

So get out there and catch the next state record, and if you catch a memorable fish (exceeding 24" or 8 pounds for an adult angler or 18" and or 6 pounds for a youth under 16 years of age), you can apply for a "Big Catch" angler recognition certificate (see your regulations summary or visit [MyFWC.com/Fishing](http://MyFWC.com/Fishing)). Whether your next bass measures up or not, remember "a bad day fishing beats a good day working," so good luck and good fishing.

Additional information can be found at [MyFWC.com/Fishing/Forecasts](http://MyFWC.com/Fishing/Forecasts), including details about access to these top bass sites, quarterly forecasts and consumption advisories.

Instant licenses are available at [MyFWC.com/License](http://MyFWC.com/License) or by calling 1-888-

[FISH-FLORIDA \(347-4356\)](tel:347-4356)

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