

## Smallmouth Bass

*Micropterus dolomieu*

“Inch for inch and pound for pound the sportiest fish that swims.” Anglers frequently offer this appraisal to describe the fighting stamina and leaping ability of the smallmouth bass. Smallmouth bass are an important component of western North Carolina’s sport fishery. Smallmouth bass, along with largemouth bass and spotted bass, are a species of sunfish often referred to as black bass. The term “black bass” was derived from the black coloration of smallmouth bass fry. There are two recognized subspecies of smallmouth bass: the northern smallmouth bass and the Neosho smallmouth bass. The northern subspecies is found in North Carolina.

### History and Status

Smallmouth bass originally ranged from the Great Lakes area of Canada south to northern Georgia, west to Oklahoma and north into Minnesota. Smallmouth bass are native to North Carolina and have been widely stocked throughout the United States and southern Canada. When introduced to waters containing favorable food and habitat, they generally reproduce successfully. Smallmouth bass are now found in every state except Florida, Louisiana and Alaska.

### Description

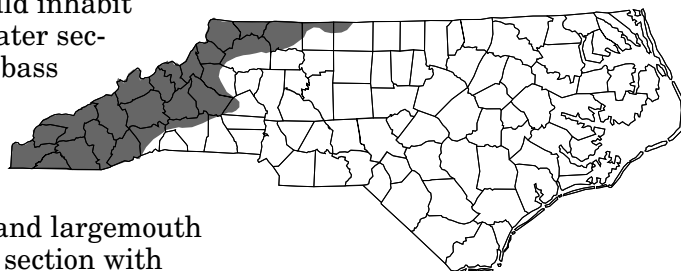
Smallmouth bass have greenish to brownish sides with faint, dark mottlings and vertical bars. There are three distinct bars that radiate from the eye, and the under-

side is dusky white. Don’t let the name fool you. Smallmouth bass have a mouth that is actually quite large, and only slightly smaller than that of the largemouth bass. The major morphological difference between smallmouth bass and other black bass is that the upper jaw of the smallmouth never extends beyond the eye. Another difference is that young smallmouth bass have tricolored caudal fins, whereas largemouth bass have only two colors on the caudal fin.

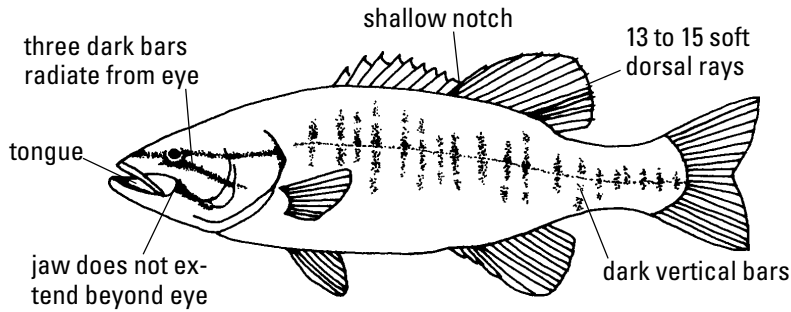
### Habitat and Habits

Smallmouth bass inhabit cool, clear mountain and foothill streams having moderate current and rocky bottoms. Adult smallmouth bass prefer streams with average widths of over 40 feet containing deep riffles, large boulders, submerged logs and pools over 3 feet deep. They are also found in large, clear mountain lakes. In a typical North Carolina stream, trout would inhabit the upper, cold-water section; smallmouth bass the cool middle section containing a rocky bottom and lots of pools and riffles; and largemouth bass, the lowland section with sluggish current, a silt or mud bottom and aquatic vegetation.

Smallmouth bass spawn in the spring, usually at water temperatures from 60 to 65 F. The male selects a nest site away from strong currents and digs a circular nest with vigorous sweeping motions of the tail. The female lays approximately 1,000 to 10,000 eggs in the nest that are fertilized immediately by the male. The eggs hatch in two to 10 days depending on the water temperature. As the fry hatch, they settle into crevices in the stream bottom for several days, living off the attached yolk sac and growing in length. After spawning, the male dutifully guards the eggs and fry. A guarding male is effective against a single intruder, but not against a school of determined predators. If a school of fish approaches the nest, the male smallmouth bass will leave the nest to chase one fish, providing an opportunity for the rest of the school to feed on the eggs and fry.



**Range Map:**  
Occupied range ■



**WILD  
Facts**

**SMALLMOUTH BASS**

**Classification**

Class: Osteichthyes (bony fishes)  
Order: Perciformes  
Family: Centrarchidae (sunfish)

**Average Size**

Adults are usually 10 to 20 in. long and weigh 1 to 4 lbs. The North Carolina record is 10 lbs., 2 oz. The world-record smallmouth bass was caught in Dale Hollow Reservoir, Tenn., and weighed 11 lbs., 15 oz.

**Food**

Fish, crayfish, frogs, and larval and adult insects

**Breeding**

When water temperatures approach 60 F, smallmouth bass will begin spawning over a sand-and-gravel substrate in little or no current. The male builds and guards the nest. The female lays 1,000 to 10,000 eggs per nest.

**Young**

Approximately one week after hatching, the black fry form a cloud over the nest and gradually disperse throughout the stream. They feed on aquatic insect larvae and zooplankton until they grow large enough to consume fish.

**Life Expectancy**

Smallmouth bass seldom live longer than 7 years in North Carolina. In northern states, smallmouth bass may live up to 18 years.

Although the male can defend the nest against predators, there are environmental influences that affect fry survival that the male cannot control. Changes in water levels due to floods and sudden water temperature changes can cause the males to abandon their nests. The rates of fry survival may be affected if humans destroy nests or catch too many of the guarding males.

Approximately one week after hatching, the free-swimming fry become entirely black and congregate over the nest, forming a dark cloud. Then they gradually begin to disperse throughout the stream. When the fry are approximately one-third of an inch long, their color changes from black to the greenish color of the adult. Young smallmouth bass feed on zooplankton and aquatic insect larvae until they are large enough to eat other fish. Adult smallmouth bass feed primarily on fish, crayfish and insects. In some instances, smallmouth bass have been observed following large turtles or suckers as they dig around roots or in the bottom. The opportunistic smallmouth bass will pounce on any insects or crayfish disturbed by this activity.

**Range and Distribution**

Smallmouth bass are generally found in the mountains and foothills of North Carolina. Native populations of smallmouth bass are found in western North Carolina streams from the New River to the Hiwassee River. Successful stockings have extended their range to the upper reaches of the

Yadkin River, Catawba River and Broad River drainages.

**People Interactions**

The smallmouth bass is considered by many anglers to be the premier game fish in North America. Similar to the largemouth bass, smallmouth will strike almost any kind of lure or bait, but they generally prefer smaller sizes. Favorites include jigs, crankbaits, spinners, streamer flies, minnows, crayfish, hellgrammites, leeches and nightcrawlers. To ensure quality fishing in North Carolina, minimum-size limits and daily creel limits are placed on smallmouth bass populations. These regulations prevent overfishing of smallmouth bass, and enhance angling opportunities.

**References**

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**Credits**

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