

First-rate Fishing

Washington County Public Fishing Lake has both quality and quantity



By Ben Ricks, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, District 5 Management Biologist
Photography by Kenny Johnson

Is there a little guy or girl tugging at your shirt tail asking you to take them fishing? Are you a bass, bream, or catfish angler looking for new water? Do you enjoy fishing lakes that are just a little off the beaten path? If yes is your answer to any or all of these questions, you should make a visit to southwest Alabama's Washington County Public Fishing Lake.

84 Acres of Fishing

Washington County Public Fishing Lake, also known as J. Emmet Wood Lake, is located just off Highway 17 in Millry, Ala. in north Washington County. This 84-acre lake, managed by the Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, was drained and restocked in 2005. It has become quite an attraction since it reopened in 2006. Anglers have found that many bass have already grown to 5 to 6 pounds. Historically, it was a "big bass lake." At present, this lake is a "numbers lake," a place where there are plenty of fish to be caught to please both kids and adults.

In 2008, the lake ranked first among Alabama's Public Fishing Lakes for pounds of bass per acre and for pounds of bream per acre. In addition, it ranked second for number of bream harvested 3/4 pounds or larger. Record-breaking bass and bream catch rates along with annual catfish stockings make this lake attractive for any angler.

Bass, Bream and Catfish

Spring and fall are best for bass fishing, though bass are easily caught throughout the year. Many bass anglers like to sight fish when the bass are making and defending their beds for spawning. The peak time is typically March to early April. When fish are found in shallow depths, the upper end of the lake is your best bet. Try soft plastics, spinner baits, top water lures, jerk baits and swim baits. If you find that the bass are in deeper water, try throwing crank baits, soft plastics, or jigs along the dam and stand pipe.

No matter what method you prefer, it should not be difficult to catch the daily limit of 10 bass per person. Don't feel like you have to release the smaller bass back. Keep them for your freezer or fryer or give them away. Biological surveys have indicated that this lake needs the small bass (less than 12 inches) thinned out.

The bream fishing is good throughout the year; however, there are key times when fishing seems to peak. Fishing for redear sunfish, also known as shellcracker, is best during

the month of March while they are spawning. Redear sunfish can be found in high concentrations at this time in and around blown down trees or other shallow water structure. Bluegill fishing starts to pick up around late April or early May. Since bluegill spawn multiple times in a year, the fishing will remain consistent until the water begins to cool off in September.

Worms and crickets work well when fished 2 to 5 feet deep under a cork. Don't forget about Beetle Spins, Rooster Tails, and plastic grubs. Fly fishermen can fish floating and sinking flies over the beds for a subtle but effective presentation. When bream fishing, look for clusters of beds the size of a basketball or larger in 2 to 5 feet of water. When the bream are bedding, as many as 30 fish can be caught from the same location. If you catch one, you may want to focus on that area for a bit; you may have found a bedding area.

Catfish fishing begins to pick up in May; however, June to September is the peak time. Fishing worms, livers, shrimp, or cut bait on the bottom is the most productive method. Focus on the lower end of the lake near the dam.


Amenities

Washington County Public Fishing Lake has plenty of access for bank fishing including two fishing piers. Although a boat is not necessary, it will help you access other areas of the lake. Once away from the bank-fishing area, you are fishing waters that have had less fishing pressure and – with any luck – plenty of eager fish. You can launch your own boat from the concrete boat ramp, or rent an aluminum jon boat at the concession building. Boats may have an outboard motor, but only electric trolling motors are allowed to travel around the lake.

Crickets, worms, livers, a variety of artificial bait and tackle, and refreshments are sold at the concession building, which also has a public restroom.

If you are traveling and would like to spend the night, a hotel is located in Chatom, Alabama, 12 miles south on High-

way 17. If you are a camper, Washington County Public Fishing Lake has both primitive camping and RV spaces available. These spaces can be reserved at the concession building. This lake is a popular camping location. It is advised to call ahead, especially if you are interested in a holiday weekend. A picnic pavilion is also available and can be reserved by contacting the lake manager.

With all the amenities found at Washington County Public Fishing Lake, it is a great place to spend time with friends and family. The best part is that the fishing is pretty good too. 



Fishing Requirements

A valid fishing license is required for anglers between 16 and 64 years. If you do not have a fishing license, you can purchase a regular fishing license for \$12, or a wildlife heritage license for \$10. The wildlife heritage license will grant you fishing privileges at state public fishing lakes, as well as limited hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing privileges at other places.

In addition to a license, a daily \$3 fishing permit is required at state lakes.

Directions

From Chatom, take Alabama Hwy. 17 North to Millry; turn left on Healing Springs Ave. and drive 1¼ miles; turn left on State Lake Road and go ¾-mile to Washington County Lake.

Hours of Operation

Washington County Public Fishing Lake is open sunrise to sunset six days a week, February 1 through July 3 (closed Monday) and 5 days a week, July 5 through November 30 (closed Monday and Tuesday). For questions, contact the lake manager at 251-846-2512, or the District Fishery Biologist Ben Ricks at 251-626-5153; Ben.Ricks@dcnr.alabama.gov.