

Get Out There and Fish PA's "Fishing Capital"

by Carl Haensel



photo-Cindy Haensel

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's capital, sits on the banks of the largest river on the East Coast, the mighty Susquehanna River. The river is more than a mile wide in some areas, and the countless islands, rock ledges, seams and eddies offer an amazing variety of fish-holding habitat. In almost every season, anglers can find a wide range of angling opportunities. Consider the great fishing in the Susquehanna River at Harrisburg:

Smallmouth bass are usually at the top of most anglers' lists when they think of the Susquehanna River. So many of these feisty fish inhabit the river that some consider it the best smallmouth bass fishing in the eastern U.S. In moving water, smallmouths prefer areas with riffles flowing over gravel or boulders, where they are found in the pools, pockets behind rocks, or in the deeper moving water. Smallmouth bass are not migratory fish, but they do congregate during the colder portions of the year, usually in deeper, slower water.





photo-Carl Haensel

Channel catfish

Channel catfish are less sought-after, but no less common in the river. Many veteran anglers visiting the Susquehanna have been surprised when a big channel cat ends up on the end of the line instead of a bass. Weights up to 15 pounds are not unusual at lengths of over 30 inches. Fish around 20 inches long are common. Channel catfish usually prefer deep pools and runs in rivers that have alternating pool-and-riffle habitats. Small channel cats eat aquatic insects. As they grow, they switch to fish, crayfish and mollusks, but still feed on aquatic insects, and occasionally eat plant matter. A forked tail and dark spots on juveniles distinguish this gray catfish from the olive-brown flathead catfish.

Natives?

Neither the channel catfish nor the smallmouth bass is native to the Susquehanna River Basin. Both were introduced in the latter half of the 19th century. The Fish & Boat Commission supported this introduction, though private individuals largely carried it out. The fact that they now are the primary gamefish species in the river is a product of their adaptability and Commonwealth management practices.

Walleyes

While not a target species for many anglers, walleyes are fast becoming a favorite of Susquehanna River anglers. This large member of the perch family is known for the light-reflective quality of its eyes. Another identifying characteristic is the white spot on the lower tip of its tail. The Commission has conducted a walleye stocking program in the lower Susquehanna River for many years. In the last 10 years, between 18 million and 33 million walleye fry have been stocked in the river from Sunbury to the Maryland line. This level of stocking has truly started to pay off. Anglers report catching good numbers of 15- to

20-inch walleyes regularly, with some reported up to 28 inches long.

Other fishes

Anglers report occasionally catching in the Susquehanna almost anything that swims. Other common sportfishing species include muskellunge, rock bass and bluegills. But don't be surprised when you hook into anything from a chain pickerel to a flathead catfish, or even a striped bass.

Rods and reels

Spinning rods and reels spooled with 6- to 10-pound test are good all-around choices to fish the Susquehanna River



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near Harrisburg. Anglers directly targeting large channel catfish may want to use heavier 15-pound-test line. Fly-fishing anglers targeting smallmouth bass would be well-suited to bring 6- to 8-weight fly rods using floating line.

Lures and bait

Smallmouths, walleyes. Even though warm-weather bass and walleyes will bite just about anything, crankbaits that imitate crayfish or minnows usually do the trick. If you're fishing in colder weather, try lead-headed jigs. These can contain a body either of hair, soft plastic or another synthetic material. For the most finicky times, a live crayfish on a hook or a jig tipped with a shiner or fathead minnow may draw strikes when nothing else will. Good ole' garden variety earthworms will also take these fish.

Catfish. It seems at times that everyone has a secret recipe for catfish bait. Indeed, you never know what you will

see if you ask to check what's on the end of the line on another angler's hook. Sometimes it could be chicken livers, and other times you'll find shrimp, worms, doughballs or even some mix of all of them that has been fermented for a few days in the backyard. Many anglers will also be surprised when a fat catfish takes a crankbait or dry fly, something many anglers think of as "smallmouth" lures.

Boating and wading

Just about any small boat will work on the Susquehanna. Flat-bottomed models in the 14- to 16-foot range are very popular, as are canoes. Shallow water and an amazing amount of rocks make this area a big market for jet-drive outboard motors. Don't bring a 20-foot deep-V and expect to reach the fish—or even launch in low water.

Check the Fish & Boat Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us, for additional boating safety information. Al-

ways wear a life jacket—even if you get out to wade! When wading, remember to watch your step carefully. River depth can change drastically in just a few feet. If you are swept off your feet, point your feet downstream and use your arms to maneuver to shallow water. Never wade in cold weather.

Where to fish

Even though nearly the entire Susquehanna River offers good angling, the sections within 20 minutes north and south of Harrisburg offer easy access at these public access areas (see map on next page).

East Shore

695. Dauphin Boro Access. Upstream of Harrisburg in the Susquehanna Water Gap, this carry-in-only access in the borough of Dauphin is a great spot to try wading or shore fishing. It is also a good canoe landing.

photo-Carl Haensel



In warm weather, crankbaits that imitate crayfish or minnows are excellent smallmouth offerings.

If you're boating downstream from this access, stay on the east shore in this area to avoid the roughest parts of several sets of rock ledges.

696. Fort Hunter Access. Just north of the city of Harrisburg, this is a very popular fishing access point. The river in this area is rocky and shallow, so fewer recreational craft frequent this launch. Fort Hunter also offers a good place to begin wading. In this area, the river is nearly a mile wide, and in some places it's only ankle deep. Wading the river on a warm summer evening is a great way to relax and cover a lot of water.

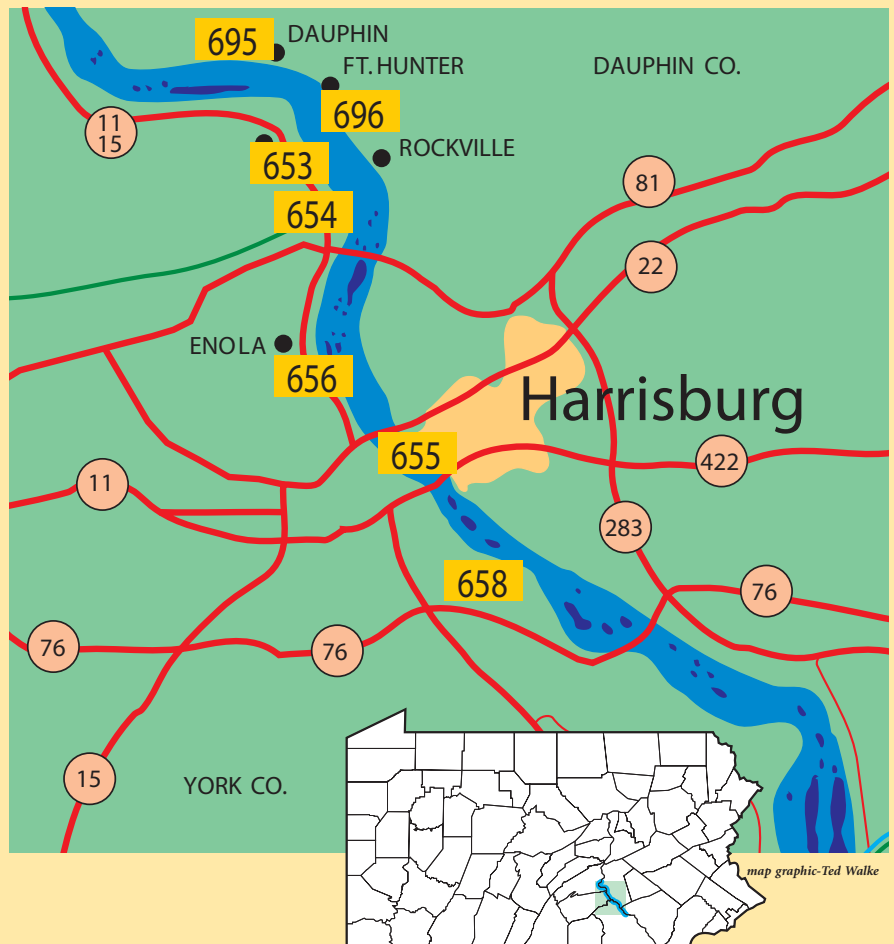
655. City Island Access. This popular boat ramp is on the south end of Harrisburg's City Island and boasts ample parking. Remember, however, that this launch is not far upstream of the dangerous Dock Street Dam. This low-head dam has been responsible for many boating fatalities over the years, and you should studiously avoid it. Recreational boating traffic can also be high at this launch. Wading is not an option at this access.

West Shore

653 & 654. Marysville Borough Accesses. Located in the scenic Susquehanna Water Gap, these accesses offer wading access and are best for launching unpowered boats. Motorized boating is challenging in the water gap area for those without experience. There are many shallow areas with rock ledges and swift currents.

656. West Fairview Access. This access, at the mouth of Conodoguinet Creek, offers an easy place to launch. Low water can make navigation from this launch tricky at times. Low water also makes this spot a good place to begin wading the river. Smaller smallmouth bass are common here, and there are fewer channel catfish. Muskies and large carp have been caught near this access.

658. New Market Access. This access is located about a half-mile downstream of the mouth of Yellow Breeches Creek. There is a good boat access located under the railroad bridge adjacent



to a public park. The park offers playground equipment and is a good place to begin a family adventure. Wading is available at this location. Anglers headed downstream will find good fishing among a number of islands just above the PA Turnpike bridge. In this area, the fishing is often best on the river's east shore.

Other shore-fishing hotspots

The east side of the Dock Street Dam is a popular place to fish in Harrisburg. Located directly under the I-83 bridge, most anglers miss it. Anglers need to exercise great caution here because of the dam, and boats are not allowed near the dam. This area can be a walleye hotspot during the spring and fall at the right water levels.

Anglers should note that even though other areas may appear to provide river access, this is not always the case. Anglers must respect private property and

no-trespassing signs. Landowners, including railroads, can and do prosecute trespassing shore anglers.

Key structure, tips

Smallmouths and walleyes relate regularly to structure of just about any sort. Bridge piles, rock piles and bed-rock outcrops all produce fish. Sometimes actually hitting the visible obstruction with your lure and then letting it drop in the water can produce a strike. A good rule of thumb for midday angling is that if you can easily see the river bottom, you won't be catching many fish in that spot. Instead, focus on fast-water chutes, current seams and eddies. Deep holes can also produce bites. Large shallow-water flats can give up big fish in low-light periods and at night if the water is clear, and during the day if the water is cloudy or off-color. ☐