

The Largemouth Bass, one of Highlands County's amazing creatures

Highlands County is popular for its abundant fishing opportunities. Anglers from all over the country find their way to our little section of the earth to cast their lines into some of our 113 beautiful lakes. Eagerly sought after by these anxious anglers is the largemouth bass, which are noted for the excitement of their fight. Often times the fish will actually become airborne in their effort to throw a hook. The 1975 legislature designated the Florida largemouth bass as the official state freshwater fish.

The largemouth (*Micropterus salmoides*) is a member of the sunfish family. Other names for the fish are wide mouth bass, bigmouth, black bass, bucket mouth, Florida bass, Florida largemouth, green bass, green trout, linesides, Oswego bass, southern largemouth and northern largemouth. The fish is olive green in color and marked by a series of dark blotches forming a jagged horizontal stripe along each flank. It is the largest of the black basses, reaching a maximum recorded length of 29.5 inches and weight of 25 pounds 1 ounce.

When young, the largemouth eats mostly small bait fish, shrimp and insects. Adult bass consume smaller fish such as bluegill, crawfish, frogs, snakes, salamanders, baby alligators and even small animals. The adult fish enjoy deeper water than the juveniles and as they mature begin to feed on shad, trout, shiners and sunfish. Their prey can be up to 25 – 35% of the bass's body length.

Studies have shown that when bass reside in weedy areas they grow more slowly due to difficulty in finding their prey. When weed cover is at a minimum, it is easier for bass to find and catch their prey. However, without the weeds, bass have been known to completely annihilate the smaller fish and other prey, which may result in stunted growth or starvation for the bass.

Largemouth bass are fierce hunters and use their senses of hearing, sight, vibration and smell to attack and kill their prey. Holding up to 5 small fish in their huge mouths at one time, they are efficient predators when in their habitat. They are tough fish and when handled properly, they have a good survival rate when caught and released.

They eat more often in warmer weather. Their metabolism increases in the warmer months and they seldom eat when water temperatures are below 50 degrees F. But when the temperature of the water rises from 68 – 80 degrees they begin to feed heavily. However, when the water temperature rises above 80 degrees their feeding declines.

Largemouths are ready to spawn in the spring when the inshore water temperature reaches about 60 degrees F. Generally they spawn in shallow bays, backwaters, channels and other areas protected from the prevailing winds. They usually look for areas with firm bottoms of sand, gravel, mud or rock, and usually in water from 1 - 4 feet deep. But if the water is extremely clear they may go to deeper water.

Actual spawning takes place when the water temperature reaches between 63 - 58 degrees. The female will lay from 2000 to 7000 eggs per pound of her body weight. She will deposit her eggs in either one nest or can deposit them in several different nests, after which she leaves the area and returns to deeper water where she will remain for several weeks without eating. Once the eggs are laid, the male guards the nest (or nests) and refuses to eat until the eggs hatch. He will pick up objects that land on the nest and move them and will attack anything that moves near the nest.

Panfish are the bass's worst enemy during spawning. Small schools will surround the nest and when the guarding bass leaves the nest to chase one off, the rest of the panfish will swarm in and indulge on the eggs. An area with a very high population of panfish can hamper bass reproduction tremendously.

The eggs hatch within 2 days if the water temperature is at 72 degrees, but it could take up to 5 days at 67 degrees. From 2000 to 12,000 eggs hatch from the typical nest. Only about 5 – 10 of these hatchlings will ever reach a length of 10 inches. The male will then guard and protect the juveniles until they reach about an inch in length at which time he abandons them. Ironically, after all this protection, the male bass will eat juvenile bass if he encounters them.

Largemouth bass are just one of the many fascinating and amazing creatures that reside in our beautiful lakes. Whether the desire is angling for the largemouth or simply taking in the serene beauty, Highlands County residents are fortunate to have such vast resources within their reach.