

# Destination: Potomac

By King Montgomery and Jim Brewer

Photos by King Montgomery

**W**e owe it all to West Virginia, the state where the mighty Potomac begins. From its origins at Fairfax Stone in Grant County, West Virginia, the great river is at first a trickle of water, tumbling down hardened rock ledges. Crystal clear and icy cold, the Potomac gradually builds up steam, connects with a series of forks and branches, and makes a grand entrance into the Commonwealth of Virginia as a major tributary to the Chesapeake Bay. Along the way, the Potomac flows through 383 miles of American history, and provides some excellent fishing in the process.

Coldwater trout ply the higher reaches then give way to warm water smallmouth bass until the Potomac reaches Great and Little Falls, and becomes an imposing,

majestic tidal river. For much of its tidal freshwater stretch, the largemouth bass is king, until the saltwater intrudes from the Chesapeake Bay. Striped bass, knowing no salinity boundaries, range throughout the river up to the fall line in Washington, D.C., and as the river nears its juncture with the Bay, saltwater species such as bluefish, spot, and croaker, prevail. The upper Potomac runs a course of 275 miles. The lower river, broader, wider, and more commanding, takes a hundred mile ride from D.C. to the mouth of the Bay, where at its widest point, the Potomac stretches 11 miles.

The Potomac is not only a river, but a way of life. The river brings tradition and history into the world of the outdoorsman. The Potomac is mallard ducks and large-

mouth bass. It's the shad run in spring and crab pots in the summer. The Potomac is the home of nearly every sport fish – fresh or saltwater – that swims. It's one of those special places where a Virginia Sportsman wants to be.

## **The Waterfowl**

It was dawn on the Potomac. Decoys danced in the wind, twisting and bobbing with the breeze. The black lab, still wet from his swim to the blind, sat quietly, prayerfully almost, in anticipation of the whistle of wings.

The birds were on us immediately. From the gray darkness across the mighty Potomac, they appeared, a flock of mallards, perhaps 10 in all. We hit the calls: "Waack, waack, waack, waack, waack!"

And the ducks poured into our spread, feet down.

“Take ‘em, boys!”

The guns rang out in stuttering blasts while here and there ducks fell from the sky. But only three birds after many shots. Not an exceptional start, but good enough for our black retriever, now busy bringing in the downed birds.

Later in the morning, we would encounter black ducks, redheads, teal and woodies. Plus geese. Lots and lots of geese. A sportsman’s haven is this place called the Potomac. It’s a waterfowler’s early vision of heaven.

The Potomac is rich with the history of waterfowl. Fine carvers have been at work at their decoy benches for nearly two centuries, creating the wooden forms that would draw in the migrating fowl. The Potomac, at the foothills of our nation’s Capital, means ducks are on the way.

### **The Fishery**

There are over 60 species of fish in the tidal Potomac River. In the freshwater reaches of the river, before the water turns from brackish to salt, the largemouth black bass reigns supreme. The bigmouth is joined by lesser numbers of its smallmouth cousin, and a resident population of juvenile striped bass, born in the river and awaiting their time, usually three to five years, to become sexually active and head downriver to the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

In the late winter and in spring, other anadromous species such as herring, hickory shad, yellow perch, white perch, and the large stripers move up into DC waters to spawn. Factor in the sunfishes (primarily bluegill, rock bass and crappie) and huge carp, channel and blue catfish, and you’ll see why you never know what



**A largemouth bass taken on the Potomac near Washington, DC.**



**Bluegill and other sunfishes are plentiful in the Potomac and its tributaries**

you’ll catch when you fish these waters.

In the fall, the black basses and sunfishes will concentrate in areas where food and cover are available, feeding heavily, particularly during the warmer times of the day. This culinary frenzy helps the fish get into optimum shape for the leaner times ahead in winter.

Tides are very important in the lives of all riverine creatures, but particularly to the fish. In each 25 hours, the tide will rise and fall twice, with an average change in depth of about 18-24 inches. All fish, from the smallest minnows to the largest striped bass, are most active and apt to be caught during moving water - either in or out. The

creatures at all links of the food chain are stimulated by the water movement, and an increase in feeding levels usually results as the tide pulls. The fish, unless they are in eddies or slack water, face into the current and, like trout in a stream, are usually on the downcurrent side of structure waiting for food to float or swim by. So present your fly or lure accordingly.

### **A Day On the River**

Today the sun was just beginning its climb, lighting pink ribbons across the morning sky. A flock of Canada geese headed south, flying in loose formation, low to the water. Tim Freese, my friend and guide for the day, turned off the jet outboard motor, and we drifted slowly and



Largemouth bass abound near Arlington across the river from Washington, DC.



Fish hang out around boat docks like this one in Alexandria.

quietly toward Harrison’s Island on the upper Potomac near Leesburg. I was taking in the calm beauty of sunrise when Tim, who had cast a Tiny Torpedo surface lure toward midstream, whooped as he set the hook on a feisty smallmouth bass. My hastily cast fly rod popper soon accomplished the same.

Today the fishing would be fair. We would land an unusual number of largemouth and some chunky bluegills and redbreast sunfishes. We were fishing tube lures on light spinning tackle and Clouser Deep Minnow streamers on the fly rod along the Maryland shore. We were just south of the Dickerson Power Plant’s warm water effluent, where the surface water temperature was in the high 50 degree Fahrenheit range. The surrounding water was in the low 40s. All species of fish that swim the upper Potomac River congregate in the warmer water to feed on the plankton,

insects, crustaceans, and each other; and anglers, even on the coldest winter day, can usually find a few fish willing to come to fly or lure.

#### **A Potomac Sportsman**

Teddy Carr, a professional fishing and hunting guide from Locust Grove, has a love affair going with the Potomac River. Teddy’s first experience with the mighty river was overwhelming.

“It was huge,” Teddy recalled. “It was a powerful river. Everything about it was powerful: the winds and currents, the fish and Washington, D.C., the nation’s most powerful city. Each time I return from the Potomac, I have a feeling that some of its power has rubbed off on me. It’s a strange, exhilarating feeling.”

For 2004, Teddy and his clients caught over 3,000 bass on the Potomac River. But

it was not always such a fishery. In the 60’s and 70’s pollution threatened nearly every living creature in the Potomac. Then America began to get the message. The Clean Water Act was enacted as law, the vegetation began to return, and by the early 1980’s the Potomac was again among the nation’s premiere fisheries.

“Vegetation is the key to the Potomac fishery,” Teddy said. “History dating back to George Washington’s day suggests that there has always been vegetation in the river. And vegetation translates into fish.” Vegetation also translates into waterfowl, which feed on the aquatic plants that inhabit the river. Teddy and clients frequently enjoy outstanding gunning from his private blinds for both ducks and geese. “The power of the Potomac is overwhelming,” he said. “In the shadows of the Capital, it’s an awesome river.”

## The History

Archaeological finds indicate that man has been fishing and hunting on the Potomac for about 10,000 years. Woolly mammoths, not ducks, provided sustenance for those first, primitive Potomac-ites. Native Americans prowled the Potomac waters and marshes from about 8,000 B.C. till Captain John Smith arrived on the scene in the early 1600's.

Smith's first fishing trips on the big river did not meet with great success: *in diverse places that abundance of fish lying so thicke with their heads above the water as for want of nets (our barge driving amongst them) we attempted to catch them with a frying pan, but we found it a bad instrument to fish with.*

European settlers arrived in increasing numbers through the 18th century when the war with England for independence would begin. Although Cornwallis would surrender to General Washington at Yorktown in 1781, it was two more years before peace finally settled on the land of the Potomac. Ultimately, in 1783, Washington's troops drove the remaining British from New York, and at Annapolis a multitude of spectators joined in the celebration of victory.

The War between the States would rear its ugly head about 75 years later. As far as Civil War battles go, Ball's Bluff, fought on October 21, 1861, wasn't much of one; not like the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) three months before or the major mutual slaughters that followed in later years. And yet, though small in terms of soldiers actively engaged (about 1,700 on each side) the repercussions of the Union defeat at Ball's Bluff proved significant. The South's relatively easy victory, close on the heels of the Union loss at Bull Run, bolstered hopes for a strong Confederacy,



Vegetation is the key to the Potomac fishery.

and further weakened Union hopes for a quick end to the war.

In the battle, Colonel Edward "Ned" Baker commanded the 71st Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment. Baker, a U.S. Senator and boyhood friend of Abraham Lincoln, was killed. And though the battle may not be famous, some of the names involved in it are: Lieutenant Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 20th Massachusetts, a future Justice of the Supreme Court, was seriously wounded by two musket balls. Major Paul Joseph Revere, grandson of the Revolutionary War patriot and also from the 20th Massachusetts, was captured.

As the Federal forces moved down Ball's Bluff toward Leesburg, Colonel Nathan G. Evans hurried formations to stop them. The first regiment to attack the Massachusetts troops was Colonel Eppa Hunton's 8th Virginia Infantry, a regiment comprised mostly of Virginia boys from Loudon and Fairfax counties. A Southern officer on the scene described the regiment as "375 more people in bad temper." That temper would be severely taken out on the Union soldiers as the day progressed. The Federal forces were beaten back to the

high bluffs overlooking the Potomac, the battle turned to rout, and hundreds of soldiers were captured, shot, or drowned as they tried to flee across the rain-swollen river to the safety of Harrison's Island.

Soldiers of the 8th Virginia, the 71st Pennsylvania, and the 20th Massachusetts regiments would face each other again in battle at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863, the bloodiest battle of the war and the beginning of the end for the South. The 8th Virginia shattered itself against the 71st Pennsylvania and 20th Massachusetts as part of General George Pickett's ill-fated charge against the strong Union line on Cemetery Ridge.

And then it was over, and peace returned for good along the banks of the Potomac, a place where pintail ducks and largemouth bass call home. A powerful river is the Potomac, as is its lasting image in the minds of all who visit.

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