



# Tunica Cutoff 2024

## REEL FACTS

Keith Meals – Fisheries Biologist

[Keith.Meals@wfp.ms.gov](mailto:Keith.Meals@wfp.ms.gov)

**General Information:** Tunica Cutoff was created by the US Army Corps of Engineers (COE) in 1942 when a bend in the Mississippi River was “cut off” to shorten the river. The lake is inside the mainline levee and connects to the river via the “runout”. Present minimum pool is about 4,000 ac. Tunica Cutoff is one of the largest oxbows in Mississippi and is a popular destination for bream and crappie anglers, mostly from Memphis, TN.

**Location:** Approximately 6 miles west of Tunica via Hwy 4.

**Fishery Management:** Largemouth Bass, bream, crappie, and catfish.

**Purchase a Fishing License:** [https://www.ms.gov/mdwfp/hunting\\_fishing/](https://www.ms.gov/mdwfp/hunting_fishing/)

### Amenities

- 2 fee ramps; Nel-Win ramp is for members only.
- Bait shop across levee.

### Creel and Size Limits

*The following apply to both sides of the lake.*

- Crappie: No length limit and 50 crappie per day per angler.
- Largemouth Bass: No length limit and 10 bass per day per angler.
- White and Yellow Bass (common): No limits.
- Striped and Hybrid Striped Bass (very rare): 15-inch minimum length limit and 6 per day per angler.
- No limits on bream or catfish.

### Regulations

*Tunica Cutoff is a boundary water with Arkansas and the following regulations apply to the Mississippi side of the lake.*

#### Yo-Yos and Jugs

- No more than 25 jugs and no more than 25 yo-yos may be fished per person. No more than 2 hooks are allowed on each device.
- Grabbling season May 1 – July 15; only wooden structures allowed; same for Arkansas side.

#### Reciprocal Agreement

- The MDWFP and AGFC recognize the resident sport fishing, hunting, and commercial fishing licenses of the two states on the flowing waters of the Mississippi River and all public waters between the main levees of the Mississippi River of the two states.

### Fishing Tips

#### General

- Best fishing is when the water is slowly falling from 15 to 10 ft (Memphis gauge).
- Fish outside edges of cover as the water falls and inside as it rises.

#### Crappie

- Target shoreline cover in spring. In summer and fall, troll out from cover near deeper “pockets”.

#### Largemouth Bass

- Target wood cover on steep, sandy banks, especially small points.

#### Bream

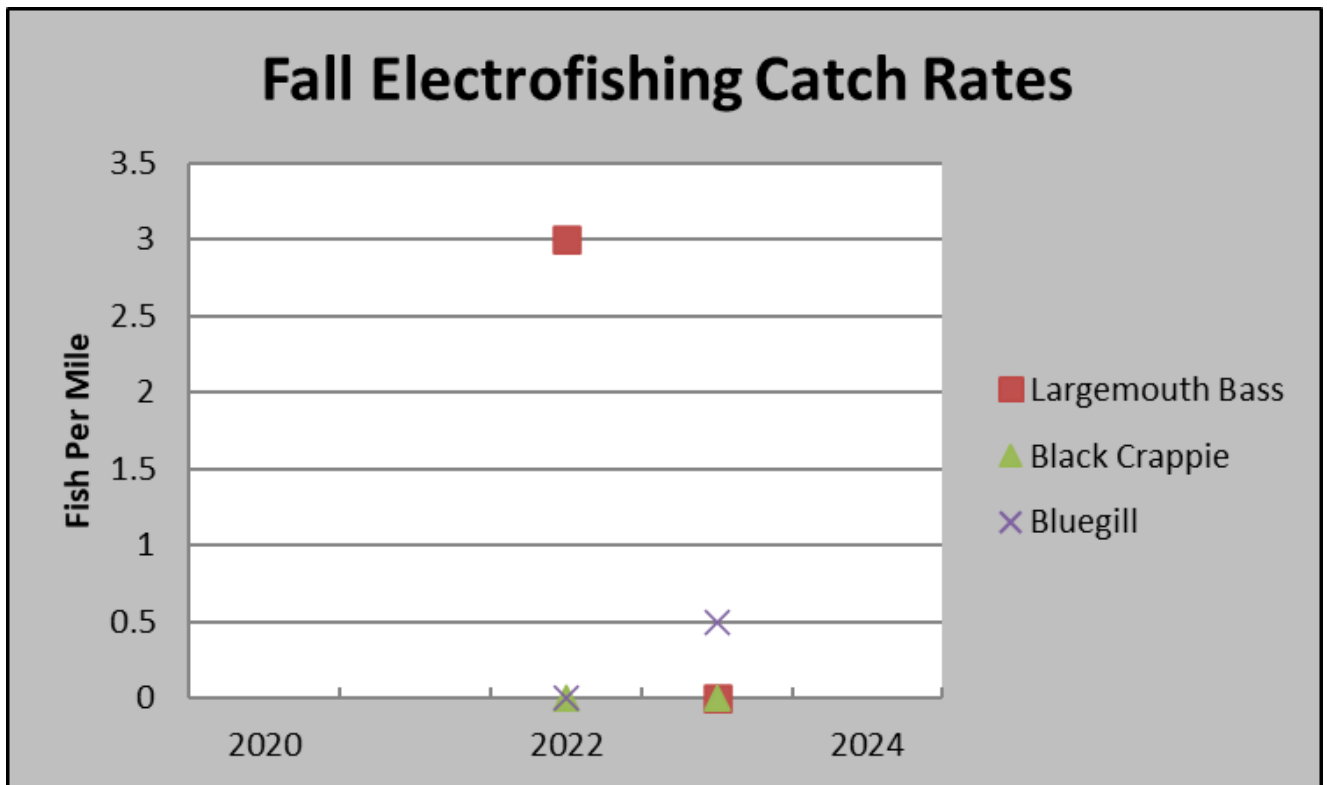
- Fish crickets or redworms near cover.

#### Catfish

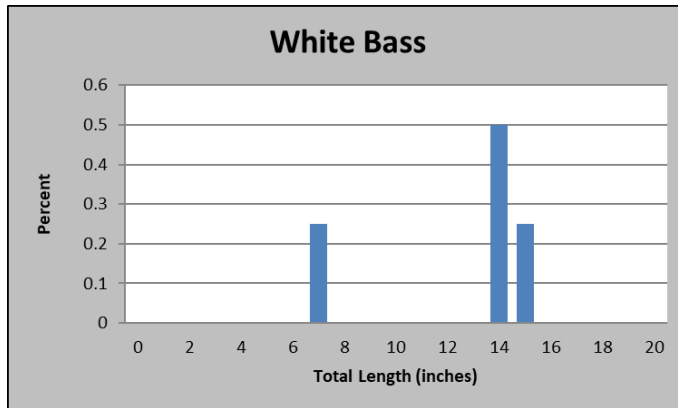
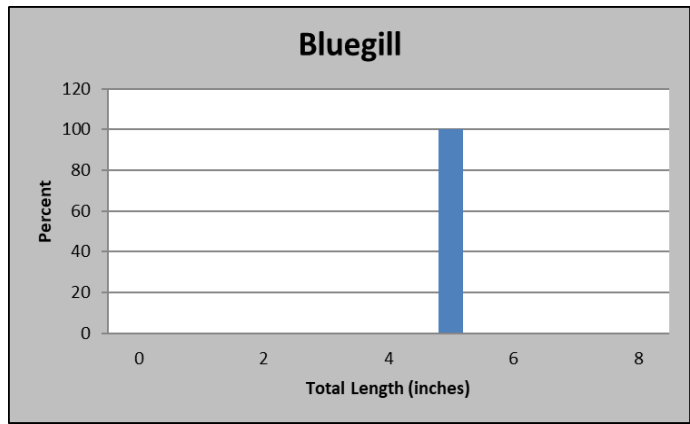
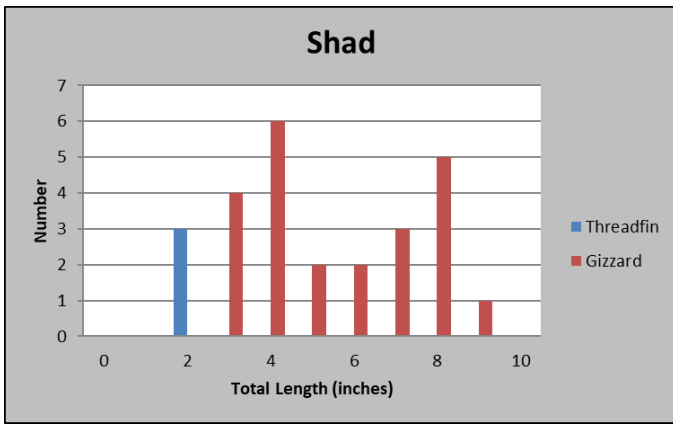
- Target mudflats or the runout with liver, worms, or cutbait.

**Below:** Results from fall 2023 electrofishing at Tunica Cutoff. Catch rates were poor because water levels were low with little cover present, water temperatures were near 50° F, and fish were suspended 16 to 18 feet deep - too deep to sample with electrofishing. Sampling was curtailed after the second day because catch rates were so low.

Species	# of fish collected	% of sample	Average Length (inches)	Maximum Length (inches)	Average Weight (pounds)	Catch Rate – Adult fish (fish/mile)
Gizzard Shad	23	65.7	6.1	9.2	0.1	5
White Bass	4	11.4	12.8	15.0	1.1	2
Threadfin Shad	3	8.6	2.5	2.8	<0.1	0
Longear Sunfish	2	5.7	3	3.7	<0.1	1
Channel Catfish	1	2.9	25.7	25.7	8.8	1
Bluegill	1	2.9	5.9	5.9	0.2	1
Yellow Bass	1	2.9	5.3	5.3	0.1	1



**Above:** Trend in catch rates in fall electrofishing. After the 2011 flood, fall electrofishing catch rates were low, so we changed to spring electrofishing. With spring sampling, high water either prevented access for weeks and/or scattered fish in dense shoreline vegetation (also resulting in low catch rates). In both 2022 and 2023, fall sampling was unavoidably delayed until cold water made electrofishing inefficient. Some bass and crappie were seen but not captured in 2023.



**Above:** Most fish collected in fall 2023 were shad (top, left). Unlike 2022, Threadfin Shad were scarce, likely from an extreme cold snap in December 2022 that caused a winterkill of the less cold tolerant Threadfin Shad. One, 5-inch Bluegill was collected (top, right). Most White Bass were large adults. One Largemouth Bass and two crappie were seen but not captured. Gars, carps, and buffaloes were present but not collected. Low catch rates do not necessarily mean fish are scarce or absent; they may just not be vulnerable to electrofishing gear (too deep and/or cold, in thick cover, etc.).

**Below:** Extended periods of flooding since 2011 have killed some shoreline vegetation, especially the “new willows” (left) established during the 1988 drought. Younger brushy vegetation (right) has also been damaged from high water; some may survive, some may not. Woody vegetation colonizes during dry years, but it may be weakened or killed if flooded too long. Beavers are also a threat.



**Below:** Tunica Cutoff runout with the weir after construction in 2002 (top); the Mississippi River is in the background and water is flowing from the river into the lake. The weir was a cooperative effort by the City of Tunica, natural resource agencies in Mississippi and Arkansas, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the US Army Corps of Engineers, Memphis District. The unique double-notched shape (center notch can be seen in faster flowing water, top) was designed by MDWFP and COE biologists and COE hydrologists to allow boat traffic to and from the river and to conserve bank vegetation, including the “new willows” (bottom) that grew up during the 1988 drought. The weir raised the minimum pool of the lake about 8 ft. During low water before the weir, the lake divided into two separate pools. All but one ramp was out of the water; afterwards, the lake remained one pool with water on all ramps.



**Lake Characteristics:** Tunica Cutoff normally fluctuates 20+ ft yearly (highest in spring, lowest in fall), but varies widely year-to-year. Droughts let vegetation colonize for later flooding as fish habitat. Floods bring in nutrients and let fish move out over the floodplain for spawning and food. Aquatic vegetation is scarce due to fluctuating lake levels, but there are abundant shoreline trees (mostly bald cypresses and black willows) at all but the lowest lake levels. The peak of the spring fishing season may not always coincide with the best fishing conditions. The weir keeps the lake from falling below about 6 ft (Memphis gauge) and was designed to allow angler access to and from the river most of the year. For the Mississippi River (Memphis gauge) daily water level and 5-day forecast, go to:

<https://forecast.weather.gov/product.php?site=NWS&issuedby=ORN&product=RVA&format=txt&version=1&glossary=0>

Tunica anglers keep a close eye on river levels to determine where and how to fish. Because incoming river water is cooled by northern snowmelt, fish here spawn about a month later (usually May for crappie and bream) than at nearby lakes.



**Left:** The river allows access by many wide-ranging fishes, such as Asian carps (Silver Carp, top; Bighead Carp, bottom), Paddlefish, and Striped and Hybrid Striped Bass. Largemouth Bass, bream, and crappie are mostly homebodies, spawning and living in the lake. Many anglers think the river stocks the lake with sport fish; if it did, their numbers should not rise and fall with lake conditions since the river flows into the lake every year.

**Right:** There was a fish kill of mostly Asian carps in late summer 2023. Similar kills have been ongoing for several years but do not seem to significantly reduce carp numbers. Previous investigations have shown they are caused by a bacterial infection. Asian carp were seen jumping, but were not caught, during fall sampling.

