Tunica Cutoff 2025

REEL FACTS

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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/

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

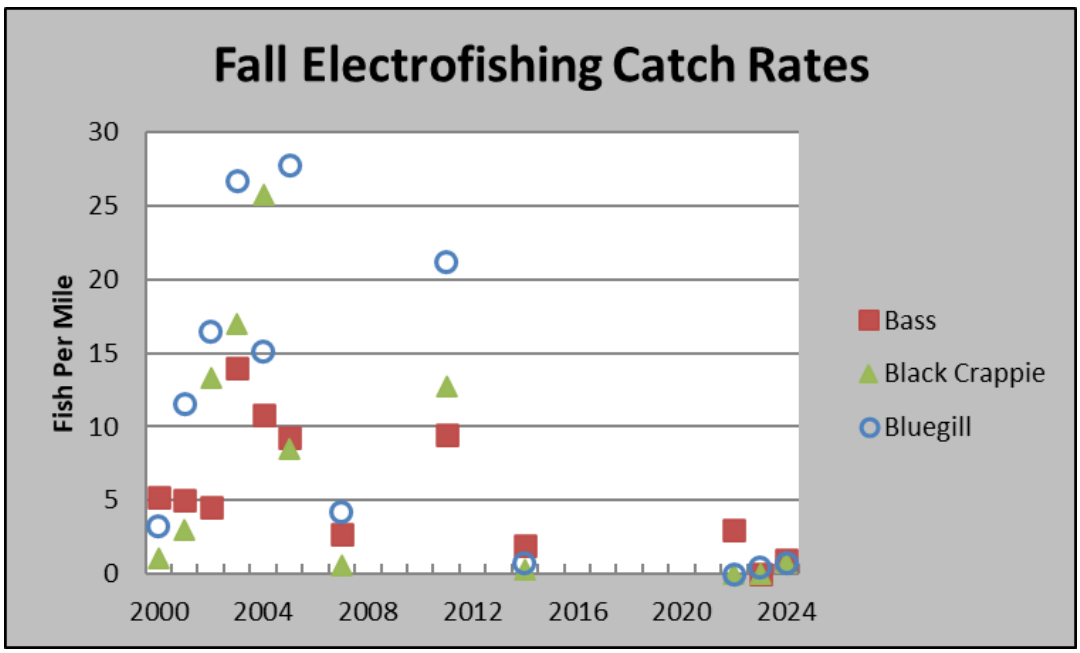
- Fish crickets or redwoms near cover.

Catfish

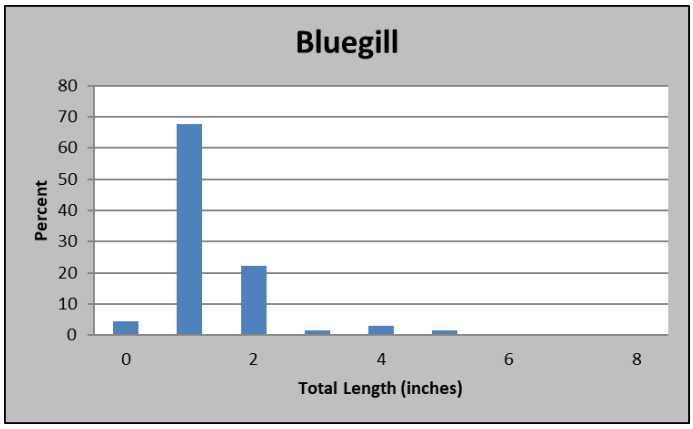
- Target mudflats or the runout with liver, worms, or cutbait.

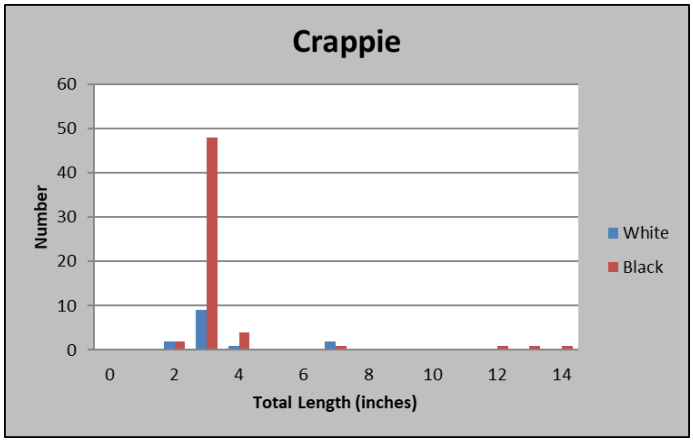
Below: Results from fall 2024 electrofishing at Tunica Cutoff. Shad were relatively abundant. Although hundreds of Silver Carp were seen, only one was captured because of their size and jumping habit. White, Yellow, and Hybrid Striped Bass were seen. Most fish were small.

Species	# of fish collected	% of sample	Average Length (inches)	Maximum Length (inches)	Average Weight (pounds)	Catch Rate – Adult fish (fish/mile)
Gizzard Shad	638	59	3.8	14.1	<0.1	132(all)
Longear Sunfish	169	16	2.2	4.8	<0.1	4
Threadfin Shad	104	10	2.2	2.8	<0.1	18 (all)
Bluegill	68	6	1.9	5.0	<0.1	1
Black Crappie	58	5	4.0	14.1	0.1	1
White Bass	23	2	9.4	15.8	0.5	5
White Crappie	14	1	4.2	7.9	<0.1	1
Largemouth Bass	7	1	10.1	18.6	1.3	1
Channel Catfish	3	<1	19.6	26.3	4.6	<1
Yellow Bass	3	<1	3.8	3.9	<0.1	1
Hybrid Shad	1	<1	2.8	2.8	<0.1	<1 (all)
Silver Carp	1	<1	30.1	30.1	9.9	<1
Flathead Catfish	1	<1	22.0	22.0	4.1	<1
Morone Hybrid	1	<1	15.3	15.3	1.4	<1



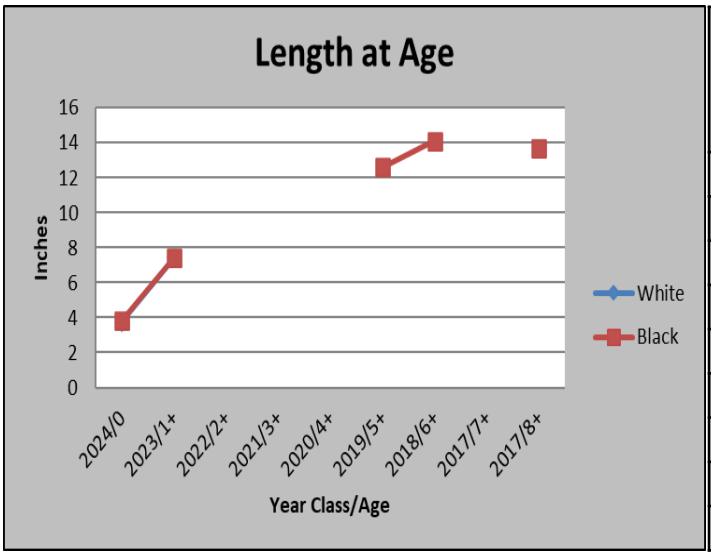
Above: Trend in fall electrofishing, 2000 – 2024 (not sampled yearly). Sport fish numbers were low in the late 1990's from low water due to erosion of the runout. Invasive carp were first seen in 2001. After the weir was built in the runout in 2002, sport fish catch rates rose for a few years, but have been consistently low in recent years.





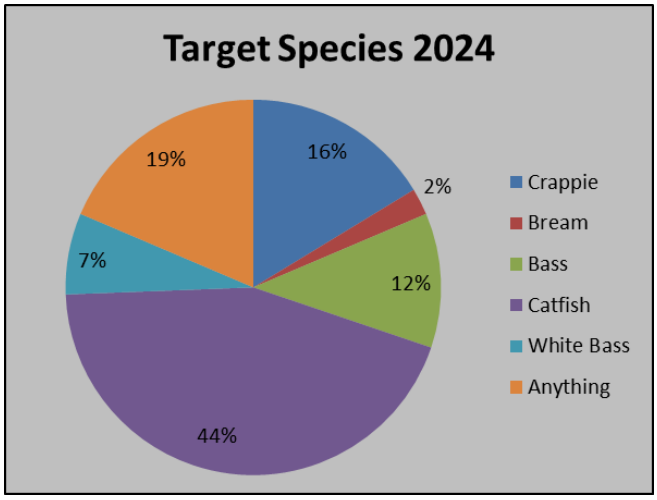
Above: Spring 2024 electofishing collected numerous recently spawned bass, crappie, White Bass, invasive carps (left, top), and gars (left, bottom). Bream had not spawned yet. Fall 2024 electrofishing confirmed a decent spawn from scarce adult sport fish (right). Fingerlings were in very shallow water hiding in any available cover. Various gars, carps, and buffaloes were abundant but not collected.

Below: Growth rates for White Crappie and Black Crappie, fall 2024. Black and White Crappie here grow at similar rates, but slower than on the nearby flood control reservoirs. The odd pattern at older ages was due to few older fish (some individuals grew faster than others).

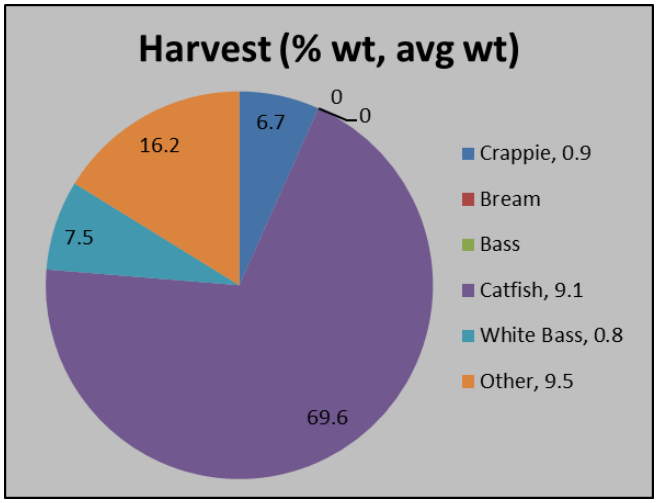


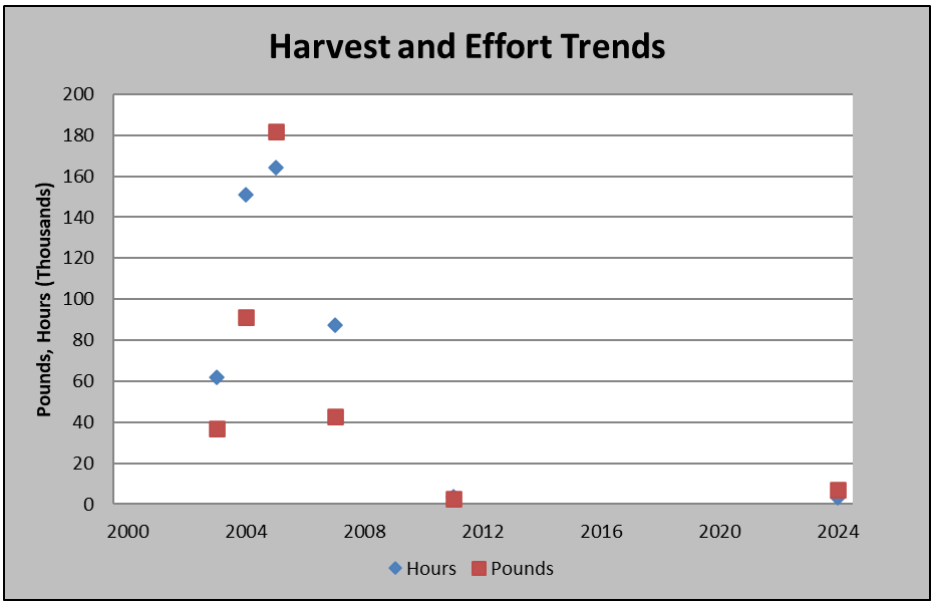
Year	Age	# White Crappie	Average Length (inches)	# Black Crappie	Average Length (inches)
2024	0	12	3.7	21	3.8
2023	1+	2	7.4	1	7.4
2022	2+			0	
2021	3+			0	
2020	4+			0	
2019	5+			1	12.6
2018	6+			1	14.1
2017	7+			0	
2016	8+			1	13.7

Fish Harvest and Fishing Effort: A spring 2024 creel survey found over 40% of Tunica anglers fished for catfish (right, top), far higher than the historical average (2%). Less than 20% fished for crappie and bream (usually over 80%). Catfish were about 70% of harvest by weight (right, bottom). Because of two bowfishing parties, more pounds of "other" fish (gar, Grass Carp, and buffalo) were harvested than crappie and White Bass combined. No bass or bream were caught or kept.



Fishing effort and harvest were similar to the 2011 survey (bottom), but anglers could not access the Cutoff 80% of the time that spring due to flooding. Fishing effort in 2024 was lower than 2011 even though the lake was accessible all spring. The pattern of fishing effort and harvest with time (bottom) strongly resembled MDWFP sampling results (page 2, bottom). If fish are present, anglers will find them.





Fishery: Over 40% of Tunica anglers in spring 2024 were from the Memphis area (below); Memphians are normally more than 70%. The average fishing party had 1.7 anglers that drove 61.5 miles, one way, and spent $36.98 per person on out-of-pocket expenses (fuel, food, ice, bait, lodging, etc.). Expenses generally rose with distance traveled. Based on an annualized fishing effort, trip length, and cost per person, the Tunica fishery generated less than $50,000, down from over $2 million in the mid-2000's.

Area	Parties	Percent	Miles/party	$/person
Surrounding county				
Tunica	0	0	-----	-----
MS counties				
Marshall	4	16	57.5	$34.38
Tate	3	12	28.3	30.00
Other MS (4 counties)	4	16	85.8	29.17
Memphis area (inc. Desoto, MS)	11	44	54.1	38.33
Other out-of-state (13 states)	3	12	95.0	54.00
Total/avg	25	100	61.5	$36.98

Water Fluctuations: Extended flooding can kill mature shoreline vegetation. Woody vegetation colonizes during dry years but may be weakened or killed if flooded too long. Beavers are also a threat. Flooding restricts angler access and forces lakeside residents out of their homes, or destroys them. Low water reduces fish and wildlife habitat and concentrates fish for predators, including anglers.

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, and all but one ramp was out of the water. After the weir, the lake remained as 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 invasive 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 invasive carps in late summer 2024. 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.