

A Profile on St. Mary's Lake



Southern Maryland is not known for its impoundment fishing. Rockfish and tidal river largemouth bass tend to steal the show. But if you are looking for some quiet relaxing fishing then you might want to give St. Mary's Lake a try.

St. Mary's Lake is a 250-acre impoundment located in southern St. Mary's County. The lake supports a variety of gamefish including bluegill, black crappie, redear sunfish, chain pickerel and largemouth bass. Panfishing here may be more popular than bass fishing. Although the crappie fishing is not as reliable as it once was, there are still some areas where the action can be good. There are

some truly awesome bluegill and redear to be had as well. A few impressive trophy size largemouth bass are reportedly caught each year, but if you are looking for big bass this is probably not the lake to try.

Several weeks ago I decided to give the lake a try. The weather had been unusually cool and cloudy for most of the spring. However this day turned out to be the hottest of the year with temperatures reaching the mid-90s and very few clouds. Not my choice of fishing weather but you have to play what you're dealt.

I've used a variety of lures with spinning and casting rigs at St. Mary's Lake but I prefer to flyfish when possible. So I rigged my 6-weight with a little foam rubber spider, the kind that has the long rubber band legs.

Heading up the lake from the ramp, I fished past the first patch of standing timber. Only a couple of small bluegill were interested. Just up lake from the fishing peninsula is a shallow flat which extends down the shoreline to the first cove. I laid the bug out with a nice splat and turned my attention to the tangle of line at my feet. It must have been a full minute later I was still occupied when I heard that unmistakable sound of something being sucked off of the surface. I instinctively lifted the rod and it bowed sharply. I could tell this was not one of those 5" bluegill. After several strong runs I lifted a nice redear sunfish into the boat. This fish was almost 10" long and typical of the big redear I have seen during some of our surveys. Several casts later I had another good strike but the fish got off before I could get a look. I suspect it was another nice redear.

The action slowed until I reached the mouth the first cove. Several logs lay on this point and I had caught fish here before. I dropped the bug right where a large branch entered the water and waited. Sometimes the best way to fish a spider is to just let it sit. Any ripples on the surface will cause the legs to move around and the fish will be watching from close by. Two minutes can seem like fifteen but if you can leave it alone long enough, the fish will often hit. I was just about out of patience when the bug disappeared into a good size swirl. This fish immediately dove under the log. I kept steady pressure on until he came out. A nice 11" bass was the reward for my patience.

It was getting hot and the sun was high in the sky so I decided to try the subsurface action thinking it would be better. I have done well before on small white or black marabou streamers. Today, however, they were having none of it. One thing I've learned over the years is not to be stubborn. If the fish are telling you something, you should listen, regardless of the universal truths that are hammered into our brains by the experts. I put the little spider back on and was quickly into fish again.

I spent most of the afternoon catching bass



from about 9" to 12". I did pickup one nice fish just over 15". He was in a large deadfall and hit my bug seemingly before it reached the water. I knew this was a larger fish and when it ran back into the tangle of branches I was afraid he might break me off but my tippet held and I was able to boat him after several short but strong runs. A few medium bluegill were mixed in the catch but I never saw another redear. Neither did I catch any of the crappie or pickerel, which I know from our surveys, are here in good numbers. It was probably a little too warm for these species.

Early spring is your best bet for good crappie fishing and pickerel bite right on through the cold weather.

As I mentioned earlier, St. Mary's Lake bass run small. Our sampling indicates an overabundance of fish from 9.5 to 12". This condition has persisted for many years and in 1985 DNR instituted 'Trophy Bass Regulations' to improve the size structure of the bass population. Under this regulation, bass between 11 and 15 inches must be released. Only one fish 15" over may be kept and the creel limit is five fish. No real improvement has been realized despite this regulation. Although no creel survey data have been gathered, we believe people are not harvesting the bass under 11" as intended. The combination of a strong 'catch and release' ethic among bass fishermen and the fact that many people don't care to keep and clean a 9" bass is probably responsible. You are encouraged to keep a few of these small fish. They are quite tasty and by reducing competition, growth rates may be improved.

Lots of stuff will work here. One of my favorites is a 4" Sluggo on a medium light spinning rod with 8 lb. test. Although you can go lighter, you need a little backbone to drive the hook through the bait and into the fish. You may even want to go to 10 lb. test if the pickerel are active. It could save you a little money in terminal tackle. Soft plastics, small spinnerbaits, shallow crankbaits and jerkbaits also work. A large bed of milfoil appeared in the upper end of the lake several years ago and is now present throughout the lake in areas 4 feet deep or less so a few weedless baits will help avoid some aggravation. I like to tie my flies with a loop of fairly stiff monofilament behind the eye and at right angles to the hook shank. This should extend not quite to the hook point. Not only does this make them semi-weedless but it also allows you to pull the fly through the branches of the deadfalls and beaver lodges. Minnows are popular for the crappie and will also take bass and pickerel. Worms and crickets are the ticket on the excellent sunfish population.

The lake is easy to get to. Take Rt. 5 through Leonardtown, turn left on Camp Casoma Rd. (there will be a highly visible sign for St. Mary's River State Park) and follow it down to the ramp. Gas motors are not allowed so leave your engine up and just run the trolling motor. The lake is small enough that you can run anywhere pretty quickly. This is a perfect place for cartops and canoes. It is also a nice place for shore fishermen. Several peninsulas have been constructed for fishermen and there is a nice trail around the entire perimeter of the lake with access at various locations. The trail is a popular spot to mountain bike so you could strap your gear on and quickly get to many spots around the lake. If you'd like more information, give us a call at the Cedarville Visitor Center. We're always happy to talk fishing.

If you are looking for lots of two or three pounders you better head for the Potomac River or the Upper Bay. But for some fine light tackle bass and a few bruiser sunfish, St. Mary's Lake can be a lot of fun.