

Managing Florida Ponds for Fishing

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Introduction

Florida has thousands of natural and man-made ponds which range in surface area from less than 1/10 acre to greater than ten acres. Man-made ponds include dug-out and impounded waters, limerock pits, and sand or gravel pits, commonly called borrow pits. Fishing pressure on public waters is increasing due to Florida's rapidly growing population and the growing interest in fishing as a source of recreation and food. Competition for public fishery resources, coupled with the high cost of transportation to go fishing, has resulted in an increased interest in fishing private waters that are closer to home. These private ponds must, therefore, be more intensively managed to maintain good quality fishing for the pond owner's personal recreation or as a source of income.

Ponds that consistently produce good catches of fish require the proper stocking of the correct species and number of fish, a balanced harvest of mature fish, good water quality, and proper aquatic vegetation management. Many unmanaged ponds can produce more pounds of fish if good management practices are followed. The annual harvest of fish can provide hours of recreation, an excellent source of food, and even a supplemental income. The purpose of this publication is to provide an introduction to the management of Florida ponds for fishing.

Stocking the Pond

What to Stock

Largemouth bass, bluegill (commonly called sunfish or bream), and channel catfish are the most commonly stocked species in Florida ponds. When properly managed, these species can provide excellent fishing.

The largemouth bass (Figure 1A) is a predatory species and requires large numbers of small fish as prey to maintain good growth. Many pond owners are reluctant to stock bluegill (Figure 1B) into their ponds because of their tendency to overpopulate and stunt, however, when stocked in conjunction with bass and properly fished, this species provides food for the bass and a fine sport fish for the angler. Without bluegill or other suitable prey species, a quality bass fishery will not develop.

The channel catfish (Figure 1C) is both a popular food and sport fish in Florida. This species should be stocked alone in ponds smaller than one-half acre

or in ponds that are muddy throughout the year. In larger ponds, catfish do well when stocked alone or with bass and bluegill. If stocked alone, catfish may overpopulate if spawning sites are available, so the addition of milk cans and sewer tiles to provide spawning sites is discouraged. In the presence of bass, the survival of small catfish is lowered because of predation. Supplemental stocking with catfish in the 8-to-10 inch size range is required to maintain their population in ponds with bass.

The redear sunfish (Figure 1D), commonly called the shellcracker, can also be stocked as a prey species for bass and as a sport fish for the angler. This species should not be stocked alone or comprise more than 30% of the initial stocking of sunfish (bluegill and redear sunfish) because it will not produce enough offspring to sustain the bass population. When stocked with bluegill, these two species will often produce hybrids which grow faster and to a larger size than either of the parents.

The white amur, commonly called the grass carp (Figure 1E), can be stocked into a pond to control aquatic vegetation. A permit must first be obtained from the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission before this species can be introduced into a pond in Florida. Only triploid grass carp, which are sterile, are legal for use in Florida ponds.

What Not to Stock

Many other species have been stocked into ponds, but none have been as successful as the largemouth bass, bluegill, and channel catfish combination. While other species do well in streams, lakes or reservoirs, they often cause problems in ponds or are not well suited for the pond environment.

Black crappie (Figure 2A) and white crappie, also known as specks, speckled perch or white perch, are among the worst fish to stock into ponds. They compete with bass for food, eat small bass, and have a tendency to overpopulate and become stunted in a pond. They spawn prior to bass in the spring. The young crappie quickly grow too large to serve as prey for young bass.

Common carp and bullheads (Figure 2B) should be avoided because they will stir up the pond bottom while feeding, causing muddy water. Bullheads will also often overpopulate in a pond.