



D. Raver



# Fish Stocking



*Electrofishing boat used to catch game fish to evaluate their populations*



*Seining to catch young-of-year fish to assess reproduction*



*A well balanced fish population has a range of fish sizes and ages*

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**For more information on the fish communities in Delaware's public ponds go to:**

<https://dnrec.alpha.delaware.gov/fish-wildlife/fishing-ponds/>

What is the first question that many anglers ask? “When was this pond/river/creek stocked last?” Historically, most anglers kept their catch and there was a greater need to maintain fish populations through stocking. However, with the widespread popularity of catch and release, stocking is not usually necessary except for specific reasons.

It is important to assess the existing fish community before stocking to determine if there is a need to stock. Electrofishing is one method the Division of Fish and Wildlife uses to collect fish to conduct an assessment. Game fish that are collected during the survey are examined, measured, weighed, and released. The abundance of each species, the size structure (a variety of size groups indicates a balanced population), and the condition (‘plumpness’, indicates if there is enough prey) are evaluated. If low numbers of juvenile fish, particularly Largemouth Bass and Bluegill, are noted during the survey, additional sampling will be conducted. This involves using a beach seine to capture young-of-year (less than 1 year old) fish between July and September to assess reproduction. If natural reproduction is poor, stocking may be conducted to supplement the population.

Poor reproduction is common in some of Delaware’s freshwater tidal streams such as the Nanticoke and Broadkill Rivers. The negative impact of tidal currents and heavy silt loads on nest-builders such as Largemouth Bass can reduce success. Largemouth Bass fingerlings are stocked annually into these two river systems. Adult bass are collected from the Nanticoke River and allowed to naturally reproduce in small ponds at a hatchery. The fingerlings that are produced are then stocked into the rivers.

Fish are also stocked if there is a dam wash-out or emergency water level reduction in preparation for an approaching storm (to minimize flooding). Reducing the water level or draining the pond can result in the escapement of a large number of fish. Fish kills can also cause an imbalance in the population or reduce the abundance of those species affected. In these cases, stocking is necessary to rebuild the fish community.

Some species do not naturally reproduce well in Delaware’s water bodies and must be stocked to maintain a population or to provide a fishing opportunity. This is the case with freshwater trout which are stocked into select rivers and two small ponds as part of a put-and-take fishery. Trout are unlikely to survive Delaware’s summer water temperatures so annual stocking maintains the fishery.

If angling is already satisfactory and the fish community is well-balanced, stocking may not be recommended. The fish are competing for a finite amount of resources and if the population is too dense, there may not be enough food available. For example, too densely populated Largemouth Bass can greatly reduce the prey population (such as Bluegill) which then results in underweight bass with slower than average growth. Conversely, if the Bluegill population is too dense they have a greater impact on bass reproductive success because they eat bass eggs and fry. Overpopulated Bluegill also tend to be small and have stunted growth. It’s a delicate balance!

So, the next time you wonder when your favorite fishing pond or river was last stocked, ask instead if the fish population is balanced and the habitat suitable. If they are, then there is normally no need for stocking due to the tremendous potential of natural reproduction.