

Fishing 'Tails'

This is not a tale about wild fishing adventures, or the big one that got away after a 45-minute battle. Rather, it is about some prime fishing opportunities available to anglers in the Mountain State. Scattered throughout West Virginia are several fishing hotspots known as tailwaters. Tailwaters are relatively short stream sections located below dams of any size. Although tailwaters below navigational dams on the Ohio, Kanawha and Monongahela rivers also provide exceptional fishing opportunities, this article addresses only the 10 tailwater areas in West Virginia located below U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) flood control impoundments.

Why are these areas such great places to fish? Fish tend to concentrate in tailwaters because the turbulence of water passing over or through dams increases dissolved oxygen and because the fast currents usually carry more prey species past the waiting fish. Large water fluctuations sometimes flush lake-dwelling fish through dams into the tailwaters. This may amount to a tremendous number of fish, particularly during major winter storms when lake levels are lowest. Finally, dams are barriers to upstream migration, leaving many fish congregated below them.

Tailwaters offer varied fishing opportunities, from strictly coolwater species at Summersville and Jennings Randolph dams, to only warmwater fish at Bluestone and Beech Fork dams. The others provide anglers a combination of both. The newer dams have been constructed with multi-level releases so water can be drawn from various lake depths and mixed to improve water quality and temperatures in the tailwaters that more closely match stream conditions that occurred prior to impoundment. Seasonally these tailwaters provide good coldwater and warmwater fisheries.

The following descriptions will familiarize you with tailwater fishing opportunities below West Virginia's COE flood control dams. It is hoped this information will improve your fishing success and lead to more enjoyable outings.



Steve Shaluta

Burnsville tailwater is accessible by concrete anglers' path. (left side of photo)

Beech Fork Dam tailwater is located on Beech Fork of Twelvepole Creek in Wayne County, 2-1/2 miles east of Lavalette on county Route 13. This tailwater is relatively small, and the banks are riprapped from the dam downstream to a small, concrete weir that forms a pool. Below the weir the tailwater reverts back to a natural stream setting. Hybrid striped bass and saugeye are the species most sought by anglers. Largemouth and spotted bass, carp, crappie, bluegill, catfish and tiger musky also live in the tailwaters. Jigs, minnows and nightcrawlers are the most popular game fish baits, while carp are usually taken with dough balls. Wildlife Resources Section (WRS) personnel stock trout in the tailwater once each month from February through May. Parking, restrooms, a picnic shelter and dusk-to-dawn lighting are adjacent to the tailwater area. A paved path and a fishing pier provide handicapped access. Anglers can call (304) 525-5092 to obtain tailwater conditions.

Bluestone Dam tailwater is located on the New River near Hinton in Summers County, approximately 15 miles south of I-64 on state Route 20. Flows are released through Bluestone Dam into a short stilling basin and then into New River. Fishing in the stilling basin from a concrete wall that extends across the river below the dam is popular for channel and flathead catfish and carp. Fishing below the dam is excellent for smallmouth and rock bass. Hybrid striped bass and



New handicapped accessible pier juts out over Bluestone tailwater.

David Fattaleh

an occasional musky are also caught in the tailwater. Fishing is best when the dam is discharging from only one to three gates. Parking and lighting are present below the dam on both sides of the river. A new handicapped accessible pier is located on the west side of the river just below the stilling basin. Anglers can call (304) 466-0156 to obtain information on tailwater conditions.

Burnsville Dam tailwater is located on the Little Kanawha River in Braxton County, three miles east of Burnsville on county Route 5/11 (use Exit 79 from I-79). Two pools, approximately 1,350 feet long, are formed by a weir at the lower end and are separated by

a causeway. The tailwater pools are riprapped so wading is not practical, but a concrete anglers' path extends from the dam to a point halfway along the lower pool. Public fishing access extends approximately 800 feet below the weir.

DNR Wildlife Resources personnel stock trout once in February and every two weeks from March through May. Walleye fishing is good in this tailwater, especially downstream of the weir during the spring and fall. Crappie, bluegill, bass and catfish provide plenty of action for anglers, and musky are also occasionally caught. Fishing success is highest when flows are below

100 cubic feet per second (cfs). Parking, restrooms, a picnic shelter, a children's playground and dusk-to-dawn lighting are located adjacent to the tailwater area. Handicapped access is provided by the concrete anglers' path along the upper pool. Anglers can phone (304) 853-2398 to obtain daily tailwater conditions.

East Lynn Dam tailwater is located on the East Fork of Twelvepole Creek in Wayne County, 10 miles south of Wayne on state Route 37. This is a relatively small tailwater, and the banks are ripped from the dam downstream for approximately 900 feet, where it returns to a natural stream setting.

WRS personnel stock trout in the tailwater once each month from February through May. Anglers eagerly seek saugeye and hybrid striped bass in the tailwater. Chicken liver is the most effective bait for hybrids. Channel catfish are also occasionally caught. Visitors will find parking and restrooms near the tailwater area, and picnic shelters and a children's playground are adjacent to the dam. There is no handicap access available for the tailwater. Anglers can phone (304) 849-9861 for tailwater conditions.

Jennings Randolph Dam tailwater is located on the North Branch of the Potomac River in Mineral County. The North Branch forms the boundary between West Virginia and Maryland. Presently, the closest access to the dam tailwater is at Barnum, West Virginia. Barnum is approximately 1-1/4 miles below Jennings Randolph Dam and is reached from county Route 46/2 off of state Route 46, midway between Piedmont and Elk Garden. The Corps of Engineers prohibits public access on its property in the tailwater area for the first 1/2 mile downstream from the dam.

West Virginia WRS personnel stock trout once each month from February through May in a 1-1/4-mile section at Barnum. Fishing for other species is unproductive because of the constant coldwater releases from the lake. Anglers must abide by Maryland Department of Natural Resources regulations while fishing on the North Branch. Maryland DNR personnel manage two sections of the North Branch under catch-and-release regulations. The first section is located between the tailwater area one-half mile downstream of



Angler access at Blue Hole below Jennings Randolph Dam

the dam and extends 3/4 mile downstream to Barnum. The second catch-and-release area begins at the lower end of the stocked section at an area know as Blue Hole, and extends four miles downstream to Piney Swamp Run. Anglers must fish with artificial lures only in these two catch-and-release areas.

Jennings Randolph Dam lacks a warning system so wading anglers should be alert for rapid flow increases. Flow increases are usually made before daylight to help prevent anglers from becoming stranded on the opposite sides of the river. Anglers can call the hotline number (304) 355-2890 to obtain tailwater conditions, and a three-day projection of the tailwater flow is posted on the Jennings Randolph website at www.nab.usace.army.mil/recreation/jenran/recinfo.htm. Parking is available along the stocked stream section and West Virginia or Maryland residents may fish with a valid fishing license from either state.

R. D. Bailey Dam tailwater is located on the Guyandotte River in Mingo County, approximately one mile from Justice off of U.S. Route 52. The tailwater is relatively small, consisting of a 400-foot-long pool extending from the dam downstream to a weir. A small vehicle bridge spans the weir, and the Guyandotte River soon reverts to the natural stream channel. The banks are ripped along the pool and below it for several hundred feet. Concrete paths provide fishing access along the ripped shoreline.

WRS personnel stock trout once in February, every two weeks from March through May, and twice



The Gauley River below Summersville Dam provides year-round trout fishing.

in October. Hybrid striped bass fishing is excellent, particularly in the spring and fall. Channel catfish and other game fish also provide some good action for anglers. Walleye are occasionally caught in some of the deep pools below the ripped section. Parking, portable toilets and dusk-to-dawn lighting are adjacent to the tailwater. There is no handicap access available at the tailwater. Anglers can phone (304) 664-9587 for tailwater conditions.

Stonewall Jackson Dam tailwater is located on the West Fork River in Lewis County, 1/2 mile east of I-79 (Exit 96) on county Route 30. This tailwater is a 1-3/4-mile-long pool extending from the Stonewall Jackson Dam to a low-level water supply dam near Weston. Both sides of the pool are ripped for approximately 800 feet below the dam.

WRS personnel stock trout once in February and every two weeks from March through May. Anglers catch bass, yellow perch, crappie, bluegill and catfish in the tailwater throughout the year and occasionally land a musky. A grouted concrete pathway is located along one side of the rip-rapped section. Parking, restrooms, dusk-to-dawn lighting and a handicapped accessible fishing

pier are located immediately below Stonewall Jackson Dam. A little farther downstream is another public access area with parking, a slide for launching small boats (electric motors only), and a graveled path, 300 feet of which is paved and suitable for handicapped access. Anglers can call (304) 269-7463 for tailwater conditions.

Summersville Dam tailwater is located on the Gauley River in Nicholas County, seven miles south of Summersville via state Route 129 off of U.S. Route 19. The water release from Summersville Lake into the Gauley River rarely exceeds 70 degrees and makes this section of river, downstream to its confluence with the Meadow River, a year-round trout fishery.

WRS personnel stock trout once in February, every two weeks from March through May, and twice in October. Additionally, trout are stocked each October and June by helicopter farther downstream in the canyon to create a unique remote fishery. Trout are the mainstay of this tailwater fishery because of the coldwater releases. Flows less than 750 cfs are best for successful fishing. Parking, restrooms and a campground are available adjacent to the tailwater. Access for anglers is limited to the area immediately

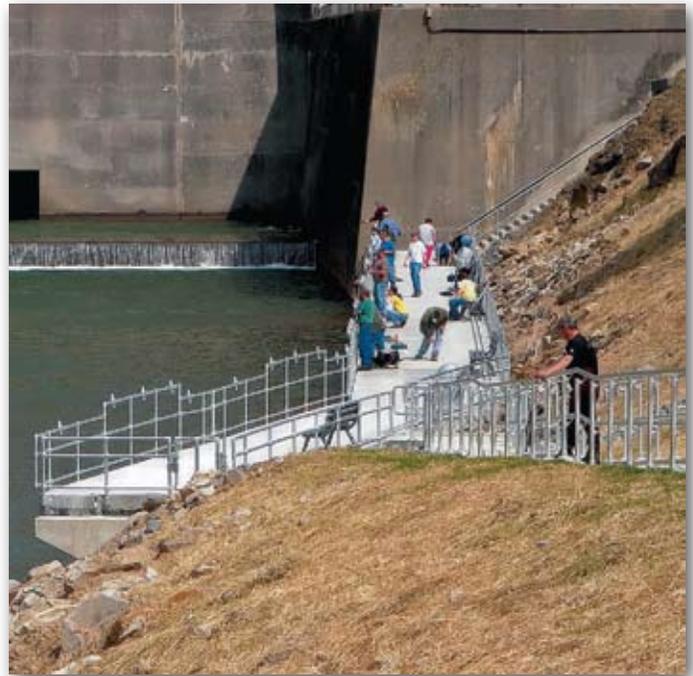
below the dam, the path across the dam to the opposite shore, and a gravel road leading down to an old U.S. Geological Survey station. Anglers can call 304-872-5809 to obtain tailwater conditions.

Sutton Dam tailwater is located on the Elk River in Braxton County, three miles east of I-79 (Exit 62), just upstream of Sutton. The tailwater is rip-rapped from the dam downstream for approximately 1,000 feet; otherwise, the habitat is natural with no manmade pools. WRS personnel stock trout once in February, every two weeks from March through May, and twice in October. Anglers catch bass, catfish and walleye in the tailwater. Legendary-sized muskies also can be found here. The best tailwater fishing is from the dam downstream to the county Route 19/40 bridge in Sutton. Flow releases less than 500 cfs provide the best success.

A new 362-foot concrete fishing access, with handicapped accessibility is available along the shore. This provides excellent shore fishing opportunities. Parking, restrooms, a picnic shelter, a modern children's playground and dusk-to-dawn lighting are provided adjacent to the tailwater area. Anglers can call (304) 765-2705 to obtain information on tailwater conditions.

Tygart Dam tailwater is located on the Tygart River in Taylor County, two miles south of Grafton. Anglers can access either side of the tailwaters by county routes 42 (west side) and 44 (east side). The dam releases water into a large stilling basin, and both shorelines of the tailwater are riprapped for approximately 1,000 feet. This is a large tailwater, and boats are frequently used by anglers to more effectively fish the abundant cover. Water released from the dam comes from deep in the lake and subsequently provides cool tailwater temperatures.

WRS personnel stock trout once each month from February through May, and twice in October. Large numbers of Tygart Lake walleyes pass through the dam into the tailwater during high flows from November through May, and anglers catch the majority of these fish by late June. Some walleyes remain in the tailwater year-round, while the larger fish generally move quickly downstream in search of deeper water. Jigs, minnows and nightcrawlers are the preferred baits of most anglers. Fishing is generally best for trout with only one or two gates operating, while walleye fishing is good with up to three gates open. Parking, restrooms, picnic shelters, camping, dusk-to-dawn lighting and a concrete boat ramp are available at the Grafton City Park on the east side of the tailwater. The launching access is steep and large boats (16 feet or longer) may have difficulty



Keith Anne Nuchies

A new handicapped accessible pier provides access to the Sutton Dam tailwater.

using the ramp. There is no developed handicapped access at the Tygart tailwater. Anglers can call (304) 265-5953 to obtain information on tailwater conditions.

The DNR Wildlife Resources Section provides weekly updated information on fishing conditions around the state which includes fishing prospects for many of the tailwaters. It is posted on the DNR website each Wednesday at www.wvdnr.gov; click on Weekly Fishing Report under the Fishing heading. The report is also sent to the state newspapers and is often printed in the daily papers on Thursday.

Tailwaters can provide year-round fishing opportunities because, even during the coldest winters, these areas remain free of ice. Anglers should be very cautious when fishing during cold weather, however, since water spray may freeze on the riprap and make footing treacherous.

Many of West Virginia's tailwaters are also good places for the entire family to enjoy. Whether everyone fishes or not, the great fishing opportunities for those who do, the playgrounds for the children, the picnic sites, and quiet places to relax and reflect all combine for leisurely recreational outings. If you consider yourself strictly a lake or stream angler, take a little time and stop by a tailwater sometime. You may be surprised by what you've been passing up – what other anglers have been enjoying for a long time.

Compiled by DNR Wildlife Resources Section Fisheries Biologists Mike Shingleton, Kevin Yokum, Mark Scott and Jim Hedrick.