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Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Largemouth Bass

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

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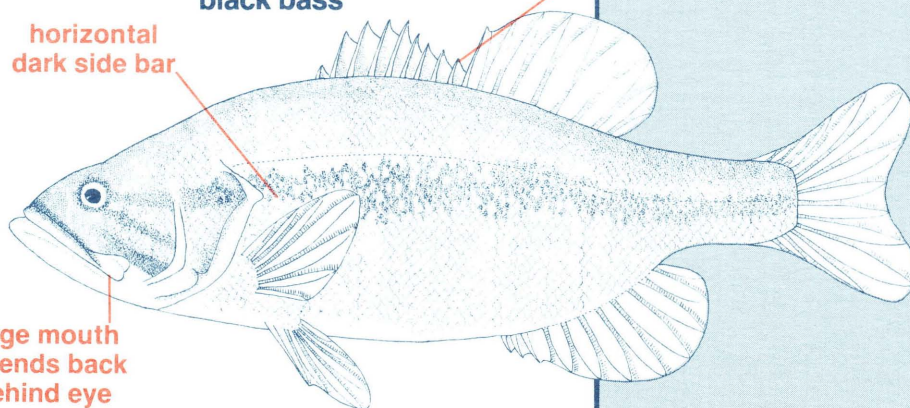
# Largemouth Bass

**Scientific name:** *Micropterus salmoides*  
**Common names:** Largemouth bass,  
black bass, largemouth  
black bass

horizontal  
dark side bar

almost completely notched  
dorsal fin

large mouth  
extends back  
behind eye



## Description

**T**he largemouth bass is one of the most exciting and popular game fishes in the United States and Canada. This muscular fighter is usually a medium-sized fish about 8 to 15 inches long and weighing 2 to 6 pounds. However, record largemouths may be over 30 inches long and weigh over 20 pounds.

A largemouth bass has two rounded **dorsal fins** on its back. The front fin is spiny and shorter than the soft-rayed back fin. The two dorsal fins are almost completely separated by a notch in the middle. The **anal fin**, on the underside of the fish just in front of the tail, is rounded and almost as large as the dorsal fin. The **pelvic fins**, located on the belly, are short and also rounded. The largemouth has two **pectoral fins**, one on each side behind the gills, which are short and broad. The tail or **caudal fin** is broader than it is long and very shallowly forked. The tips are rounded.

The largemouth's head and upper body are bright green to olive or sometimes light to golden green. The belly is milk-white to yellow. There is a wide, almost solid, horizontal black band along each side of the fish. The band is especially noticeable in young fish.

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The largemouth bass looks much like the smallmouth. The largemouth's upper jaw extends at least to a line even with the back margin of the eye. The smallmouth's upper jaw only reaches back to the middle of the eye. The largemouth's tail is more rounded than the smallmouth's. The smallmouth does not have the black horizontal side bands frequently seen on largemouth bass.

## Life History

**T**he adult largemouth bass lives in the shallows of small and large lakes. This fish moves to the bottom of the lake in the winter. They are often abundant in medium to large slow-moving rivers. This bass prefers water with sandy, gravel or mud bottoms, stumps, undercut banks and vegetation such as water lilies, cattails and pond weed. Other fishes that may be seen with the largemouth bass are sunfishes, muskellunge, northern pike, yellow perch, brown bullhead and many species of minnows.

Largemouth bass spawn (breed) from late spring to midsummer when the water temperature is over 62°F. They spawn in protected sites in quiet bays among the water plants. The spawning site is usually over small gravel, sand or **marl** (minerals forming a soft lake bottom) in reeds,



bullrushes or water lilies. The male builds a nest by fanning out a basin in the lake bottom with his fins. Males usually spawn with more than one female. Each female lays her 2,000 to 20,000 eggs directly on gravel and sand or on hard objects in the water such as roots, twigs or snail shells that the male may have uncovered.

The male guards the eggs in the nest. He fans his tail to bring oxygen to the eggs and to keep away silt. The eggs hatch in 3 to 7 days. After hatching, the young may stay together in a **brood** for up to 31 days. The male largemouth guards the brood most of the time. Once the young fish leave the nest they continue to swim together in a **school** until they are 1½ to 2 inches long. Swimming in a school helps protect the young bass from **predators**, animals which may feed on them.

Because of its large mouth, this bass can eat fish like bluegills that are one-third its own size. Its diet also includes frogs, crayfish and land-dwelling insects like grasshoppers that may fall in the water. The largemouth feeds near shore at the surface of the water in the morning and evening, and in deeper water during the day. They usually feed at the edges of vegetation or near logs, stumps or boulders.

Largemouth bass grow slower in the north than in the south. During the first summer (age 0), the largemouth grows to a total length of 1 to 4 inches. After that, typical growth rates for largemouth in the Great Lakes region are 2 to 4 inches per year.

Largemouth bass may live up to 15 years.

## Fishery

**L**argemouth bass were harvested commercially until 1936. A federal law now bans commercial fishing for this fish. When new lakes and ponds are stocked with bass, **forage fishes** such as bluegills or golden shiners are often also stocked. However, neither bluegills nor golden shiners are recommended in the northern Great Lakes region. Bluegills often overproduce in shallow weedy ponds and their growth is **stunted** even when bass are present. Golden shiners will grow to 10 inches and will eat young bass. The bass can be stocked alone or with fathead minnows to provide excellent bass fishing. Natural reproduction generally keeps bass populations large enough to allow continued fishing.

The evening and early morning hours are usually the best times to catch largemouth bass.

The largemouth bites almost any type of moving bait or lure. Live baits such as worms, minnows, frogs, insect **larvae** (immature insects) and crayfish have all been used with success. Most anglers use artificial crank baits such as large, noisy surface plugs, spinners, spoons and plastic worms. Lures are usually cast to the edge of weed beds, stumps or logs, then slowly retrieved.

Local and national bass angler clubs sponsor tournaments that attract many sportfishing enthusiasts. This has led to specially-designed bass fishing boats with seats that make casting easy, and powerful motors to get to fishing sites. Completely outfitted bass boats have electric trolling motors, depth finders, fish finders, oxygen meters and live wells. Some of the monies generated by these tournaments are used to promote the conservation of aquatic resources.

Check fishing regulations for season and size limits when fishing for bass.

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## Glossary

- Anal fin**—the fin on the underside, between the anus and the tail  
**Brood**—a group of young fish  
**Caudal fin**—tail fin  
**Dorsal fin**—fin on the back, usually central in position, with rays or spines  
**Forage fishes**—small fishes that bass eat  
**Larvae**—young insects  
**Marl**—a mixture of minerals forming a soft lake bottom; sometimes used as fertilizer  
**Pectoral fin**—fin just behind the gill, one on each side of the fish  
**Pelvic fin**—paired fins below the pectoral fins or between the pectoral and anal fin  
**Predator**—an animal which feeds on other animals  
**School**—a large number of fish swimming or feeding together  
**Stunted**—failed to grow large



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