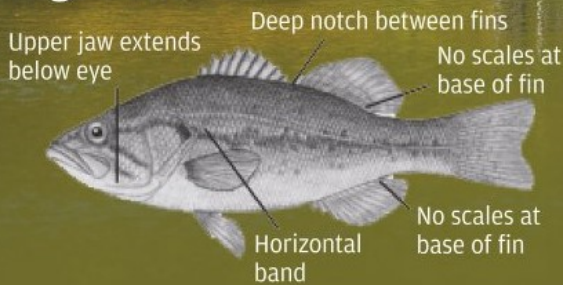
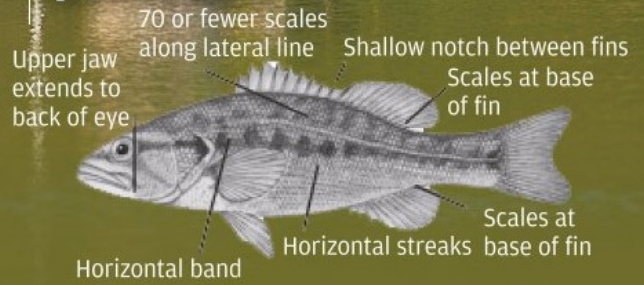




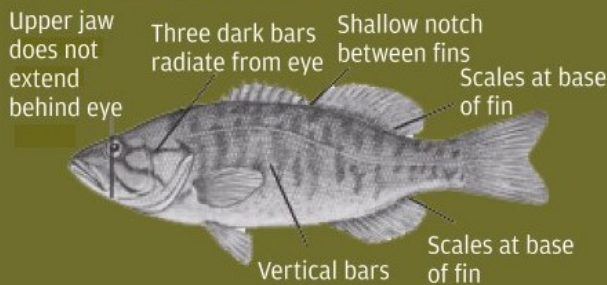
### Largemouth Bass



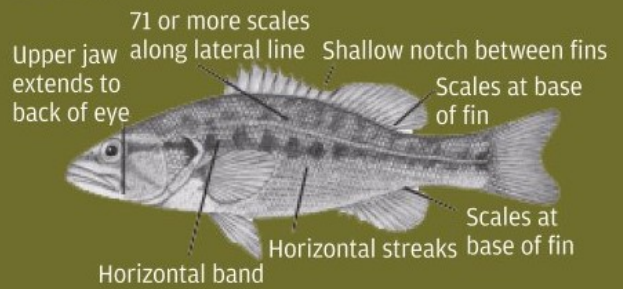
### Spotted Bass



### Smallmouth Bass



### Alabama Bass



# Invasive bass species pose threat

Unauthorized fish stockings dramatically increase in past decade

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BELEWS CREEK — At first glance, Alabama bass might seem like a nice addition to Belews Lake for the average fisherman. It's aggressive — biting at just about anything and giving a good fight — but still relatively easy to catch.

But wildlife officials and conservationists say the fish is an invasive species that is wiping out the lake's prized largemouth bass. Alabama bass also are detrimen-

tal to smallmouth bass and could find their way into the Dan River, affecting the population there.

"Alabama bass ... are kind of like kudzu or ivy, once they get into a lake, they're going to run it and there is no question about that," said Bill Frazier, North Carolina conservation director for the Bass Angler's Sportsman Society. "They breed like rabbits or feral cats."

Little more than a decade ago, the fish was considered a subspecies of spotted bass because they look so similar. But genetic testing has since revealed they are different species.

Native to central Alabama and north Georgia, Alabama bass have been reported in Kentucky,

South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia and even California.

The spread into North Carolina concerns Kin Hodges, District 7 fisheries biologist for North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission — which includes Belews Lake.

He sees the Alabama Bass edging out the bigmouth bass — as happened in Lake Norman — and fears it will breed with smallmouth bass to a point where that species disappears from many lakes and rivers.

The impact isn't limited to conservation. It also affects the state's opportunities to attract national fishing tournaments.



COURTESY OF BILL FRAZIER

Bill Frazier, North Carolina Conservation Director for the Bass Angler's Sportsman Society, holds a healthy largemouth bass. The native largemouth bass is threatened by the invasive Alabama bass.

# Fish

From A1

“Tournaments are a big deal for a lot of people ... they generate a lot of money, particularly in North Carolina,” Frazier said. “You’re talking millions of dollars ... so it’s big business.”

On the flip side, the ability to consistently catch bass, even if they are smaller, can be beneficial for fishing guides.

“The people who are out there in fishing tournaments – the bass fisherman, the hardcore guys – they’re upset,” Hodges said. “But the guides – when they just have someone on vacation that wants to go out and catch fish consistently for five hours one day – they have a different opinion. It gives people action and keeps them busy.”

“There’s a definite divergence of opinions out there,” he said.

## Where did they come from?

Hodges said Alabama bass were first detected in Belews Lake in 2011. He said they were illegally introduced by fishermen likely seeking to improve their fishing hole. “They’re a well-liked, popular sport fish in their native range in Alabama, where they perform better than in North Carolina,” Hodges said.

Illegal fish stocking is a Class 3 misdemeanor, he said, and potential penalties include hundreds of dollars in fines and even a short stay in jail. “To my knowledge, nobody ever has been caught,”

## More Information

To report illegal fish stocking, call the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission hotline at 800-662-7137.

Hodges said.

Over the past decade, unauthorized fish stockings have increased dramatically in the state, according to the Wildlife Resources Commission’s website.

“There’s a lot of people moving (Alabama bass) around,” said Frazier, whose organization works with federal and state agencies to protect aquatic resources and the sport of bass fishing. “There are even reports of tanker trucks being used to move them around.”

Frazier said the invasive species has been found Oak Hollow and City lakes in High Point. “That’s like someone coming and planting kudzu in your yard without your permission,” he said.

Greensboro officials said they have no reports of Alabama bass in city lakes, but Frazier believes they’re living undetected there and in other Triad lakes.

## How do they impact other bass?

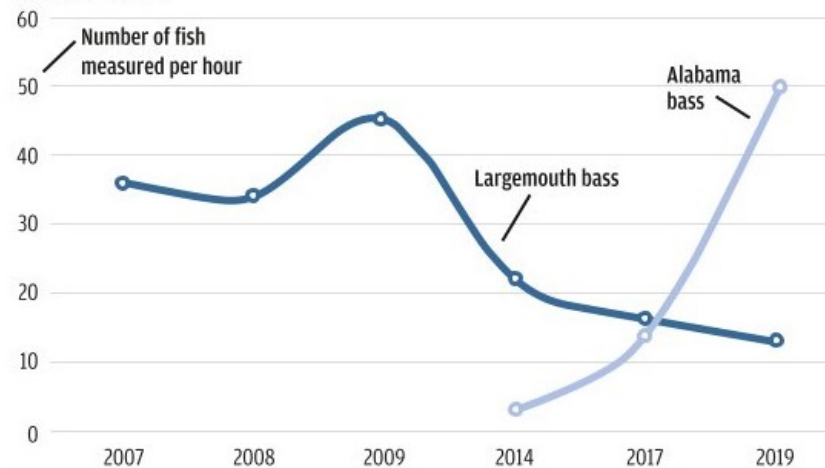
When Alabama bass are first introduced to a lake, it may seem like a boon to the average fisherman.

Because there are fewer fish initially, there’s less competition for food or other resources and they can grow to two or three pounds.

Hodges also said Alabama bass

## Invasive species

Alabama bass have affected the abundance of largemouth bass in Belews Lake.



Provided by N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission

initially may interbreed with the largemouth bass – which average two to four pounds but can reach 10 pounds, until the invasive species gets a foothold in the lake.

This initial interbreed “temporarily produces a wave of really big Alabama bass,” Hodges said, around four or five pounds. But that weight drops to a pound or less as the Alabama bass resumes breeding with its own species and its greater numbers increase competition for food.

“Up front, (fishermen) were getting the best of both worlds,” Hodges said. “They were getting Alabama bass that were reaching good sizes, and they were still catching largemouth bass just like they used to.”

But biologists studying Belews Lake started seeing the impact in 2017, when they observed a dramatic decline in 1- and 2-year-old largemouth bass.

“That’s when we really hit the panic button,” Hodges said.

And, with Belews Lake discharging into the Dan River, he worries about the impact interbreeding will have on its smallmouth bass population.

“It’s one of our better fisheries in the state,” Hodges said. “People come from all over to fish for smallmouth bass there.”

Next year, officials plan to conduct a survey of the river with genetic testing to see if the interbreeding already is occurring.

“This is a real looming disaster in our eyes,” he said, noting the rising popularity of fishing among kayakers. “We’ve really put a lot of effort into promoting the smallmouth bass fisheries in rivers that are conducive to kayak fishing. We’re spending tons of time and money building new access points so people can get out there and use them.”

## Lifting restrictions

To combat the spread of Alabama bass, state officials this summer eliminated catch limits on the size and number of that fish as well as the spotted bass.

“We had to lump those two species together, spotted bass and Alabama bass, because there’s no realistic way for a fisherman to tell them apart,” Hodges said.

The hope is that fishermen will catch and keep as many Alabama bass as possible, extracting them from Belews and other lakes. It won’t resolve the problem, Hodges said, but it will help mitigate it.

Frazier supports the effort.

“It’s an experiment, we don’t know if it’s going to work,” he said. “But we encourage people to take them, learn how to identify them and, if you’re not sure, throw them back.”

Hodges said other solutions proffered, such as stocking largemouth and smallmouth bass to offset the Alabama bass, just aren’t viable.

It’s not proven to be successful elsewhere, he said, and state hatcheries have limited capacity.

And removing the Alabama bass, possibly by electrofishing – which uses electricity to benignly stun fish until they can be netted – also isn’t feasible. It’s just too big a job for the state agency to undertake, he said.

“Eat ‘em,” Frazier said. “Catch a bunch and eat ‘em.”

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