



SCHOOL OF FISH & FISHING

THE NORTH MISSISSIPPI FISH HATCHERY AND VEC
ARE BOTH EDUCATIONAL AND ENTERTAINING

By Emily-Jo Wiggins





Fishing is fun. Education is essential. Located in north Mississippi is a unique facility that combines the two.

This place appeals to anglers, sparks the curiosity of students, and provides an entertaining experience for families and individuals alike. It is the North Mississippi Fish Hatchery and Visitor Education Center (VEC).



WHERE: It is adjacent to Enid Reservoir at Exit 233 east off Interstate 55 on 58 acres of land leased from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

DESCRIPTION: The hatchery is one of two owned and operated by the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP). It began operations in 2006, and the VEC opened in April 2009. Since then more than 50,000 people have enjoyed the educational experience offered by the VEC, which features a native habitat area, a 10,000-gallon aquarium, interactive exhibits, displays, artifacts, a fishing rodeo pond, gift shop, and an event room for programs and public rentals.

PURPOSE: To provide an opportunity for the public to learn about Mississippi's aquatic resources, conservation and good stewardship of those resources, and the vital role hatcheries play in supplementing Mississippi's fish populations.

HOURS: March through October, open Tuesday through Saturday, 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. November through February, open Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m.

ADMISSION: Adults over age 60 and children age 3-17, \$2. Adults age 18-59, \$2.50. Children under age 3 and active military personnel, free. For educational groups, admission is \$2 per student while teachers, tour directors, and bus drivers are admitted free with their group.



The VEC is open for self-guided as well as guided tours throughout the year. Visitors can tour the facility at their leisure, walking through a visual fishing timeline of antique rods, outboard motors, and lures.

A guided tour is an option for groups of 10 or more. Hundreds of educational groups have taken advantage of the guided tours, programs, and hands-on activities provided by the VEC. Activities include turning school groups into schools of fish where students become a native fish species and learn about “themselves,” including their habitats, diets, life spans, and record sizes. These “fish” learn whether they are raised at the North Mississippi Fish Hatchery and about predators they face in the wild. Other activities require students to test their knowledge. Students become fishing detectives as they solve scavenger hunts that take them traveling through

fishing past and present. These same detectives turn into fisheries biologists and learn about fish production in the two 80-foot raceways. Students also learn about the equipment used in the ponds, raceways, and hatchery.

These tours and corresponding programs are Fun, Interesting, Surprising, and Hands-on. Programs are included for students of all ages, learning styles, and abilities. The goal is to engage Mississippi students and connect them to the outdoors.



Permanent exhibits at the VEC feature interactive components to engage visitors. Interactive screens feature videos, pictures, and games.

WORLD RECORD: Among the top exhibits is the World Record White Crappie, caught in Enid Reservoir in 1957 by Fred L. Bright. This crappie, which the state's oldest fishing record at 5 pounds and 3 ounces, is a must-see not only for avid crappie anglers but also for those new to sport fishing.

FRESHWATER AQUARIUM: A 10,000-gallon aquarium holds many of Mississippi's native freshwater fish species. Some of these fish species like crappie, channel catfish, and largemouth bass are familiar rewards after long hours of fishing. The aquarium also is home to lesser-known species like the freshwater eel or the warmouth.



POP QUIZ: Youth can choose from one of three categories, “Fishing Facts,” “The North Mississippi Fish Hatchery,” and “Fishing History.” For example, if a young visitor chooses “Fishing Facts,” the interactive screen asks a question, such as “what is the largest freshwater fish in North America?” Next, he or she is given possible answers to the question. All the answers are located on the VEC exhibit panels. However, if they are “snagged” on a question, an option on the screen allows them to receive a hint. The answer, of course, is the alligator gar.

OBSERVATION AREA: Here visitors have the opportunity to watch biologists tagging fish or working with fish eggs in the hatching jars.

FISHING SIMULATOR: Visitors can experience the virtual thrill of landing a trophy largemouth or smallmouth bass.

TRUE IDENTITY: Knowledge of 29 different fish species is tested in this exhibit. For example, a fish picture like the bluegill appears on the screen. A list of hints guides visitors to the identity of the species shown. Hints include, “I am a dark green color with a blue color on my sides and gills. My nicknames are blue joe, bream, and blue sunfish.” Participants can make their choice from a list of multiple-choice answers under the hints.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS: Both youth and adults have ample opportunities at this unique facility. The VEC programs include events like “Tree ID Seminars,” Native American art-

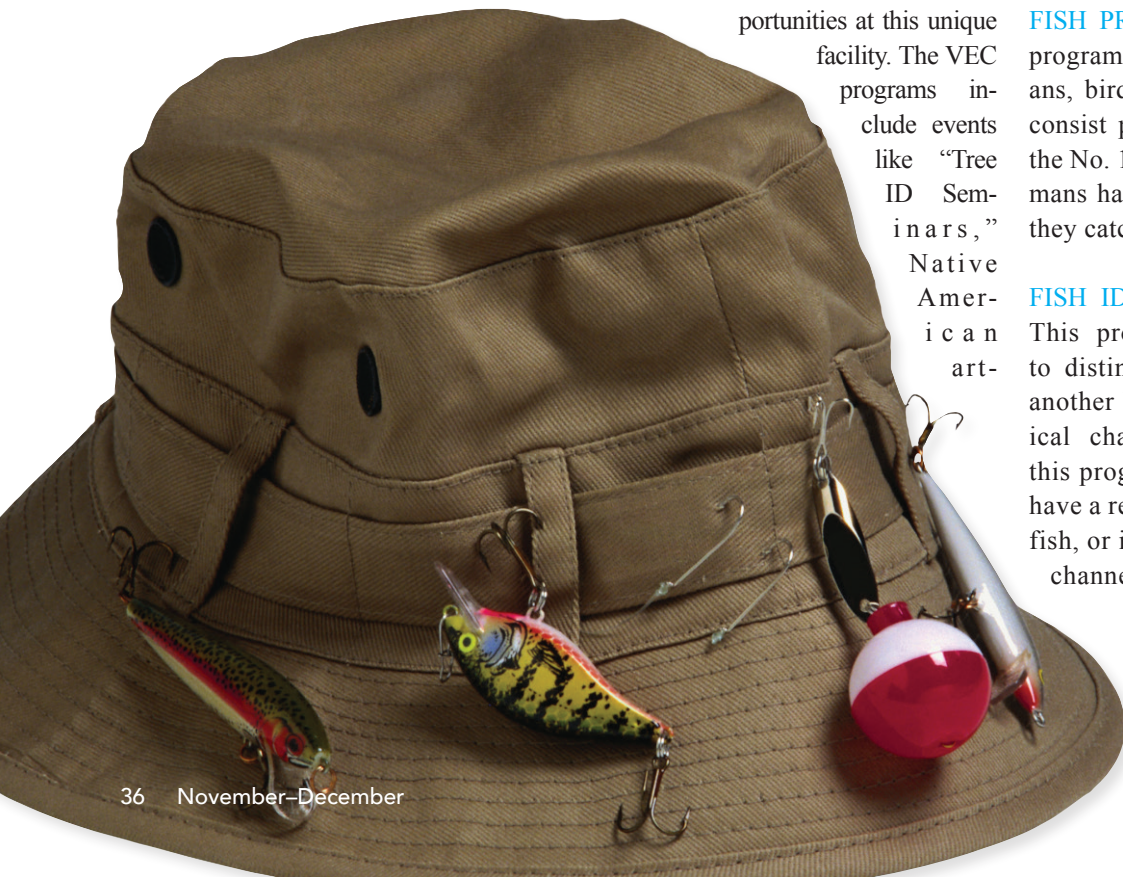
ists, and water safety talks. Here are a few other programs included:

ART CONTEST: Sponsored by the Mississippi Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks Foundation (MWFPPF), the VEC hosts an annual art contest for youth ages 5 to 19. Youth use different types of media to depict a type of native wildlife species that lives or migrates within Mississippi. First, second, and third place winners in four age categories receive Bass Pro gift cards for \$100, \$50, and \$25 respectively. Winners also receive a certificate, and their names and artwork appear in the Mississippi Outdoors magazine. The VEC has received more than 1,000 pieces of artwork from youth across the state.

FISH PREDATORS PROGRAM: This program identifies reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals whose diets consist primarily of fish. Humans are the No. 1 predator of fish, but some humans have trouble identifying the fish they catch.

FISH IDENTIFICATION PROGRAM: This program allows young people to distinguish one fish species from another by recognizing specific physical characteristics. After attending this program, youth will know if they have a redear sunfish or a longear sunfish, or if they have a blue catfish or a channel catfish.

POND MANAGEMENT WORKSHOPS: MDWFP conducts workshops to help pond owners learn





more about managing their private ponds or lakes. From controlling weeds to stocking the right fish at the right time, this program allows participants to discuss these and other issues with a fisheries biologist.

FISHING RODEOS: The VEC's rodeo pond is stocked with catfish for the annual fishing rodeo attended by hundreds of young anglers each spring. For some, this is an opportunity to land their first catch. For others, the rodeo is an opportunity to get outdoors and practice their fishing skills before hitting local lakes and ponds during the summer. Either way, the MDWFP fishing rodeos encourage youth to get outdoors, enjoy nature, and learn more about fishing.

ENID RESERVOIR HISTORY: This reservoir, which was created for flood control, has turned into a popular recreation area and is a water source for the North Mississippi Fish Hatchery. Mike Robinson, Enid Reservoir Resource Manager for the Corps of Engineers, has extensive knowledge of facility's construction.

To see an updated calendar of events or to schedule a guided tour visit the MDWFP website at www.mdwfp.com or call the VEC at (662) 563-8068.

Emily-Jo Wiggins is the VEC Coordinator for MDWFP.

