

# 2014 Winnebago System Sturgeon Spearing Season: A Season That Lived Up to the Billing

## *Post-Season Synopsis*

Ryan Koenigs, Winnebago Sturgeon Biologist, 28 February 2014

The 2014 sturgeon spearing season on the Winnebago System began with high expectations of a successful, potentially historic season in terms of the number of big fish that could be harvested. The water was clear and Mother Nature had blessed us with cold weather that produced strong ice for safe travels. In fact, conditions leading into the season were the best that they had been since the 2008-2010 seasons, all of which lasted 4-8 days. So spearmen had high hopes of spearing bounty as they traveled onto the ice on February 8, and the season did not disappoint.

The harvest of 878 sturgeon (636 from Lake Winnebago and 242 from the



A spearer attentively gazes into their hole waiting for a sturgeon to swim through. Spearing conditions for the 2014 season were favorable to spearmen. Photo Credit: Bob Rashid.

Upriver Lakes) on February 8 made opening day of the 2014 season one of the more successful openers since the current regulation package was implemented. In fact, the 242 fish harvested on the Upriver Lakes was the highest opening day harvest since a lottery fishery was implemented in 2007 and matched the total harvest from the 2-day season in 2012. The 636 fish harvested from Lake Winnebago on opening day was the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest opening day harvest since the 6-hour spearing day was implemented in 2002.

Although harvest numbers did decrease following opening day, spearmen were still able to harvest large numbers of fish leading to closure of the season after just 3 short days on the Upriver Lakes and 6 days on Lake Winnebago. The 3-day season on the Upriver Lakes is the 2<sup>nd</sup> shortest since 2007, while the 6-day season on Lake Winnebago is tied for the 3<sup>rd</sup> shortest since 2002. In total there were 341 fish harvested during the season on the Upriver Lakes, meaning that 72.7% of license holders successfully harvested a fish during the lottery fishery. The high success rate on the

Upriver Lakes (50-65% in a normal year) has really elevated the popularity of this fishery to the point that there are now more than 5,000 sportsmen and sportswomen applying for the 500 licenses that are awarded annually. The Lake Winnebago fishery closed with a total harvest of 1,513 fish (13.3% success rate), which is the largest harvest since the 2004 season (1,854 fish registered) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest since 2000.



John Skahen proudly registered this 161.0 pound, 77.1” sturgeon at Quinney on February 12. John’s fish was the largest sturgeon harvested during the 2014 spearing season.

The big fish trend that has emerged in harvests spanning the last 5-10 years continued in 2014 as well. A record 106 fish tipped the scales at 100 pounds or larger. 95 of these fish were harvested from Lake Winnebago and 11 were taken from the Upriver Lakes. The largest fish of the season was the 161.0 pound, 77.1” fish that was registered at Quinney on February 12 by John Skahen. There were numerous fish in the 130-160 pound range, but none of the fish harvested as part of the season were large enough to enter the top 10 on record. The record books have been rewritten for the most part since 2004 and fish now need to be larger than 171 pounds to enter this exclusive company. The fact that there weren’t any of these very large (top 10) fish harvested was surprising to DNR staff because of the more frequent encounters with these very large fish in

recent harvest and spawning assessments. The most noteworthy being the 87.5 inch fish that DNR crews captured during spawning assessments on the Wolf River in 2012. This fish was estimated to weigh 240 pounds and would easily break the current 212 pound state record. However, fish don’t reach these old ages and large sizes by having high harvest rates. Either way, those fish are still out there in the population and I am confident that they will continue to show up in future harvests.

This season, like all others, was one where many memories were made and streaks were broken. Anyone who is even vaguely familiar with the sport of sturgeon spearing knows that the odds are stacked against the spearers. The old expression is that sturgeon spearing is like duck hunting out a chimney and this analogy is actually pretty close to the truth. Even in a year with good spearing conditions, similar to this season, the success rates on Lake Winnebago remain low. The long term average success rates are around 10-12% meaning that the “average” spearer will go 8-10 years between fish.



Allan Kraemer has speared all but 5-6 seasons since 1972, and his dedication paid off in 2014 as he was able to harvest his first sturgeon.

unique and keep people coming back year after year. We are blessed to have such a great resource in our back yard, a sturgeon resource that is unmatched anywhere else in the world. The robust population provides the opportunity for an annual spear harvest, but it's the social aspects that make the sport special. Another prime example is the 139.5 pound sturgeon that was speared by a 13 year Matthew Klein on opening day. Matt comes from a family of dedicated sturgeon spearers, but this was the first fish that he had ever speared on his own. Further, this was the 9<sup>th</sup> largest fish harvested during the 2014 season and the largest fish harvested by a 12-13 year old since the minimum spearing age changed in advance of the 2013 spearing season. Now that's a memory that young sportsman and his family will never forget.

Now there are people who defy these odds and harvest fish more regularly, but there are also those spearkers that defy the odds with bad luck. For example, Allan Kraemer registered his first ever sturgeon at Stockbridge Harbor this year. He had been spearing almost every year (claims to have missed maybe 5-6 seasons) since 1972 and this was the first fish that he had ever even seen in the hole. What a story and I'm glad to hear that Allan's persistence finally paid off.

Those who spear, or have experienced the sturgeon spearing culture, know that it's the stories like the one above that make this sport truly



Matthew Klein (left) and his father (Steven Klein; right) hold the 139.5 pound sturgeon that Matthew speared on February 8, 2014. This was Matthew's first fish, but I think it's safe to say that he is now hooked on the sport. Congratulations Matthew!

There are many more great stories from the 2014 spearing season, a season that was short but certainly lived up to the hype. Conditions were prime for a great season, and the population did not disappoint. After three straight seasons of poor conditions, it was nice to have clear water and safe ice conditions so that the sturgeon population on the Winnebago System could once again be showcased on center stage. Just like many spearers, I was sad to see the season come to an end early, but I take comfort in knowing that we are less than a year away from the start of the 2015 season!

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