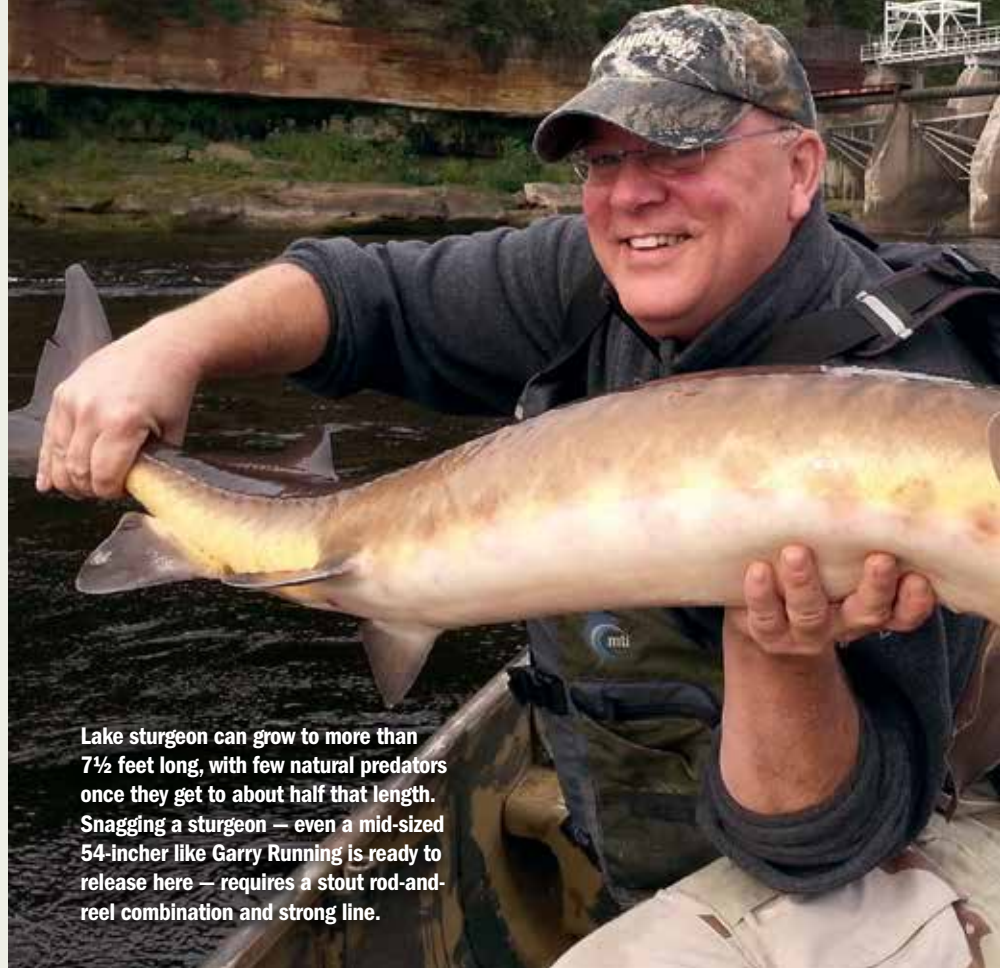


# FRESHWATER MONSTERS



Lake sturgeon can grow to more than 7½ feet long, with few natural predators once they get to about half that length. Snagging a sturgeon — even a mid-sized 54-incher like Garry Running is ready to release here — requires a stout rod-and-reel combination and strong line.

## LAKE STURGEON ON HOOK AND LINE

*Garry Running, Chris Mackey-Natz and David Harkness*

Several sturgeon species inhabit North American freshwaters. In most places where they are found, sturgeon populations are crashing, with most species either threatened or endangered. Few viable sturgeon fisheries exist in North America, but in Wisconsin — if you're lucky — there may be a viable lake sturgeon fishery near you.



CHRIS MACKEY-NATZ

Wisconsin waters are actually home to two species of sturgeon: the comparatively smaller shovelnose sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus*) and the lake sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*), the grandmother of North American freshwater fish. You can find lake sturgeon in the Great Lakes and rivers that feed them, Lake Winnebago and the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Shovelnose sturgeon are only found in the Mississippi River drainage area. The lake sturgeon is the focus of this story.

#### First, a word about respect

Lake sturgeon are amazing creatures.

They grow 1 to 1½ inches per year and can grow to more than 90 inches long — you do the math. Young sturgeon may grow as fast as an inch per month in summer, but that slows down as the weather cools and as they approach 20 years of age. Once they are about 4 feet long, their most significant predator is humans.

Lake sturgeon share some characteristics with some shark species such as: general body design; big eyes; powerful, fast swimming; “toothy” skin instead of scales; extra senses in their snout; and a skeleton of cartilage instead of bone. However, sturgeon and sharks are not close relatives, despite the fact they are both predators.

Instead of sharp teeth, lake sturgeon boast a vacuum-hose-like mouth they can extend from their sensitive snout to feed. They are clearly designed as bottom-oriented predators, but can eat wherever in the water column they choose.

Normal sturgeon fare is invertebrates siphoned up out of bottom sands and gravels, but we’ve witnessed them take live sucker minnows, cut bait and masses of night crawlers. We’ve even seen them, snout out of the water, sucking up freshly hatched mayflies from the water surface.

Please respect these fish. They are rare, even here in Wisconsin. They have been around since before the dinosaurs and can — and should — live longer than people. We will share some tips for how to catch them, but also for how to take care of them and return them safely to the water.

Note that it is unlawful to target species out of season. However, when you’re fishing for catfish or walleye in waters that support freshwater lake sturgeon, we think you should be prepared to bring one in and then release it unharmed in case you hook one accidentally.

#### Why fish for lake sturgeon?

On our favorite river, lake sturgeon season happens every September. A lake sturgeon tag is required and is not included in our regular fishing license. One fish per tag holder per season is the limit and the minimum length is 60 inches.

We’ve all caught our share of big freshwater fish of various species in North America over the years. However, in our experience, 60-inch or longer lake

sturgeon — and other similarly large sturgeon species — are the most powerful and acrobatic freshwater fish we’ve ever encountered. They run like tarpon and many an unprepared angler has been “spooled” by a big lake sturgeon.

Nor do lake sturgeon just sit on the bottom after being hooked. They jump like smallmouth bass on a mission. There is nothing like seeing a 60-plus-inch fish launch itself out of the water, which it can do three or more times before you finally haul it in. Hauling in a lake sturgeon is the most exciting and exhausting 20 to 25 minutes of freshwater fishing we’ve ever experienced.

#### Where to find them

We are most familiar with fishing for lake sturgeon in rivers. Predatory fish in rivers share some of the same haunts. You can find lake sturgeon in the same places you find catfish or walleyes, such as deep holes or eddies, or where currents change direction or speed.

We mostly hook lake sturgeon where riverbeds are composed of pea-sized to robin’s-egg-sized gravel and the current is fast. Depth doesn’t seem to matter as long as the riverbed is gravelly.

Others claim lake sturgeon feed mostly in low light or at night and, therefore, recommend fishing for them during those times. We have not experienced any such pattern and find that lake sturgeon take advantage of food sources wherever and whenever they are available.

Lake sturgeon don’t seem to be schooling fish but we often catch more than one at a time. Perhaps they independently cruise the same areas when food is available.

#### Tips for catching lake sturgeon

To be respectful of these ancient fish, you don’t want to leave terminal tackle — like a fish hook — in your quarry. The best way to maximize the odds of landing a lake sturgeon and removing the hook swiftly with a minimum of fuss is to use a heavy fishing rod.

We recommend an 8- to 10-foot rod, preferably in the medium-heavy to heavy range. In the case of a big lake sturgeon, a long rod will help you steer the fish away from obstacles in the fight.

Use a sturdy surf-casting reel designed to deal with the strain of catching powerful fish weighing more than 60 pounds in heavy current and capable of



GARRY RUNNING

**Taking a photo of your prized catch? Chris and Grace Mackey-Natz (with David Harkness, left) demonstrate the best way to pose a lake sturgeon for pictures: Grab it by the tail with one hand and cradle it with the other arm, keeping it horizontal to help avoid injuring the fish.**

holding 150 or more yards of 65-pound test braided nylon line. A good stout rod-and-reel combo and strong line are your best tools for ensuring success. Although a skilled angler can bring in a lake sturgeon on light gear, the higher risk of losing the fish and leaving it with a hook in its mouth doesn't seem worth it to us.

We recommend you build your own two-part 9-foot leader from 80- to 100-pound test fluorocarbon and use swivels rated to 35 or 40 pounds. Tie the hardware with a uniknot, or use size 8 or 10 leader crimps. Allow about 1 foot of leader between the sinker and the hook to keep your hook and bait on or near the bottom, even in fast current.

Terminal tackle getting snagged on something is inevitable when river fishing. You want the swivel to break, not your rod or reel, so use 3- to 5-ounce weights, depending on current speed. Sometimes we have to use two of them.

Several large galvanized or steel nuts can be used to replace lead sinkers. Run a loop of abrasion resistant fluorocarbon leader material through them; the threads in them are hard on the line.

Why the 9-foot leader? Lake sturgeon roll when brought near the bank or boat. Their skin is protected by five rows of scutes along the top, sides and belly, which can easily cut your line. Heavy fluorocarbon is resistant to abrasion. A

lake sturgeon only has to roll once or twice to reach the end of a 5-foot leader, so we now make our leaders 9 feet long.

Use an improved Albright knot to connect the end of the fluorocarbon leader to the braided line coming from your reel. That will allow the long heavy leader to pass through the line guides on the rod for easier casting.

Nylon-coated steel leaders may work, too, but can emit tiny electrical currents in the water. Sensory organs in a lake sturgeon's snout can detect these subtle currents, much like a shark's can, so we use fluorocarbon leaders.

Tip your leader with a circle hook large enough to hold six large night crawlers simultaneously. A hearty gob of night crawlers or a hefty piece of cut bait requires a big hook. Check your bait often because smaller fish will steal your crawlers. We've found redhorse sucker or moon-eye steaks cut into 5- to 6-inch strips to be the best cut bait.

We recommend size 6/0 to 9/0 circle hooks — with the barb of the hook exposed — for two reasons. First, they don't require a well-timed hook set, so even novice anglers can use them successfully. Second, they almost always hook in the lip. We've rarely had a sturgeon — or any other fish species for that matter — swallow a circle hook, so they are easy to remove with minimal dam-

age to the fish. Don't try to remove a circle hook if it has been swallowed. Instead, cut the line and let the fish's own body deal with it.

Skip the landing net. If you're fishing from a riverbank, be prepared to go in after your sturgeon to keep it from injuring itself in the shallows. You want to be able to release a fish too small — or a legal size fish that you can't bring yourself to kill.

You can remove a circle hook safely from a played-out fish with pliers while your fish is in the water by gently grabbing it in front of the tail and rolling it on its back. The fish will calm down and allow you to remove the hook. Use the same procedure over the side of a boat.

If you plan to remove your lake sturgeon from the water to measure it or take a photograph, grab it by the tail with one hand and cradle it with your other arm, keeping it horizontal. Holding fish vertically can injure them. Protect the lake sturgeon by holding it securely on shore to keep it from thrashing around. Once you have your measurement and photos, return the fish to the water as quickly as you can.

We suggest that before release, you hold your trophy by the tail and move the fish back and forth to force water over its gills. You'll know when it's ready to go. One powerful flick of its tail and it's gone. You will have a couple of great photos and sore arms to remember it by. 🍷

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## LAKE STURGEON REGULATIONS

**Check out DNR's website for more information on the lake sturgeon hook and line season, including season dates, harvest tag availability and listing of registration stations. Visit [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov) and search "sturgeon fishing"**