



Photo by Beth Lippert

A dedicated sturgeon spearer peers through a sturgeon hole in hopes a fish will swim through.

# STURGEON SPEARING:

## The Good Ol' Days Are Right Now!

By Ryan Koenigs, Senior Fisheries Biologist,  
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data are collected from each fish and these data are used to help set harvest caps for subsequent spearing seasons. These stations also provide a great opportunity

most noteworthy story emerging from the season. A record 106 fish (95 from Winnebago and 11 from the Upriver Lakes) 100 pounds or larger were registered during the 2014 sturgeon spear fishery. The largest fish was John Skahen's 77.1", 161.0 pound female that was harvested on February 12. The trend of larger fish in the harvest has really emerged within the last decade and is indicative of a healthy, balanced population. Throughout the 1950-2009 seasons, there was an average of 0.83% of the Lake Winnebago harvest that were fish 100 pounds or larger. In comparison, the last five seasons (2010-2014) have boasted an average 6.02% of the harvest being fish tipping the scales at 100+ pounds. These big fish also dominate the record books, with 8 of the top 11 heaviest fish dating back to 1932 being harvested in the last five seasons! Further, only one fish in the top 11 was speared prior to 2004, and that was the famous 180 pound, 79" fish speared by Elroy Schroeder in 1953. The most noteworthy fish in recent seasons remains the current state record 212.2 pound, 84.2" fish that was harvested by Ronald Grishaber in 2010.

These large fish are not only showing up in harvests spanning the last decade, but have also become more frequent in spring assessments conducted at spawning sites located on the major Winnebago System tributaries. DNR staff now routinely capture fish 75" and larger. Four such trophy sized fish were captured in each year of 2011 and 2014, while nine were captured in both 2012 and 2013. The most prominent fish was the potential record breaking fish captured from the

for non-spearers to come observe the registration process and learn more about the sport of sturgeon spearing and sturgeon biology. The season itself lasts until either the harvest caps are reached or for a maximum of 16 days.

Water clarity and ice conditions for travel are the two factors that have the largest impact on spearing success and, in turn, season length. Due to the early freeze up and cold winter conditions, spearers experienced favorable spearing conditions for the 2014 season. The relatively clear water combined with more than 2' of ice led to a short 3-day season on the Upriver Lakes and a 6-day season on Lake Winnebago. The 3-day season on the Upriver Lakes was the 2<sup>nd</sup> shortest since 2007, while the 6-day season on Lake Winnebago was 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 Lake Winnebago fishery concluded with a total harvest of 1,513 fish (13.3% success rate), which was the largest harvest since 2004 (1,854 fish registered) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest since 2000.

The above average harvest in 2014 made for a successful season, but the number of large, trophy sized fish was the

get that giddy feeling as another season draws near.

For those readers not familiar with the sport of sturgeon spearing, believe me, you are missing out. The sturgeon spear fishery starts the second Saturday in February, which happens to be Valentine's Day this year. There are fisheries on two different water bodies within the Winnebago System, both of which are managed by sex-specific harvest caps as well as an overarching system-wide harvest cap. The Lake Winnebago fishery is unlimited to how many licenses are sold before an October 31<sup>st</sup> deadline and spearers there experience an average success rate of 10-12%. The other season occurs on the Upriver Lakes (Butte des Morts, Winneconne, and Poygan) and operates under a lottery with 500 permits per year awarded to over 5,000 applicants. Spearers on the Upriver Lakes experience a much higher success rate (50-60%) mostly due to shallower water. The sport of spearing itself involves peering into the water through a large hole (48 ft<sup>2</sup> maximum) cut in the ice with hopes of seeing a sturgeon swim through. Spearers can "fish" from 7:00 AM to 1:00 PM each day the season is open, and all harvested fish must be presented at a registration station manned by DNR personnel by 2:00 PM of the same day the fish is harvested. Critical biological

Well, it's getting to be that time of the year again, where winter's cold has us beaten down and many sportsmen and sportswomen are looking for something a little more exciting to get the blood flowing. Something more than the traditional ice fishing adventure. To many that void is filled by the annual sturgeon spearing season on the Winnebago Pool Lakes. In fact, it's safe to say that to many families and spearing groups, another sturgeon spearing season is met with anticipation rivaled only by the gun deer opener in Wisconsin. It's hard to think of another outdoor sport that is more entrenched in tradition and culture than sturgeon spearing. Most of the equipment necessary to pursue the sport (spears, decoys, gaff hooks, etc.) are homemade and have been passed down through the generations. As an avid spearer myself, I always revel in the excitement of a new season, and especially enjoy hearing the stories of seasons past when "cutting in." As the lead sturgeon biologist for the Wisconsin DNR, my experience on opening day is now entirely focused on managing the fishery, but I still



Photo by Ross Bielema

Ron Grishaber with his 84.2", 212.2 pound lake sturgeon that was harvested on February 13, 2010. Ron's fish is the current state record and 24 pounds heavier than the 2nd largest fish on record.

Wolf River in 2012. The 87.5" female was estimated to weigh 240 pounds pre-spawn and is the largest, by weight, fish ever observed on the Winnebago System. This is likely not the only record breaking fish in the system, and, in my opinion, it's only a matter of time until someone is lucky enough to break, if not shatter, the current state record.

We have been tracking these large fish through recent spawning assessments, but the spawning run also allows DNR staff to collect important population level data, as was the case in 2014. The cool spring weather pattern delayed the onset of sturgeon spawning while also substantially extending the spawning period. Sturgeon normally spawn for a 4-10 day period each spring,

but fish were observed spawning for more than 18 days in 2014. This extended spawning run allowed DNR staff to capture a record 1,982 lake sturgeon (261 females and 1,721 males). 2014 was also the first spring where sturgeon were captured on all four of the major spawning tributaries within the Winnebago System. The majority of the fish were captured on the Wolf River (1,920), but

fish were also captured on the upper Fox (32), Embarrass (28), and Little Wolf (2) Rivers.

The data collected during sturgeon spawning assessments and spearing seasons is critical to the management program and the continuation of a sustainable harvest. The most critical is the tagging data collected during spring spawning runs and the recapture of those marked fish in the spear fishery. This is the reason for mandatory registration as each harvested fish is checked for presence of tags by DNR staff. These data are collectively used to estimate abundance of adult males and females within the population and set sustainable harvest caps for upcoming spearing seasons. The DNR staff currently estimate that the Winnebago System is home to 18,000 adult females and 25,000 adult males. Past and current abundance estimates indicate a slight growth in population size resulting from more restrictive harvest regulations and our current management program that promotes protection of this important resource.

One critical management action was the implementation of the current harvest cap system that bases sex-specific harvest caps on the most recent abundance estimates. Thus the caps fluctuate with changes in the population. Spearers have benefited from a steadily increasing population, and therefore harvest caps have gone up as well. Looking forward to the 2015 spearing season, spearers will be happy to know that adult female harvest caps will increase by 6%. The increased harvest caps doesn't mean that all of those fish will be harvested; rather the season closes the day that 100% of any of the harvest caps are reached or 24 hours after 90% of any of the harvest caps have been reached. The season closes after 16 days if neither of these scenarios occurs. History indicates that the adult female harvest cap is normally the first cap triggered and thus the driver behind season length when good conditions persist.

Continuing to forecast the 2015 sturgeon spearing season, a record 13,134 licenses (12,650 for Lake Winnebago and 484 for Upriver Lakes) were sold. This is an 11% increase over 2014 license sales and 454 more licenses than the previous record of 12,680 licenses sold for the 2012 season. The increase in license sales is likely tied to the overall spearing success of the 2014 season, a season which presented the best spearing conditions since 2010. Further, clear water and thick ice conditions presented the best opportunity to showcase the sensational lake sturgeon resource inhabiting the Winnebago System, both in terms of overall abundance and availability of trophy sized fish. To perspective spearers looking to break into this outdoor past time, 2014 provided ample incentive.

The increase in license sales shows a growth in popularity of the sport of sturgeon spearing, but doesn't automatically convey that a short, successful season is on tap for 2015. As described earlier, sturgeon spearing success is driven, in order, by water clarity and ice conditions. Water clarity benefitted from an early freeze and a cold winter with adequate snow cover in 2014. As I write this article in late November, it appears that this winter may well be similar to last year. However, there are a lot of factors that can affect water clarity, making it almost impossible to predict.

So as the days pass and the 2015 sturgeon spearing season draws near, spearers will continue to hope for favorable spearing conditions. One thing is for certain, the population boasts an abundance of lake sturgeon, second only to the population in



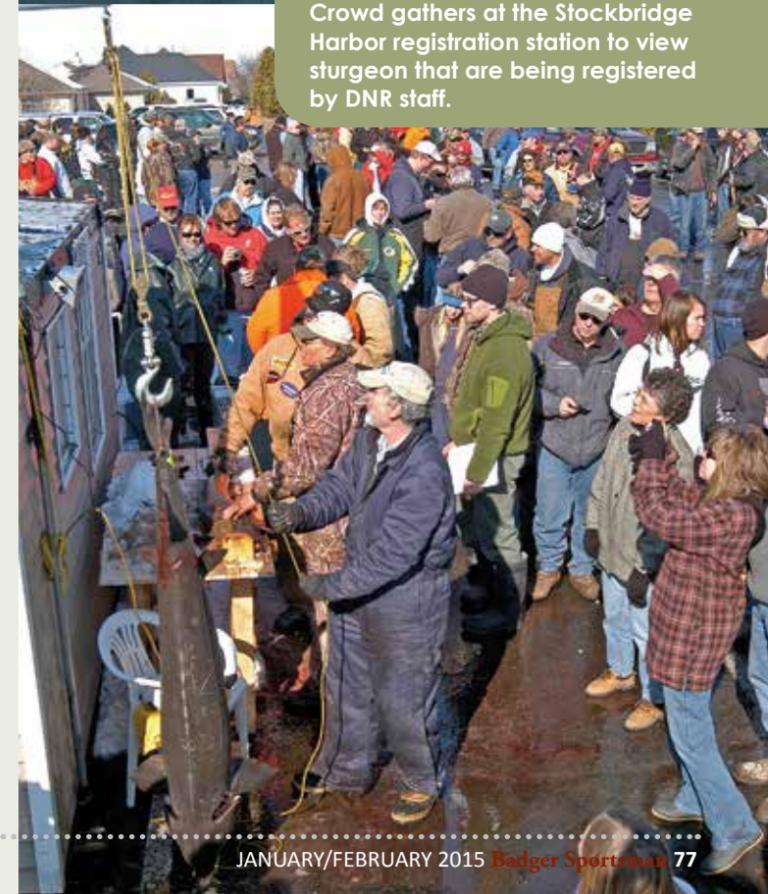
Photo by Pat Durkin

Above: Kids looking at a sturgeon being registered at Waverly Beach sturgeon registration station. Below: Dawn on Lake Winnebago opening day of the 2014 season.



Photo by Beth Lippert

Crowd gathers at the Stockbridge Harbor registration station to view sturgeon that are being registered by DNR staff.






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DNR staff and UW Stevens Point fisheries students captured this 87.5" female lake sturgeon below the Shawano Dam on the Wolf River on April 10, 2012. The fish was not weighed, but estimated to have weighed 240 pounds pre-spawn.

the St. Lawrence River Estuary, while also containing a historic number of large, trophy sized fish. The record books have been rewritten over the last decade, and I suspect they will continue to be rewritten as we move forward. These larger fish continue to be observed during spring spawning assessments, and it's likely only a matter of time until someone is lucky enough to spear the next record breaking fish.

Whether favorable spearing conditions prevail for the 2015 season or not, I hope that people can take a step back to think about what they are actually taking part in. We are truly fortunate to be able to enjoy the remarkable sturgeon population, a resource that can sustain a substantial harvest

unlimited to the number of participants. Further, the annual sturgeon spear fishery on the Winnebago Pool Lakes is the largest sturgeon spear fishery in the world and is rich with culture and tradition. The sturgeon provide the opportunity for the season to take place, but the social aspects of the sport are what make it so special and truly unique. Simply put, the traditions associated with the sport, time spent with

family and friends, and tales that grow with each telling go far beyond harvesting a fish.

To all spearers, I wish you good luck and safe travels for the 2015 spearing season. I hope to see you at one of our registration stations while you are registering your catch and taking in the atmosphere. To non-spearers, I strongly recommend that you venture to one of our registration stations on February 14. An event like this doesn't occur anywhere else in the world, it just happens to take place in our own backyard here in Wisconsin. DNR staff operating these stations are very knowledgeable about sturgeon biology, and will gladly answer any questions that you may have. Let's make the 2015 sturgeon spearing season another "season to remember."

Looking forward to February 14<sup>th</sup>!



*Ryan Koenigs is the Winnebago System sturgeon biologist for the Wisconsin DNR. Ryan maintains an email distribution list that he sends general Winnebago System fisheries information and daily updates during spearing seasons. Email Ryan at [Ryan.koenigs@wisconsin.gov](mailto:Ryan.koenigs@wisconsin.gov) if you are interested in receiving updates.*



Photo by Hannah Dumke

Above: Sturgeon displayed at Wendt's on the Lake during the 2014 season. Right: Matt Klein (13 years old; left) and his father Steve (right) proudly display Matt's 139.5 pound lake sturgeon harvested on February 8, 2014.



\*Unless otherwise noted, all photos courtesy of the Wisconsin DNR.

FEB 14, 2015



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