Well, it’s getting to be that time of the year again, where winter’s cold has us beaten down and many sportmen 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 spear 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 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 spearing 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 31st 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 ft² 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 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 for non-spearmen 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 2nd shortest since 2007, while the 6-day season on Lake Winnebago was tied for the 3rd highest since 2000. The Lake Winnebago fishery concluded with a total harvest of 1,513 fish (13.3% success rate), which was 1,066 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
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.

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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 14th!

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 if you are interested in receiving updates.

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

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