

Winnebago ice magic



A homemade Schwabenlander shack flies Old Glory as the sun rises over the eastern Wisconsin Niagara escarpment.

Remnants of wind-shoved, early ice, on the eastern shore shows the power of the natural forces and the annual uncertainty of Lake Winnebago.

A STURGEON SEASON FOR THE STORYBOOKS.

Story and photos by Marc Schwabenlander of Lethal Insight

Another fall of deer hunting had expired and winter came to northeast Wisconsin. After filling two deer tags during the shotgun season, it was time to look forward to the upcoming lake sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*) spearing season in February on Lake Winnebago. Little did I know, 1998 was going to be a season with a day of spearing action that would likely never be repeated.

Lake Winnebago is a large freshwater lake spanning 30 miles from north to south and a maximum of about 10 miles east to west with an average depth of 15.5 feet. There has been a regulated lake sturgeon spearing season since 1903 with many fluctuations in the rules over time.

As the sport became more popular through the 1990s and the water became clearer for a number of reasons, the Department of Natural Resources was actively implementing phases of a new Safe Harvest Management System for the Winnebago system sturgeon. The department was proactive in managing the

sturgeon for the longevity of the population and the continuation of the spearing season, a time-honored tradition for the people of northeast Wisconsin. When asked about this sport and species by Wisconsinites and out-of-staters who have no experience with the Winnebago system lake sturgeon, I continually find myself praising the department when I explain how this species is managed and protected.

The anatomy of Lake Winnebago lends itself to be an annual crapshoot regarding winter ice formation. High winds and/or periods of warm tem-

peratures wreak havoc on the ice in the early winter. By February of most years, the ice is safe for vehicle travel. The occasional expansion cracks and areas of open water or thin ice are monitored by area fishing clubs and the department.

As can happen, 1998 proved to be a year of questionable ice travel and by the February sturgeon spearing season opener there was only about 10 inches of solid ice. The season lasted only 12 days (it can go as long as 23 days) due to an early ice out on Feb. 26.

Dad, Uncle Dan and I were not to be dissuaded from pursuing the prehistoric fish that swam the Lake Winnebago system. We all were raised within a few miles of the northeast shores and this annual pursuit was part of our being.

The three of us each had a tag in our wallet, so we discussed the options and made a plan. We did not gamble with bringing a truck onto the lake but rather, decided to move our shacks around with the aid of an ATV.

Nobody traveled too far, not wanting to risk the ice conditions beyond the half-mile comfort zone. We brought two shacks out; one for Dad and I to share and another for Dan to sit in. The large, 3-foot by 6-foot holes were sawed the day prior to the season opener and the shacks were set. The water was crystal



Uncle Dan (right) and two helpers sink the block with long, pointed poles after the hole is cut.



(Left to right) Jeff Schwabenlander (Dad), Dan Gehl (Uncle Dan) and Mark Schwabenlander (the author) with their sturgeons from that spectacular day on the ice.

clear, so we were optimistic and looked forward to the next day.

Onto the ice we traveled early the following morning. Our ATV pulled a sled behind for spears, food, drink, an array of gear, and with any luck, a sturgeon on the way back to shore. Dan went off to his shack while Dad and I prepared ours for the multi-hour sit. If you have never had the opportunity to participate or observe this winter pastime, imagine staring at a big screen TV for hours with the power off. Hours of anticipation were filled with decoy changes, radio broadcasts, conversation and filling our stomachs.

We had not seen a fish all morning until 11:30 when I could make out the head and pectoral fins (or paddles) of a huge fish tight on the bottom. Dad and I were both

staring at the hole, so I said, "There one is!"

Dad replied that he could not see it. By the time he did catch a glimpse of tail movement and mud "rolling," I was letting the spear fly in the general direction the giant fish was swimming. Those hours of looking at the uneventful "big screen" are interrupted by heart-pounding moments of sturgeon sightings. Any hesitation with the spear can spoil an opportunity, and that was exactly what happened with the big fish on the bottom. The spear came up with nothing but mud. Once the mud settled, we were back to staring through empty water.

After a little lunch and a couple more hours with no action, Dad decided to turn over on the bench and take a nap. That left me to man the hole by myself.

At 1:30 Dad jumped up off the bench as he awoke to the sound of a spear being sent into the water. A sturgeon swam into view as she was checking out our decoy about 10 feet down. My aim was true, and by the time Dad sat up, I was controlling a rope that had a Winnebago lake sturgeon on the other end!

The sturgeon was pulled out of the water and placed in our sled. We put the shack back in order, since the event of pulling a sturgeon out of the water is fast, chaotic, and causes multiple ropes and strings to be tangled.

It was time for Dad and I to switch spots; I went to the bench, he sat on the chair, and we were ready for another appearance. Around 2:30, I was getting some shut-eye on the bench and wouldn't you know it, the roles were reversed. A sturgeon came in the hole, and Dad connected with a spear. It was only an hour later and we were back to the organized chaos of landing a sturgeon.

That was three fish observed in the matter of four hours. Dad and I had our tags filled and couldn't fish in our shack anymore, so the next step was a no-brainer. Dan closed up his shack and joined us. Now we had three men sitting shoulder to shoulder looking at the "big screen." Spirits were high as we anticipated Dan getting a chance at a sturgeon, too.

The stars aligned and at 4:30 another fish went swimming through our viewing window. Dan's spear sliced through the water and connected with another giant Winnebago fish. Within a few minutes, there were three happy guys with three sturgeons in the ATV sled.

I don't foresee that 1998 season ever being topped. We could hardly believe we had speared three sturgeon from the same shack in three hours! My fish was 53 pounds, Dad's was 58 pounds, and Dan's fish weighed 38 pounds. Aunt Ann sat over that hole the next day and never saw a fin. For us three guys, I guess it was the right place at the right time. Seventeen seasons later, we still reminisce about that crazy day on the Lake Winnebago ice. ❧

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