

St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow

January 2024 Newsletter



A Thriving Sturgeon Fishery

We believe fishing is critically important to lake sturgeon conservation. It is one of the few ways that we can bring people and lake sturgeon together. This helps to create a connection and deeper appreciation for the species. When we started St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow in late 2010 things were very different. The St. Clair River was mostly devoid of sturgeon anglers. Many nights we fished with just a handful of other local boats. The fishery has expanded a lot, with the same stretch of the river now hosting numerous sturgeon angling boats both after dark and even during the day. Weekday nights are now busier than weekend nights were on the North Channel 13 years ago. Looking back to the early years there were 9 master angler lake sturgeon reported to the Michigan DNR, some of which were caught on our boats. In 2022, the most recent year for which records are available, there were 110 master angler sturgeon reported ranging from 50 to 78 inches in length. Back in the early days, sturgeon charter captains were non-existent. Now there are many charter options available. We have personally introduced over 100 anglers to the fun of sturgeon fishing. We have written several magazine articles over the years and been featured in others. We have been blessed to promote the fishery on National Geographic Television, In-Fisherman and many times on Michigan Out-of-Doors TV. We were named as partners in the reef building projects in the St. Clair River for our efforts in helping to move those projects forward. We worked with Clay Township Supervisor Artie Bryson and members of the Michigan Senate and House to name Clay Township as “The Sturgeon Angling Capital of Michigan.” We also promote fishing by sponsoring a catch-and-release sturgeon fishing tournament every year in the fall. Social media now has many fishing related groups with sturgeon the focus of several. Plus, there are plenty of “how to” videos on YouTube that show anglers how to catch lake sturgeon in the St. Clair River. As a result, the fishery continues to grow with more and more people joining the ranks of anglers targeting these amazing living fossils.

A wise person said it very well, “It is okay to look at the past and look to the future, just don’t stare.” Once again, we find ourselves looking back. Not only at 2023, but at our accomplishments as an organization over the last 13 years. Much has been accomplished, but there is much more that can be done. As we look forward, one of the most difficult challenges for any volunteer-based organization is how to recruit and retain members to whom we can someday pass the torch. In 2023, we streamlined our memberships. Our annual membership costs \$30 and includes a very nice Gildan or Port Authority t-shirt shipped to you. For \$200 you can become a lifetime member. Any adult member of St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow is eligible to be on our board of directors. Our bylaws allow for nine board members. We currently have eight. Six of us are founding members. We need some new fresh ideas and energy to help propel us forward. Now is the time when we solicit memberships. Board and officer elections are coming up in the next couple of months. You can be part of an amazing team that includes business owners and managers, biologists, community planners, a college administrator; all very smart, welcoming, fun people with passion and skills needed for success. You can sign up for membership [by clicking here](#). If you wish to be considered for a seat on the board of directors, please send an email to:

stclairsturgeon@gmail.com.



The purpose of St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow is to perpetuate Lake Sturgeon through the support of science and public education by promoting, preserving, and protecting ethical and sustainable fishing; by assisting management agencies and their partners in their efforts to improve sturgeon populations and habitats; by promoting conservation through community outreach and education; and by engaging in other charitable activities deemed proper and necessary to accomplish the foregoing objectives within the Huron-Erie corridor.



Our sturgeon cooperater patch program is one of our signature programs to promote ethical and sustainable fishing. Occasionally we design and produce somewhere between 100 and 130 embroidered patches that we provide to the Michigan DNR to be given to anglers reporting the catch of a tagged lake sturgeon. Once those supplies are depleted, we design a new one. These patches have never been for sale (except in the secondary market). Because of increasing participation in the sturgeon fishery, some anglers were reporting several fish per year and getting duplicate patches. In 2023, we decided to create two patches to introduce more variety. Artwork for patches in the past came mostly from friends and family members. In 2023 both patches were designed by students who were learning about sturgeon in their schools.

Designed by Maxwell Mayfield in early 2023. Maxwell came up with the design in the last couple of weeks at school in Yale High school. His earth science teacher informed and encouraged the class to create draft patch designs for consideration as a new cooperater patch, which Maxwell was interested in. During class he created this patch design using Procreate on his iPad Pro. Maxwell's teacher was part of the 2022-2023 Sturgeon-in-the-Classroom program and had a sturgeon in his class named Scoots.

In the summer of 2023, Chael Amiels designed artwork for the 7th lake sturgeon management cooperater patch. Chael was 11 years old at the time and his design was one of ten selected for the Blue Water Sturgeon Festival art contest for 5th graders. Chael's art work took first place in the contest and subsequently was chosen for the design of this patch. Chael loves drawing and art and is a super smart little boy that loves helping his community.



To report catching a tagged lake sturgeon [click here](#). Be sure to include date, time, place, length and girth of the fish along with the tag number.

You can see our past patch designs [here](#).



DNR Sturgeon 2023 Tag Return Summary

Our thanks to MDNR Fisheries Research Biologist Andrew Briggs for providing information for this brief summary of sturgeon survey results and tag recoveries reported in 2023.

A total of 73 Lake Sturgeon were caught during DNR sturgeon surveys in SE Michigan in 2023. Of those, 20 were recaptures (thanks to Sturgeon for Tomorrow who has donated both external metal tags and internal PIT tags and a PIT tag reader to us in the past!). The largest fish caught in the 2023 surveys was about 70 inches long and 102 pounds.

Anglers reported a total of 74 total tag recaptures thus far for 2023. This number will go up a great deal as we still need to process the sturgeon angler diary program data for

2023. Sturgeon with metal dorsal tags accounted for 66 angler recaptures (specifying metal tags here since angler diary anglers can also report out on PIT tagged sturgeon). This is the 3rd most we've seen, but may surpass the most we've seen (71 in 2022) once angler diary data are included.

In 2013, the MDNR caught, tagged, and released a 36.2" sturgeon that weighed 10 pounds and was 10 years old. Since then, that fish has been recaptured 12 more times (2 during DNR surveys and 10 by recreational anglers). In fact, the fish, which is now 20 years old and about 50 inches long, was reported recaptured by 5 different anglers in 2023! Andrew reports that 6 of those 10 angler recaptures occurred while the fish was within the legal slot size and during the legal harvest season. This single fish is a fantastic example of the success of catch-and-release sturgeon angling.



Results of the 2023 North Channel Sturgeon Classic

The 9th North Channel Sturgeon Classic was held on Saturday, September 23rd in Clay Township, Michigan. This year 26 teams were registered and 24 teams fished. The Classic is a fund raiser for two local non-profit organizations (Pearl Beach Lions Club and the St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow). This tournament is a catch and immediate release event with digital photos taken on board each vessel and then texted to tournament judges to register each fish. A total of \$2,500 in cash prizes are awarded for the top 3 longest sturgeon registered. There were also 3 additional prizes including 2 randomly drawn mystery fish, and the highest total combined length for all fish registered by a single team.

Fishing ran from 6pm Saturday to 8am Sunday morning. A total of 99 sturgeon were successfully registered by the 24 teams that fished. Twenty-one (or 87%) of the teams registered at least 1 sturgeon. Three teams registered 10 fish or more. A total of 8 teams registered at least 5 fish over the course of the 14-hour fishing period. The first fish (Fish 1, 65") was registered at 6:27pm on Saturday evening and the last fish (Fish 99, 18") was registered at 7:49am Sunday morning. At least four of the registered fish had been previously tagged by the Michigan DNR.

The largest sturgeon registered was 71.0" in length and the smallest was 18". A total of 27 (27%) sturgeon registered were over 60" in length, while 23 (23%) were less than 30" in length. Thirteen of the registered fish fell

within the 42"-50" slot limit size range, but no fish were harvested during the event (tournament rule prohibits harvest during the event).

At 6:36pm, "Finns Sport Fishing" registered a thick fish that measured 70 3/4". That fish held first place until 4:42am when "Sturgeon Frenzy" registered a beauty that measured 71 inches. That fish stood up through the rest of the morning and took home the 1st place prize of \$1,500. The third-place fish was registered at 1:28am. It measured 70 1/4" and was caught by Salmon Quest. For the third consecutive year in the history of the North Channel Sturgeon Classic, all three prize winning fish exceeded 70 inches in length.



SAVE THE DATE: The 10th annual North Channel Sturgeon Classic tournament is scheduled for Saturday, October 12, 2024. We are excited to announce some changes for the North Channel Sturgeon Classic in 2024. The Classic will take place **on Saturday, October 12th**, so please save the date. This will be a daylight event with **the Captains meeting at 7am and fishing hours from 9am to 5pm**. The Awards ceremony will take place at 6:30pm at the Sturgeon Festival beer tent. The Clay Township Sturgeon Festival will also be held on October 12th and will include live entertainment by the Gobies. Please plan to participate in the 10th North Channel Sturgeon Classic and the Clay Township Sturgeon Festival in 2024. Put a reminder on your calendar to register on July 16th so you don't miss your chance. The limited team spaces fill up fast.



We continue to prosper because of our strong working relationships with management agencies. As mentioned

by biologist Andrew Briggs, we have donated some much needed equipment to the Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station for incidental purchases. Brad Utrup from the same office manages a sturgeon angler diary program. SFT president, Jim Felgenauer continues to represent St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow as a member of the Lake Erie/ Lake St. Clair Citizens Advisory Committee after his recent resignation as the chair of that committee. Blair Hughes serves in the same capacity. A memorandum of understanding between Michigan's Sturgeon for Tomorrow chapters, The Michigan DNR, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service allows us to secure and hold lake sturgeon under permit for our Sturgeon in the Classroom Program. Our strong relationship with US Fish and Wildlife enables us to have adult sturgeon touch-tanks at some of our outreach events. They catch those fish on setlines and transport them to our events. They then staff our events to help educate the public about the importance of lake sturgeon. Fish are held under their federal permits before being release back into the river at the end of the day.



Our Sturgeon in the Classroom program is one of the ways we connect the public with the normally invisible lake sturgeon. Eggs and milt are collected from sturgeon in the St. Clair River by biologists during the spawning run in late May or early June. The fertilized eggs are transported to the Federal Fish Hatchery at Genoa, Wisconsin where they hatch and the larval sturgeon grow up to about 6 inches long by September. In the early fall those fish are stocked into rivers and streams connected to the Great Lakes. Some of these baby sturgeon come to us to be raised by students in classrooms during the school year. We also provide fish to some public venues such as the nature center at Lake St. Clair Metro Park and the Sea Life Aquarium at Great Lakes Crossing. St. Clair County Community College also gets a fish. Another of our great partners, Friends of the St. Clair River have fish that can be seen in their offices in St. Clair. They also have a live camera that can be seen [here](#). Be sure to view in full screen mode. We also keep a fish or two to take to events such as the St. Clair County Earth Fair held in Goodells each April.

Our public outreach and education efforts involve participation in festivals and events during the year with our "traveling" baby sturgeon. At Earth Fair we can be found inside the visitor center where we engage with hundreds of students on Friday and with the general public on Saturday. We will be there again on April 26th and 27th this year.

Saturday, June 1st will find us at the Blue Water Sturgeon Festival in Port Huron once again. During this festival we release the young sturgeon from our sturgeon in the classroom program into the St. Clair River. There is also a touch tank with adult sturgeon on the beach near the Lighthouse. Tickets can be purchased for public sturgeon cruises aboard the Huron Lady II on Saturday, weather permitting. On the Thursday and Friday before the festival we sponsor school students who are invited aboard the Huron Lady II to learn about sturgeon from the US Fish and Wildlife Service team doing setline surveys on the river.

One of our main fundraising events and festivals is the Clay Township Sturgeon Festival held during the fall in conjunction with the North Channel Sturgeon Classic Fishing Tournament. This event includes a sturgeon touch tank, family fun during the day and entertainment with adult beverages during the evening. This is made possible by a great partnership with the Pearl Beach Lions Club and the support of Clay Township officials. This year both events will take place on Saturday, October 12th.

We have done well in accomplishing our mission. Many more people than ever before are aware of the presence and importance of our local lake sturgeon population. This fishery has grown exponentially yet responsibly. As biologist Andrew Briggs mentioned, one fish has been caught 13 times including 5 times just this year by 5 different anglers. St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow remains financially stable. We are 100% volunteer. All money goes to support our purposes.



Another way we support long term sturgeon conservation and rehabilitation is to sponsor twenty of the several hundred children who release fish into the Maumee River in Ohio as part of a yearly event held by the Toledo Zoo. This is part of an ongoing effort to reestablish an extirpated population in the Maumee watershed and Lake Erie. Each of these fish is tagged and that tag is associated with the child who released the fish. Any time the sturgeon is recaptured during its lifetime the child is notified. This helps each child develop a long-term relationship with the species. We look forward to participating again in 2024.



Our outreach, community education, and promotion of ethical fishing is paying off. In the fall of 2022, anglers on the Algonac boardwalk observed someone landing a lake sturgeon. This was after the close of the harvest

season. They informed the person that the season was closed, the fish was undersized and that he must release the fish. The person refused, saying he was going to keep it anyway. After gathering a description of the poacher, the anglers called law enforcement who were able to apprehend the offender in possession of the fish. The sturgeon which was about 37 inches long was not able to be revived and was taken to the Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station. Biologists determined that the fish had an internal tag. Research showed that this sturgeon was part of the 2018 Toledo Zoo release into the Maumee in Ohio, at which time the fish would have been only several months old and 5 inches long. Even if you do not fish for lake sturgeon you should know that anglers are allowed to harvest only one sturgeon per year. In the St Clair River, the harvest season extends from July 16th until the end of September. The fish must be between 42 inches and 50 inches in length. If you see anyone in possession of a lake sturgeon under any other circumstances, please inform law enforcement.



Looking Forward - 2024

Your board of directors is planning an in-person membership meeting in early March. We will be attending many of our favorite outreach events beginning with the St. Clair County Earth Fair in late April. Our primary fundraising events, the Sturgeon Festival and the North Channel Sturgeon Classic will once again be held on the same date, Saturday, October 12th. We have Sturgeon in the Classroom fish at seven locations across southeast Michigan and we expect them to remain there until June. Merchandise sales are now available on our website.

Please consider becoming a member of St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow. Any person subscribing to the purposes of SC-DR SFT shall be eligible for membership in this organization without discrimination for any reason. A single one-year membership is only \$30 and this year comes with a free Sturgeon for Tomorrow t-shirt. We also have lifetime memberships available. We are a 100% 501(c)(3) organization with all proceeds being used for our charitable purposes. We have a small but amazing and capable team. We are always looking for fresh people with fresh ideas. [Click here to join SC-DR Sturgeon for tomorrow!](#)

Any member that is 18 or over is eligible to make an even greater contribution by joining our board of directors. Terms are for one year with elections held in late winter or early spring. We are accepting nominations for the board of directors now. Please let us know by February 10th if you would like to throw your hat into the ring.

We also have sponsorship and volunteer opportunities during the year. Our sponsors, volunteers, and participants are what make us successful. The work we do is both fun and rewarding. We believe it's a good thing to be passionate about lake sturgeon.

The SC-DR SFT Mission is to perpetuate Lake Sturgeon through the support of science and public education by:

- promoting, preserving, and protecting ethical and sustainable fishing;
- assisting management agencies and their partners in their efforts to improve sturgeon populations and habitats;
- promoting conservation through community outreach and education;
- engaging in other charitable activities deemed proper and necessary to accomplish the foregoing objectives within the Huron-Erie corridor.



Closing Thoughts from The President

What we have done in the past and will continue to do in the future, we can do with our eyes closed. Those things are now a matter of routine. Our main goals in 2024 are to address the changes needed to carry us for the next 13 years and beyond. We need to have the right systems, infrastructure, procedures and people in place. But we know we are working from an old model. We have a small number of paid memberships. We still hold in-person monthly board meetings. Our social media presence is hit or miss. The new model is social media groups with strong administration that have hundreds of members who join for free. There is widespread sharing of information on these pages. We should be moving in that direction. We need improvement in our communications. Instead of a yearly newsletter we need to build our email list and do at least monthly email contacts. We are currently reviewing our web pages and updating as needed to make them more functional.

We need people. Every sturgeon charter captain who earns a living from the local sturgeon fishery should at least join the organization that was the impetus for the expanded interest in the sturgeon fishery and works to assure that the population will continue to thrive. We need the anglers that participate in our sturgeon tournament to join SC-DR SFT and become active in helping us plan our yearly tournament, maybe as a committee member, or a board member. Animal rights activists would like nothing better than to take away your opportunity to fish for a state-listed threatened species. Through our political contacts we fight to protect your rights. We think Charter operators should be part of that fight too.

Local business owners that benefit from sturgeon related tourism dollars should support the organization that supports them. Some do, but many more could. Through our various festivals, tournaments, and promotion of the fishery we have had a significant positive impact on the local economy. At a minimum you need to join SC-DR Sturgeon for Tomorrow and possibly join a committee.

Are you the person with the management, communications, organizational, or social media skills that can be used to support a volunteer organization that supports you? Do you have a shared passion for lake sturgeon? Are you willing to be a part of a team that includes some of the finest human beings on the planet? Are you willing to have more fun? Sturgeon are fun. Along with that fun comes a tremendous feeling of pride and satisfaction in knowing that you are accomplishing something much bigger than yourself. Please consider joining St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow. For a reason, a season, or a lifetime!

With best regards,

Jim Felgenauer
St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow



Upcoming Volunteer Opportunities

In 2024, we will be attending several of our annual public outreach events. Details will be posted on our Facebook Page. Everyone is welcome to join in the fun. If you would like to volunteer, please contact a board member by email at: stclairsturgeon@gmail.com

April 28-29: St. Clair County Earth Fair, Goodells Park.
June 1: Bluewater Sturgeon Festival, Fort Gratiot Lighthouse Park, 10am-3pm.
October 12: North Channel Sturgeon Classic and Festival, Clay Township Park.

DID YOU KNOW THAT:

Small Lake Sturgeon were originally identified as a different species because of their distinctive sharp scutes and mottled pigmentation.



Recent Scientific Publications of Interest

Listed below are several recent peer-reviewed journal articles that report findings of lake sturgeon research projects in the St. Clair-Detroit River System or other nearby waters.

- Buchinger, Tyler J., DW Hondorp, and CC Krueger. 2023. Spatiotemporal segregation by migratory phenotype indicates potential for assortative mating in lake sturgeon. *Oecologia* 201.4 (2023): 953-964.
- Chiotti, JA., JC Boase, AS Briggs, C. Davis, R. Drouin, DW Hondorp, L. Mohr, EF Roseman, MV Thomas, and TC Wills. 2023. Lake Sturgeon population trends in the St. Clair-Detroit River System, 2001-2019. *North American Journal of Fisheries Management* 43(4): 1066-1080.
- Embke, HS., CA. Nikiel, and MP. Lyons. Potential effects of climate change on *Acipenser fulvescens* (lake sturgeon). No. 2021-1104-E. US Geological Survey, 2023.
- Hilling, CD., ML Belore, J. Boase, JA. Chiotti, RL. DeBruyne, SE Doka, R. Drouin, CM Mayer, J Tyson, T. Wills, & EF Roseman. 2024. How well do existing surveys track fish community performance measures in the St. Clair-Detroit River System? *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 196(2): 1-21.
- McKenna, J.R. Assessing Survival, Movement, and Habitat Use of Reintroduced Juvenile Lake Sturgeon in the Maumee River. PhD diss., The University of Toledo, 2023.
- Shaw, SL., Z. Lawson, J. Gerbyshak, N. Nye, & M. Donofrio. 2023. Catch-and-Release Angling Effects on Lake Sturgeon in Wisconsin, USA. *North American Journal of Fisheries Management*, 43(2), 451-464.
- Utrup, B. E., JM Hessenauer, AS Briggs, KT Scribner, J Kanefsky, & TC Wills, (2023). Biological investigation of the endangered northern madtom in the North Channel St. Clair River. *North American Journal of Fisheries Management*, 43(3):730-742.