

Sturgeon Fishing in the St. Clair River

By Jeremy Guc & Mike Thomas

Ask any angler in Great Lakes region what their favorite sport fish is, and 99% of the time you will receive a response such as such as *salmon, walleye, smallmouth bass or musky*. All of these make sense as the Great Lakes support world-class fisheries for each of these species. However, a growing number of anglers are taking advantage of an exciting, up-an-coming fishery for the largest fish that swims the Great Lakes, *Acipenser fulvescens*-the lake sturgeon.

Once one of the most populous fish in the Great Lakes, sturgeon were considered a nuisance by commercial anglers in the mid-1800's because of damage they caused to fishing gear (<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/sturgeon/biology.htm>). Commercial views of sturgeon soon changed however as their flesh and caviar became regarded as delicacies. Decades of exploitation combined with the pollution and habitat degradation from the industrial age caused sturgeon populations in the Great Lakes to plummet throughout the twentieth century.

Today, although the overall population is still only a fraction of what it once was, lake sturgeon in the Great Lakes appear to be making a comeback. In the waters connecting Lakes Huron and Erie, known as the Huron-Erie Corridor, sturgeon are supporting an exciting, new fishery.

Location

The epicenter of the lake sturgeon fishery within the Huron-Erie Corridor is the St. Clair River, where the presence of a self-sustaining sturgeon population including good numbers of all age classes, indicates that the population is healthy. There is a possession season for sturgeon in Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River open from July 16th to September 30th, immediately followed by a catch-and-release season which is open until November 30th. During the possession season, anglers in Michigan waters who have an all-species fishing license and sturgeon tag can legally harvest one fish per year between 42 and 50 inches. However, few sturgeon are harvested, as most anglers elect to release all sturgeon they catch. Many lake sturgeon caught by anglers are in the 48 to 60 inch range, but fish as small as 20 inches and fish exceeding 70 inches are caught every year. Anglers who keep a sturgeon during the harvest season must immediately affix their harvest tag to the fish and register it within 24 hours. Further registration details are available on the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) website.

The best areas in the St. Clair River to target sturgeon are often near eddies or downstream of shallow areas in the river that slow the main river current and concentrate food. Many areas of the St. Clair River have a flat extending from shore that is two to eight feet deep that abruptly drops off into 25 to 30 foot of water. The transition zone where the drop-off meets the main channel is often a very good area to set up for sturgeon. Good anglers monitor electronics in promising areas to find "the spot on the spot" that is concentrating fish and then anchor upstream, allowing them to drop baits back to the fish.

Tackle & Technique

Not unlike hook-and-line sturgeon fishing in other areas, the technique used on the St. Clair River involves presenting natural bait on the bottom. The most popular bait of choice is night crawlers, although many anglers use live minnows, cut-bait or a combination of all of the above. Availability and past success have made crawlers my favorite choice-I recommend having at least three dozen crawlers per angler for a four or five hour outing, as you will go through a lot of bait. Gobs of three or more crawlers are placed on a 4/0 to 6/0 octopus style or circle hook. The hook is attached to a three to four foot, 30 to 50 lb mono leader, which is tied to a barrel swivel and connected to the main line. For the main line, I use 50 lb braid for maximum sensitivity. Using the mono leader in combination with the braided line allows for the sensitivity of braid along with some stretch provided by the mono which is valuable early in the fight as these fish often jump immediately after being hooked.

The most popular rod and reel setups include six to eight foot medium-heavy or heavy action rods paired with a level wind reel. I use a 6'8 St. Croix Musky casting rod and a Penn 320 GTi reel. Sturgeon can be very big with a fish pushing 100lbs possible at any time. Using too light of tackle causes battles to be unnecessarily long, causing undue stress on the fish and limiting the opportunity to catch multiple fish in an outing. It is good practice for all lines to be reeled in immediately when a sturgeon is hooked-not doing so will ensure glorious tangles as big sturgeon will take you for a tour all around the back the boat crossing any line that is left in the way.

Most successful sturgeon anglers hold their rod to feel the subtle take of sturgeon. While they may be the largest fish in the Great Lakes, sturgeon also have one of the most delicate bites. They have sensitive barbells and can suck in and spit out a bait before an angler has time to take a rod out of a rod holder to set the hook. This is evidenced by the fact that lake sturgeon are hardly ever hooked deep-out of over a 120 sturgeon we've boated in the past few years, the hook has always been right in the corner of the mouth.

Another plus of holding onto the rod is detecting bites from smaller fish that steal your bait. No bait equals no sturgeon, so it is important to check often, especially when consistent small bites end suddenly. Experienced anglers can often tell the difference between the bite of a sturgeon and other fish. A sturgeon bite is no harder and certainly won't rip the rod out of your hands, but it is just different. When we take "sturgeon virgins" out, we instruct them to set the hook at every bite because it might be a 6 inch rock bass or a 6 foot sturgeon.

Timing

While the season opens in mid-July, fishing usually peaks after the first major cold front in late summer, which is usually around Labor Day. September is the most consistent month for producing fair weather and good fishing. Most sturgeon anglers on the St. Clair River fish after dark, although some anglers in the area have very good success during daylight hours. Wind and boat traffic usually settle down after dark, making this a desirable time for many anglers to be on the water. During the peak of the season, multiple fish nights are common with a good, four to five hour outing often producing two or three sturgeon along with numerous other species including rock bass, catfish and drum. Four or more

sturgeon in an outing is great, and does happen to anglers who are doing the right thing at the right time.

Handling

Proper handling of sturgeon is critical as the fish have the potential to grow very old and propagate for decades after being caught if given a chance. Plus, they can be caught over and over again. A tagged fish we caught in 2009 had been caught twice in the past 10 years. Caught fish should be kept out of the water as little as possible. Keeping a camera and measuring tape handy helps accomplish this. Also, always have fish handling gloves accessible when targeting sturgeon, as all sturgeon, especially smaller ones have very sharp, protrusions that will cut your hand if not careful. When holding sturgeon, best practice is to hold the base of the tail with one hand and place your other hand under the pectoral fins. **DON'T HOLD A FISH BY THE GILL PLATES.** When releasing the fish, hold the fish upright boat-side until the fish is ready to swim off. This can take two seconds or 20 minutes. Don't worry, the fish will let you know when it is ready to go.

Reporting Tagged Fish

The Michigan DNR has been tagging sturgeon in the Huron-Erie Corridor for several years. If you catch a tagged fish, write down the number of the tag, measure the length and girth of the fish and take note of the location you caught it. Tagged fish can be reported online at www.michigandnr.com/taggedfish/. Anglers who report a tagged fish will receive a lake sturgeon cooperator patch as well as a detailed history of the fish they caught. Reporting tagged fish is very valuable to fisheries biologists and also very interesting for participating anglers.

Safety

The St. Clair River is a busy waterway used by both commercial and recreational anglers. Be sure to have all required safety equipment easily available, including a spotlight which should be plugged in and within reach at all times when fishing at night. It is critical to be safe and prepared for anything because there is a good chance you will be sharing the waterways with others who are not.

The Future

The future looks bright for the St. Clair River sturgeon fishery. Research efforts to better understand the life history and habitat requirements of lake sturgeon in the Huron-Erie Corridor are ongoing. Habitat improvement projects, including construction of spawning reefs, promise to support improved recruitment. Management efforts to restrict harvest will continue to promote increased survival and higher numbers of spawning adults in the system. Finally, an active, grass-roots, angling conservation group like St. Clair River Sturgeon For Tomorrow is fostering a growing awareness of this unique sturgeon population and the exciting angling opportunities it supports.

Sturgeon fishing on the St. Clair River is exciting and any angler who likes catching big fish that fight hard and make spectacular jumps should give it a try. If you want more information on sturgeon fishing or conservation in the Huron-Erie Corridor, please visit www.stclairsturgeon.org. An affordable

membership will link you with the most serious sturgeon anglers in the area who will be willing to share their knowledge and help you experience this exciting fishery.

About the Authors

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Works Cited

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/lake-sturgeon_229770_7.pdf

