

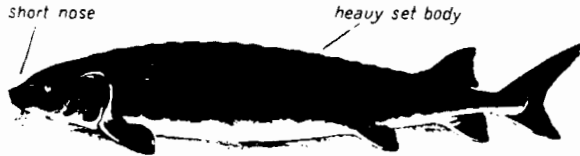
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# Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

## THE LAKE STURGEON



LAKE STURGEON



SHOVELNOSE STURGEON

\* The lake sturgeon was once a very common fish in many of our larger lakes and rivers, but today it is rare in most of its original range. This fish belongs to a family of quite primitive fishes whose internal skeleton is made up of cartilage instead of tough bone. Rather than scales, this fish is covered with a tough leathery skin and bony plates, making it a rather formidable looking creature. One could consider it the "Sherman Tank" of the deep. Another primitive characteristic of this fish is the shape of its tail. The upper lobe is longer than the lower lobe and is called a heterocercal tail by biologists. Sharks also have heterocercal tails. The lake sturgeon has several close relatives, the most impressive being the white sturgeon of western North America which gets up to 20 feet long and 1,000 pounds in weight. Imagine one of these monsters on the end of your line! But, like the lake sturgeon, the white sturgeon is also rare.

At one time sturgeon were considered trash fish and only tore up the nets of fishermen seeking walleyes. They were killed and dumped, fed to pigs, used to fire steam boilers, sold for ten cents each, etc. Their eggs were considered fit for hogs or fish bait. Just imagine caviar for hogs! A gelatin from the swimbladder was used for cement, also to set jellies and jams, and to waterproof textiles. The skin was tanned for leather. Later the value of sturgeon eggs, more commonly known as caviar, was realized and smoked sturgeon became a delicacy. Sturgeon were intensely harvested by almost every possible means, and by 1900 only small remnant populations remained. For example, the sturgeon catch from American waters of the Lake of the Woods was 1,300,000 pounds in 1893, and by 1903 the catch declined to a mere 45,239 pounds. As the sturgeon

catch declined, the fishing intensity increased and this valuable fish was almost exterminated like the buffalo of our virgin prairies.

This is a classic example of what over-harvest can do to a slow-growing animal like the sturgeon. This fish usually doesn't spawn until it reaches 20 years of age. Then it spawns only once every two to four years. They spawn in swift water with a rocky bottom at water temperatures between 55° to 65° in the spring. Early explorers report some of our rivers alive with this huge fish at spawning time. The eggs hatch in five to 10 days and the young grow to about five inches the first year. They live to be about 50 to 80 years old. However, the oldest known sturgeon was determined to be 154 years old. The record weight is 310 pounds, but today few sturgeon over 100 pounds are taken. The sturgeon has one very spectacular habit. It is able to leap completely out of the water and almost stand on its tail. It hits the water with a tremendous splash as the water flies as much as 15 feet in the air. It is as if some kind of medieval monster had disappeared.

The sturgeon is a bottom dweller with a sucking tube-like mouth on the underside. It feeds on small bottom organisms such as insect larva, snails, small clams and some plant material. It rarely takes other fish. The sturgeon has few predators in nature other than man. They can still be harvested in many areas but in very limited numbers. They are usually taken by spearing through the ice or hook and line in the fall. But always keep in mind the lesson we never seem to learn: Man has the ability to eradicate many animals; he also has the knowledge to preserve and protect them.

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