

# On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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## Sturgeon Record Falls 212 pound monster part of opening morning

By Dick Ellis



*Man's best friend? Copper begs to differ if Master Gary Schwantes of New Holstein thinks a first sturgeon in 30 years of spearing can take his place in the truck. The sturgeon weighed 84 pounds. Old copper looks to come in at a respectable 80 pounds or so. (Ellis)*

Driving north with the new day along Lake Winnebago toward Pipe, as far as the eye can see from horizon to horizon, shanty's dot the ice of Wisconsin's biggest lake; 10,194 shanties in fact on this opening day of the 2010 sturgeon spear season. Inside, in the dark, men and women caught up in a tradition of spearing have thrown back the trap doors and plywood that have covered the window to Winnebago cut in the floor, lowered decoys of every size and imagina-

ble design, and hung heavy iron spears above the hole in preparation for the pre-historic giant they are sure will appear this year. But really, just what are the odds? More than 10,000 ice shacks seem to indicate that collectively anyway...those odds are good. Much sturgeon will without doubt die on this February morning. Water clarity is excellent, especially on the northern half of the lake and like a veteran Wisconsin deer hunter, many of these seasoned spear throwers will not likely miss if

given the opportunity. Like the deer hunter too, patience is not a problem. Some of these veterans of Winnebago would take all of their vacations even over the three week seasons of yesterday, to stare down a hole into greenish-stained water and hope for a visitor. But ponder the size of Winnebago, and even those collective odds will fall again and 10,000 shanties seem but a sprinkle of sand on the hardwater. The Lake stretches from Appleton to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin largest inland lake at 10 miles by 30 miles formed from Glacial Lake Oshkosh 12,000 years ago when ice blocked water from entering Lake Michigan at Green Bay. With no outlet the glacial lake "ponded", leaving 88 miles of shoreline and an average depth of 15.5 feet and very little structural change.

For the spearers, this is a tremendous hunting ground to hold a big game quarry; the lake sturgeon that is the envy of the world. Some will be grateful if even if the minimum sturgeon of 36 inches swims in. The odds, certainly, are that there are many more relatively "small" fish. But what of a real monster. What of a sturgeon weighing 178 pounds, like the fish Dave Piechowski speared here for a new world record in 2006? Or a sturgeon over 200 pounds? State fisheries biologists have handled fish in spring spawning surveys for several years, but none has felt the end of a hunter's spear.

The ride continues on. Pipe is located



Ron Bruch, DNR Upper Fox-Wolf Fisheries Work Unit Supervisor, checks a sturgeon for stomach content at the Pipe registration station on the east side of Winnebago opening morning while media personnel look on. (Ellis)

roughly halfway “up” the big lake on the east side, one of many registration stations necessary to server thousands of spears on the vast body of water and the upriver lakes of Poygan, Winneconne, and Butte des Morts. At Pipe, I walk into the registration station and meet the DNR professionals who will weigh, measure and age the sturgeon, check for age, and sex the sturgeon and with spearer’s permission check stomach contents. Fisheries Program Specialist Al Blizel and Fisheries Technicians Bob Hoodie, Doug Rinzel and Tim Kroeff will be assisted by UW-Stevens Point Fisheries Students Colt Christopherson and Rebecca Pawlak in chores that will often leave them spattered in blood and up to the elbows in guts. What they do helps maintain the health of the population. It is a population that the experts believe is “at the top of its biomass” and nearing the carrying capacity of the system. It’s a nice problem to have, since not long ago biologists worried about the health of the population and were forced to shorten the season depending on harvest numbers and enforce a cap system.

The team will also check for PIT tags

on the fish, or Passive Integrated Transponders, which are imbedded under the skin of many of the sturgeon with a hypodermic needle during spawning and take the place of the previously used metal tags that too often became unattached over the years. PIT tags help track growth rates from the time the fish was tagged until harvest and the sturgeon’s journey since tagging and is important in determining population estimates.

After almost two hours, Jim Dehn of Fond du Lac brings in the first sturgeon, a 47 pound, 59 inch fish that he brought to surrender at the hole with the help of Jim Berres of Kewaskum. Berres saw the fish first over 14 feet of clean water after a few shad scooted from the area, and gave the warning. Dehn stood up with spear, and made the lethal shot.

“I shot a very big buck several years ago and this was every bit as exciting as that,” he said. “I’m still shaking.”

Gary Schwantes of New Holstein was hunkered alone over his window to Winnebago just 15 minutes when he speared an 84 pound sturgeon that dared to cross his path. Perhaps...this spearing is easy, a new observer to Winnebago might ponder. Until Schwantes tells shares that he’s been spearing for 30 years, and this fish is his first sturgeon.

“I said...is it big enough? Is it big enough? I’m going to take him...” Schwantes said, before letting the fish pass through high and releasing a perfectly thrown spear in 15 feet of water. “It sure made my heart go.”

“It’s probably spawned a few times already,” says a Fish Tech listening to the story. “They come into maturity at about 35 years. This one has been in the lake longer than you’ve been trying to spear her.”

In the end, it all comes down to numbers and odds, chances and luck. I have rubbed elbows with a very knowledgeable team of fisheries experts, the leader of this magnificent program; Ron Bruch, and two students from the UW-Stevens Point Fisheries program just beginning their professional journeys. I head south at the conclusion of day one and look west again to the sea of shanties now bathed in full light.

I reach home before the reports come over the line from Bruch’s office. After one

day of spearing, 68 juvenile females, 256 adult females and 191 males have been harvested on Lake Winnebago for a total of 515 fish, and 28 juvenile females, 38 adult females and 75 males have been speared on the upriver lakes for a total of 141.

And...the Wisconsin record has fallen. Ron Grishaber of Appleton has taken a 212 pound mammoth on opening morning of 2010, measuring in at 84.2 inches. Grishaber, just another dot on the ice, was in the perfect place at the time when the largest lake sturgeon in state history swam under his personal window to a very different world.

Long odds? Now that is more like a lottery win.

### A Conversation with Ron Bruch

Upper Fox-Wolf Fisheries Work Unit Supervisor Ron Bruch makes an appearance in Pipe, and rolls up his sleeves to help register fish. Bruch has steered this system fishery through good and bad to make the sturgeon population the envy of the world. But he places credit everywhere but on himself. Tomorrow, Sunday,



Gary Schwantes of New Holstein asks for a little help from UW-Stevens Point Fisheries student Colt Christopherson at the Pipe Registration station on Lake Winnebago opening morning of the spearing season when a reporter asks him to pose with his 84 pound, first-ever sturgeon.



*UW-Steven Point Fisheries students Colt Christopherson and Rebecca Pawlak draw a crowd of media and interested onlookers at the Pipe Registration station on Lake Winnebago opening morning as they work to check the stomach contents of a recently speared sturgeon. (Ellis)*

for the first time ever Bruch will be in a shanty on the upriver lakes, trying to spear one of the fish he knows as well as anyone alive.

“It all starts with these guys,” Bruch says, referencing his fisheries team. “They do everything necessary to make the fishery successful. This is a very unique situation. We have a huge lake with many different users focused on the same resource. We try to capitalize on the common denominator and manage the resource so that everyone can be satisfied. In many ways it’s easier than trying to manage somewhere like Vilas County with hundreds of lakes. We have Sturgeon for Tomorrow, Walleyes for Tomorrow, The Ottawa Fishing Club, Shadows on the Wolf, the Poygan Fishing Club; all these different groups full of people who are very good partners raising money and providing grass roots support.”

When asked if the system is nearing its carrying capacity with sturgeon numbers, he is non-committal. “The carrying-capacity is the kind of thing that is not static,” he says. “It varies from year to year, or decade to decade and century to century.”

10,860 licenses have been sold and another 500 licenses drawn through a lottery system on the upriver lakes from 4,228 applicants. Reflecting the coveted nature of the lucky eligible 500 upriver spearkers, a whopping 496 have actually purchased their license.

The upriver lakes guarantee a much higher success rate than spearkers on Winnebago. The Upriver water, he said, offers a blend of migrating adults moving from the big lake and staging to spawn in the river, while also serving as a nursery ground for younger fish. The result is more fish in shallow water.

“There’s a mix there of big fish and sub adult sturgeon beyond the legal size limit,” Bruch said. “That’s why the success rate on the upriver lakes is 67 percent while the success rate on Winnebago is 13 percent.”

### **Sturgeon Facts, Season Facts**


The Winnebago System, likely holds the largest natural sustaining lake sturgeon population in the world, and is used as an egg source for sturgeon reintroduction and rehabilitation projects throughout the fish’s original North American range.

Sturgeon are slow growing, long lived and late maturing fish. Both males and females will attain legal size in the spear fishery of 36 inches in nine to 10 years. Males and females generally grow at similar rates up to about 40 inches, after which females grow faster. Females live longer and attain much larger sizes, making up most of the population of fish over 60 inches. Females have the potential to live over 100 years and males over 80. Fifty percent of the females are mature at age 27 (55 inches) with 100 percent of the fe-

males mature at age 39 (63 inches). Fifty percent of the males are mature at age 19 (47 inches) with 100 percent of males mature at age 30 (50 inches).

To protect a fragile sturgeon population and in particular egg-bearing females, the DNR had adopted a cap season structure and closes the sturgeon season on Winnebago when the first of two conditions occur; at the end of the fishing day in which 100 percent of any one of the three Lake Winnebago harvest caps is reached or exceeded or, 24 hours from the end of the fishing day within which a harvest of 90 percent to 99 percent of any one of three Lake Winnebago harvest caps is reached.

The DNR will close the season on the upriver lakes when the first of the two following conditions occur; at the end of the fishing day in which 100 percent of any one of the three Winnebago system-wide harvest caps is reached or exceeded or, 24 hours from the end of the fishing day within which a harvest of 90 percent to 99 percent of one of the three Winnebago system-wide harvest caps is reached. After day one, Lake Winnebago is at 38.4 percent of its adult female harvest cap (343 under the 90 percent closure trigger and 410 below the 100 percent trigger). The Upriver Lakes are at 51.4 percent of their adult female cap, 29 under the 90 percent closure trigger and 36 below the 100 percent closure trigger. The largest male sturgeon ever recorded at 116.8 pounds and 71 inches has also been registered, part of a record 34 sturgeon fish greater than 100 ever harvested in one season, including 31 on Winnebago.

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*An endless shanty town of 10,194 shacks spreads across the ice of Lake Winnebago Saturday morning for opening day of the 2010 Sturgeon Spearing Season. (Ellis)*