

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Sturgeon Tales

Season, stories a Wisconsin heritage

By Dick Ellis



DNR Fisheries Technicians weigh, measure and sex sturgeon and check for disease as they are brought in for registration by spearers at stations all around Lake Winnebago and the upper lakes. The season reached the harvest cap on Winnebago and closed Saturday. The upriver lakes closed in mid-week after a February 14 start. (Ellis)



Aaron Karls of Stockbridge speared this 54 pound sturgeon Friday, February 20 on Lake Winnebago at 11:00 a.m. with his son, Ethan, 6, watching the whole show. Aaron has speared five or six sturgeon. (Ellis)



Fox Valley Student Cole Gudis of Ladysmith helped the DNR register sturgeon last week during the spearing season as part of his work toward a Natural Resources degree with the goal of becoming a conservation warden. (Ellis)

Stories here on the Winnebago ice during the sturgeon spearing season are not hard to find. 6,853 shanties speckled the ice during a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) aerial survey of Lake Win-

nebago and the upriver lakes of Poygan, Winneconne and Butte des Morts on opening day, Saturday, February 14. Tales are told here. And, they accumulate with the passing seasons.

Fourteen sturgeon, for example, were speared on opening day this year exceeding 100 pounds, with a 148 pound female taken on Lake Poygan by David Koball of Elkhart Lake the largest. Accord-

ing to DNR Sturgeon Biologist Ron Bruch, who spearheads (pun intended) this sturgeon management effort recognized around the world for the sheer wonder of it, ninety-one year old Aelred Schu-



A sturgeon like this one on the registration station table at Stockbridge after being speared on Lake Winnebago Friday will often use its sucker mouth to eat red worms buried in the mud or to capture shad. (Ellis)

macher of Hilbert speared a fish almost as old as himself, a 125-pound female registered at Stockbridge.

On Sunday, February 15, Amy Van Beek of Menasha speared an 80-inch, 168 pound female sturgeon that was the fourth heaviest and sixth longest fish recorded in the history of the Winnebago spear fishery. The heaviest fish is the current record of 188 pounds speared by Dave Piechowski of Redgranite in 2004. The longest was a 90 inch sturgeon speared in 1951 with no name of the spearer provided.

In sheer numbers surely, very few spearkers can surpass the stories told by Don Burg of Stockbridge. This reporter found the 75 year old spearer in the registration trailer at Stockbridge on the east shore of Winnebago Friday shooting the bull with DNR Senior Fisheries Biologist Kendall Kamke. He had already shot the sturgeon...speared the sturgeon...on opening day. It was in fact, Burg's 66th consecutive opening day spearing sturgeon on Winnebago.

"He's the patriarch," Kamke said simply. "Sixty-six years in a row."

According to the Patriarch, Don Burg's father Robert, born in 1890, had learned the art of spearing from his uncle, Charlie Bloom, and scored on his first fish in 1900. Stockbridge at the turn of the century, he said, was an Indian reservation with the local school comprised of

90 percent Indian students and 10 percent white. It was from the Indian spearkers, who huddled under robes and hides at the edge of the holes waiting for sturgeon that the Burg family also learned valuable tactics that would help tag many sturgeon across the decades.

The Indians, he said, mostly speared in March when ice was deteriorating and easier to chop through and when more mild temperatures closer to spring made the long vigils more tolerable. They also lay flat on their bellies on watch, which offered a much wider field of view than the spearker sitting over the hole could enjoy.

"I lay flat on the floor of the shack my whole life," said Burg. "Except this year. I'm 75 years old and I'm getting arthritis."

In the 1930s, Robert Burg would pull the sturgeon spearing shanty out on the ice of Winnebago with the family horses, walk the horses back home, and walk out again to spear. During the 1938 season, he said, Winnebago's water was crystal clear but despite keeping watch for each day in February, Robert Burg never saw a sturgeon. He speared a fish each of the first five days in March.

"That was back in the depression," Don Burg said. "Everybody lived on the sturgeon."

In 1944, when Don Burg was 10 years old and his brother Ben was 12, they joined their

father on their first sturgeon hunt. In the early years, sturgeon tags could be purchased, five for a quarter, and the Burg shack had 35 tags tacked above the hole awaiting fish to fasten to. In the early days too he said, there was little competition on Winnebago in terms of numbers of shanties placed for the spearing season.

"Maybe 15 shanties to the northwest of here," he said. "Fifteen shanties at Mud Creek and 10 near County Park. But my brother and I have been fishing for sturgeon ever since. I went into business on a mink ranch with foxes because I knew that I would be able to spear during the season. This year Ben got a 60 pounder and mine was 39 pounds. I waited 45 minutes on opening day and I had it."

The stories keep coming on the Winnebago system. Kamke reported 11 fish registered on this Friday as the harvest cap neared on the big lake, including a near 81 pound sturgeon taken by 16 year old Katie Leitner of Chilton. Her dad, Chris, had tagged a 77 pound fish a few days before. "A bunch of the Maders got fish," said Kamke, paging through the registration book that tells stories of its own.

To the south at the Pipe registration station, Chris Pickhardt of Fond du Lac watched as his 46 inch, 19-1/2 pound sturgeon was registered. The fish was speared on his third day out in very poor water conditions after two futile days on the west shore. His spearing partner, Kory Baker, had announced the sturgeon's approach as Pickhardt lay down in the shack.

"I said, 'yea right'," Pickhardt said. "The fish was five feet under the ice and I hit him right behind the head. "It was my first year, first fish and the last year I'm going to be doing it. It's too boring. I was on that ice shelf that broke off on Lake Erie last week when all those guys had to be rescued. That was more exciting."

To thousands of Wisconsin residents though, the sturgeon season will call them back again year after year. Like the deer season, it is a heritage, a tradition not to be missed.

In 2009, the season began February 14 with a slated run through March 1st unless predetermined harvest caps on the upriver lakes and Lake Winnebago to protect the resource were reached. The upriver cap, which included any of 70 juvenile females, 63 adult females, or 200 males, was reached Tuesday. The final day of spearing on Winnebago, with preseason caps set of 280 juvenile females, 567 adult females or 800 males, was Saturday, February 21. System wide, 1,512 fish were registered.

And system wide, thousands of new stories were registered in the hearts and minds of the spearkers of Winnebago. *W*