

# "A Good Way to Pass the Winter": Sturgeon-Spearing in Wisconsin

Ruth Olson

**M**y talk with sturgeon fisherman Bill Casper begins with an early history lesson. The healthiest population of sturgeon in the world is in Lake Winnebago, in eastern Wisconsin.

Lake Winnebago, one of the largest inland lakes in the area, is 11 miles wide and 28 miles long — but at its deepest point only 22 feet deep. "It was shoved in here by the glacier. You can tell by all the north-and-south running lakes in the Great Lakes area. Even Lake Michigan got sort of plowed in here. You can see where the drumlins in the land were formed by the great glacier pushing the earth and bringing stone and debris along down. Must have been quite a time." As the glacier melted, lakes formed and fish migrated into the area. Bill believes the sturgeon came into the Great Lakes and Lake Winnebago area from glacial runoff and by traveling north along rivers like the Mississippi.

Sturgeon have been around for 3 or 4 million years. They are a primitive fish, growing to be decades old and yards long. Bill describes them as "a very nice fish to eat — their meat is very good." They have marrow — a soft, cartilage-type bone — and gizzards, like dinosaurs and chickens. Covered with a tough hide, sturgeons' backs and sides are ornamented with "scoots" or hackles. Their heads are a heavy mass of bone.



*On opening day of sturgeon-spearing season on Lake Winnebago, thousands of fishing shacks are brought onto the ice with the help of four-wheel-drive vehicles and snowmobiles. Photo © Bob Rashid*

Until the 1800s, lake sturgeon were abundant in the Great Lakes. Although commercial fishing there almost wiped them out in the mid-1800s, it was a different story for the fish in Lake Winnebago. The lumber boom in the area resulted in a number of dams on the Fox River between the lake and Green Bay, practically trapping the crop of sturgeon in Lake Winnebago. The sturgeon still have ample place to spawn in the Wolf River, which runs 125 unrestricted miles from Lake Winnebago to the Shawano dam.

Spearing sturgeon on the lake has long been a tradition. Bill remembers going out with his Uncle Ambrose and compares those earlier seasons with the more restrictive season now, when individuals are only allowed one sturgeon each year:

He would come up from Milwaukee on weekends and stay at our home, and then he'd go fishing, and I'd always want to go with him. And so my mom said, "Well, you've gotta be eight years old at least." So when I was eight and he showed up, I started going with him... We'd leave when it was almost dark, and we'd go out to the lake. He had just a car... and we'd drive out on the lake, and shovel our way out there because there were no snow plows at that time. And we'd start fishing. Fish till he couldn't see anymore down in the hole... then we'd come back home and have our supper at our house.... It was at a time where you could get five fish. Well, some days we'd get two, but in those years there weren't so many sturgeon fishermen out there.



It's different today. Bill estimates that during sturgeon-spearfishing season, which runs from the second Saturday in February through the third weekend of that month, there can be 3,000–4,000 shanties on the lake, and of course the same number of pickups.

Twenty-four hours before the season starts, people can cut their hole in the ice —

producing a block about 4 feet by 6 feet, and 2 feet thick. To cut through that ice a chain saw with a special 42-inch-long ice bar is used. The ice is cut at an angle — narrower on top, wider on the bottom — to make it easier to push the ice block down into the water. They then use long pike poles to sink the block under the ice.

Once the hole is cut, the ice shanty gets dragged over it. A shanty typically is equipped with two doors in the floor that raise up to expose only the hole. Thus, the sturgeon spearer can sit on a nice, dry, carpeted floor, in a heated shanty, while waiting to spot a fish.

When Bill fished with his uncle, the hole would be sawed entirely by hand with ice saws, and, once they had a hole cut, they didn't move. Now, with a chain saw, a shanty can be set up in 20 minutes. Like most spearers today, Bill hires someone with a chain saw to cut his hole.

A big chain saw is so very expensive...so a guy will buy [one], and he'll go out there and cut holes for ten bucks apiece. People will leave their name at a



*Sturgeon fishermen push cut ice underneath the surface and away from the fishing hole on Lake Winnebago.*

Photo © Bob Rashid

tavern, or he's got a radio in his truck with a flasher on the roof, and you can usually spot him out there, and you just go over and say, "Hey, I'm over here. When you're ready, come cut a hole for me." And it works out very nicely. He has all the gear for sinking the block, he'll help you move your shanty on the hole, and then they leave and cut the next hole.

People may move three times a day, but Bill stays put. Sturgeon-fishing requires a lot of waiting. Some people wait for two or three years to see a fish. Some, in half an hour, see a fish or maybe two. Bill's had pretty good luck over the years getting his sturgeon.

Is there a good strategy for picking a place to set up? Bill says you try to get closest to the spot where you caught a fish last year.

Or you turn on your radio.... Jerry Schneider, the radio station up at Chilton,...has a sturgeon report every hour or so, where if you get a sturgeon in the morning and you take it in and

register, it'll automatically get called in to Jerry Schneider's radio station. So everybody on the lake will know who got it — there's no secrets any more. ... Then they may start moving.... If they know where I'm at, and they know someone else near me and if we happen to both get a fish, they'll say, "Wow, they're in there." Shanties will come in, and

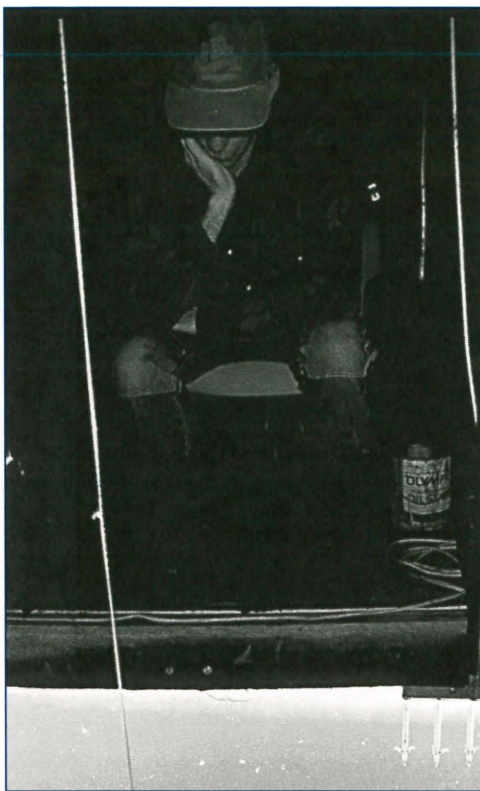
they'll be cutting holes around you, chain saws are going.... Some mornings you go in your shanty, and there's four shanties out where you are.... You come out in the evening, and you could be right in the middle of a big town.

But life on the ice is more sociable than competitive. People stop to visit each other's shanties, maybe sharing a beer while they sit and talk. Many people have CB radios in their shanties and chat back and forth. Like most shanties, Bill's is equipped not only with a heater but with a two-burner gas plate. "If you spend a whole day out there, you have to do a little cooking. If somebody visits, you gotta have a bowl of chili."

Most of the gathering is in the taverns in the evening. "It used to be years ago, the guy would walk in with a sturgeon on his shoulder and flop it on the tavern floor, even on the bar — everybody had a treat. Now, of course, they don't want you to do those things. It's always kind of a fun time, you know. And it's a good way to pass the winter in Wisconsin."

Bill's sister Mary Lou Schneider not only spears sturgeon, she carves the





Dennis Haensgen waits for sturgeon to swim by the hole in the floor of his sturgeon shack on Lake Winnebago. Photo © Bob Rashid

decoys she uses to attract them. She's gained local popularity as a decoy maker. Decoys are one of the most important elements in sturgeon-spearing. As Bill says, everyone has a favorite. They can range from brightly painted carved wooden fish weighted down with lead, to corn cobs, to kettles. "I've seen washing machine agitators down in the sturgeon holes.... Whatever got lucky a year or two ago, that's what [people] like to use."

While many people use spears with detachable spearheads (once the fish is speared, the handle comes free, exposing the rope attached to the spearhead), Bill does not.

Because when you first hit the fish, it will just stop. And if you bring it up right away, and you've got a gaff hook, depending on how you got him, you can take him right outside before he gets too

wild on you. If you just leave him alone for a little while and he starts coming to, they will take off like a wild calf on a rope. And they're all over the place, down in the mud and up against the ice, and down and up. You will not believe. And then when they come up into the shanty with you, there's water flying, water on the stove — you know, the tail is going! If you get a big fish, 80 pounds, every swat of the tail seems like 5 gallons of water comes up at you.

Yet one person usually can bring the fish out of the lake. In fact, one woman can do it. Mary Lou, who weighed only 115 pounds, speared one that weighed 117 pounds. She got it out by herself.

It's not just the good meat or the pleasure of the company that keeps people sturgeon-spearing. For many, to be out on the ice is a clear statement of who they are — as displayed through their ice shanties, for example. People put a lot of effort into personalizing their shanties. Bill's is a Green Bay Packer helmet. A lot of people come to see it, and on the lake they always know where he's at. "If you have your radio they'll say, 'He got one in the Packer helmet!'" But it's all right, Bill doesn't mind that people like to come and visit. "You just sit and talk and fish."

## Suggested Reading

Boyle, Robert H. "Friends of a Living Fossil." *Sports*

*Illustrated*, 4 March 1996.

Lyons, John, and James J. Kempinger. *Movements of Adult Lake Sturgeon in the Lake Winnebago System*. Madison: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 1992.

Priegel, Gordon R., and Thomas L. Wirth. *Lake Sturgeon Harvest, Growth and Recruitment in Lake Winnebago, Wisconsin*. Madison: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 1977.

## Sturgeon For Tomorrow

Bill Casper founded Sturgeon For Tomorrow (SFT) 21 years ago, after he decided there was a need to learn how to raise sturgeon artificially in case something happened to the healthy local fish population. He printed up bulletins, posted them in local taverns, and had 150 fishermen show up at his meeting. Eventually, with the help of William Ballard of Dartmouth College, who had studied sturgeon in Russia and Romania, SFT spearheaded the effort to hatch sturgeon artificially.

Today, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages to hatch more than 90 percent of fertilized sturgeon eggs. They have helped to restock sturgeon in the surrounding states of the Midwest and even Canada. SFT continues to work closely with the DNR, as members serve on a sturgeon advisory board and help staff a volunteer patrol every spring to stop poaching on rivers while vulnerable fish are spawning. When SFT started in 1977, there were 11,500 sturgeon in Lake Winnebago; now, helped by both a reduction in poaching and adding to the natural population, the population is estimated at 45,000–50,000 fish.