

Fish Topic by Species

Sturgeon

A Sturgeon Sleepover - by Denis Peirce, Columnist, The Union, Nevada County, CA

If you want a chance to catch the largest fish that swims in California Rivers, winter nights are your best bets. Sturgeon spend most of the year in San Francisco Bay and the lower Delta. They migrate up the valley-rivers beginning in January to spawn in the spring. The trigger to move upriver is rising water flows that come with heavy winter rains. Each storm series that raises the Sacramento River substantially will bring another surge of fish moving upstream. The time to fish for sturgeon is not during the high water. It is too dangerous to be out on the river then. Sturgeon fishing involves anchoring above a deep hole where fish will tend to hold. The Sacramento River is known for the number of large dead trees that are swept along with the current in high water. If a tree washes onto your anchor rope, it can pull your boat under in a manner of seconds. Prime time for sturgeon is after the storm surge recedes and the river level stabilizes.

Sturgeon are bottom feeders much like catfish. They root in clam beds, eat crawdads and will not pass up smaller fish dead or alive, but it has to be on the bottom. There at least three prime feeding times for sturgeon, sunset, moon rise and sunrise.

The allure of sturgeon is the long hard fight from a large fish. The rules allow only fish between 40 and 60 inches to be kept. Fish that are 5 feet and longer must be released. Sturgeon are slow growing creatures that do not reproduce until aged 5 to 10 years. A 6-foot-long fish will be about 25 years old. They can live to over 100 years. A 6-foot fish is considered a large one in the Sacramento River but on occasion larger ones are caught. Twenty years ago, an eight footer was caught in the Russian River.

Sturgeon fishing tips

- If you want to fish sturgeon on your own and don't have a boat, there are a number of riverside beaches that have deep holes within casting distance. A couple of the more popular are Sandy Beaches #1 and #2, about a half mile up river from Knights Landing on the west side of the Sacramento River.
- Sturgeon fishing has a number of special regulations to protect the fish from over-harvest, be sure to pick-up a Department of Fish & Wildlife regulations book free at a Rooster Tails Fishing Club's third Friday breakfast meeting.
- Be sure to use a single barbless hook, know how you measure the 40-to-60-inch length slot limit for a keeper, and the difference between white sturgeon (keeper) and green sturgeon (protected).

Sturgeon Fishing in Sacramento Area

The white sturgeon is sought as a tough-fighting sport fish and for their white boneless meat. The white sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*) ranges from Alaska to Ensenada, Mexico, but in California exists primarily in the Sacramento River region and the San Francisco Bay area. Fisherman can only catch legally the white sturgeon. Its close cousin the green sturgeon has been placed on the endangered species list. The white sturgeon has a large head with a wide and toothless mouth that has four barbels or barbs protruding on either end of the mouth. The body has no scales but scutes. Scutes surround the body like armor. Fish coloration ranges from light gray to dark gray, light brown and an olive color with white bottoms.

During spawning season a majority of the adults head up the Sacramento River to spawn during the months from early February to late May. You might also find sturgeon in the upper parts of the San Joaquin River and the Feather River. Spawning will take place in rocky areas with swift currents north of Sacramento in the town Knights Landing to 55 miles north around Colusa, California. The fish are very aggressive due to spawning and will grab bait ferociously. They will stay in the area till June and then head back down the river to the delta area of the Sacramento River. Fish will hang out till fall in the delta

around Antioch, Suisun Bay and the Glomar Buoys. After the fall the large adults return to the sea. During the fall and winter on the Sacramento River, sturgeon head to the deeper channels of the river.

No season exists for white sturgeon in the Sacramento River region. You can take white sturgeon all year long with these exceptions: Daily bag limit of one white sturgeon per day, three fish per year statewide, a size limit of no fish under 46 inches and no fish larger than 66 inches. All sturgeon caught must be by pole and line only; no gaffs, firearms, and nets may be used and there is also no trolling allowed.

How to Clean a Sturgeon

One thing you do need to know immediately is a sturgeon is quite similar to catfish foraging habits. After you have caught a sturgeon, the best practice is to cut the tail off and let the fish bleed out through the tail. Being bottom feeders, these fish suck in a lot of mud and other gunk. If you allow the blood to stay in the fish until you get home, the taste of mud and the other nasty things can get into the meat. It makes a big difference in the taste.

After you have cut off the tail. You will come to a cord. Leave the tail hooked to the cord. It will flap. Rinse the fish down completely with cold water. Now, using a large, sharp knife, cut through the neck area all the way around exposing the backbone. Use that knife to cut through that bone and discard the head. You will next cut into the top part running your blade along the whole body cutting off the top scutes. Do the same exact thing with the scutes on the sides of the fish's body. You now have strips of skin left. Use your knife and trim the starting skin near where the head was. Use a pair of pliers and pull that skin back towards the tail area. It should peel right off.

Now you will see there is a second layer of skin. Insert your knife making a slight hole at the top of the fish. Holding your knife nearly flat, cut through this layer of skin all the way to the tail area. Use the knife to create a small flap and grab the flap with the pliers. Do the same as the first layer of skin and pull the skin off each side. It may take several pulls to get all of the skin.

Now you are ready to pull out the cord with the tail. This will take a bit of strong-arming. Make sure the whole tail is cut leaving only the cord. Twist both ways holding the body with one hand and pulling the tail with the other. You will pull the cord completely out. You may need someone to hold the body of the fish while doing this, and at some point you may need to grab the cord further down and pull it out. Just keep pulling and it will completely come out.

There are several YouTube videos demonstrating 'how to clean sturgeon' including this video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=JshYXihb9_0

How to convert Sturgeon Roe into Caviar

When you catch a fish that may have eggs and you want to make caviar, clean the fish immediately, and if it does have egg sacks, put them in a plastic bag and on ice. As soon as you can, start the caviar. Slit the egg sacks, and clean the eggs from the membranes they are attached too. This is the hard part. Use your fingers, continually cleaning out the little pieces of membrane. A steel screen with 1/4 inch or so mesh can be a help. Through all of this process do your best not to break the eggs. Do most of this work in a bowl of clean, cold water, and when all of the membrane has been sorted out, and the eggs are clean, drain them well.

Measure the eggs, and for each cup of eggs, make a brine of two cups of cold water and 1/2 cup kosher salt in a glass bowl large enough to hold both brine and eggs. Add eggs to cold brine and swirl gently occasionally for 15-20 minutes. Drain in a sieve and refrigerate for at least an hour or two and preferably overnight.

Caviar is good on crackers, with baked or boiled potatoes, scrambled eggs, blinies, crepes, deviled-eggs and such. Decorate the caviar with a slice of lime, a bit of minced onion, or a little sieved hard-boiled egg yolk. Serve with ice cold vodka, champagne or a clean, cold Pilsner. If you like caviar, this is excellent.

How to Cook Sturgeon Fish

Sturgeon is a white, meaty fish and can be eaten year round. It contains large amounts of calcium, selenium, potassium and phosphorus. It is also rich in vitamins A, B6 and B12c. Sturgeon can be paired with rice, vegetables or eaten alone. With less than 20 minutes cooking time and the right combination of ingredients, you can enjoy a sturgeon delicacy any night of the week. There are several ways to prepare Sturgeon from baking to barbequed on a grill. Google cooking sturgeon recipes to choose a method that best suits you.