

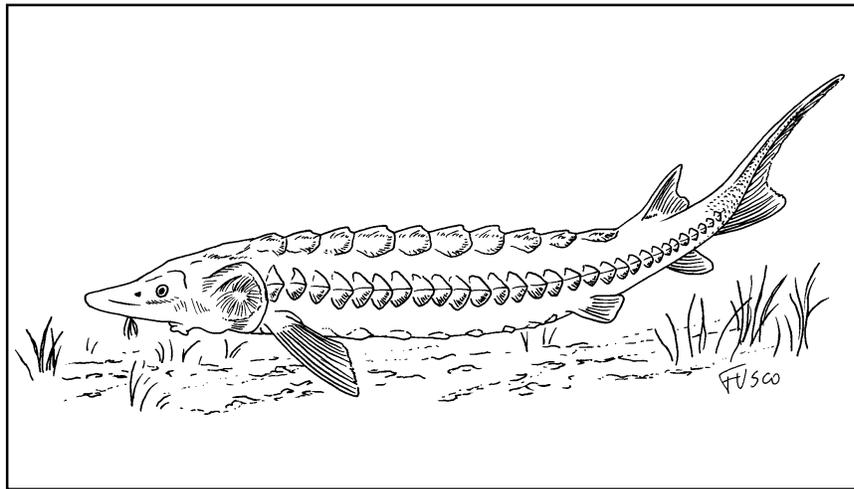
WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

ATLANTIC STURGEON

Acipenser oxyrinchus

THREATENED



Habitat: Main channel of large rivers, estuaries and open ocean.

Weight: Adults, up to 800 pounds.

Length: Adults, up to 12 feet.

Life expectancy: Ages from 50 to 75 years have been reported.

Food: Mollusks, worms, snails, invertebrates, shrimps, small bottom-dwelling fish and insect larvae.

Status: State threatened in inland (fresh) waters.

Identification: Sturgeon are primitive-looking fishes, with a heterocercal tail (the upper lobe is much longer than the lower lobe) and a body covered with 5 rows of large bony plates. These heavy, cylindrical fish have an elongated bony snout, with a tubelike mouth located on the underside of the head. The mouth protrudes several inches when the fish is feeding. The Atlantic sturgeon ranges in color from brownish-gray to blue-black on the back and upper side, shading to white on the belly.

Any sturgeon found in Connecticut waters that is more than 4 feet long is an Atlantic sturgeon. Atlantic sturgeon can be distinguished from shortnose sturgeon by their relative mouth width. Atlantic sturgeon have mouth widths (inside the lips) that measure less than 50 percent of the distance between the eyes, while shortnose sturgeon have large mouths that measure greater than 60 percent of the distance between the eyes.

Range: Atlantic sturgeon range along the entire east coast of North America, from the St. John River in New Brunswick, Canada, to the St. Johns River along the east coast of Florida. A separate subspecies, the gulf sturgeon, is found along the west coast of Florida and throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Atlantic sturgeon native to Connecticut waters are believed to be extinct.

Reproduction: Atlantic sturgeon are anadromous, entering large freshwater river systems to spawn during the spring. Only a few states still have spawning populations of the Atlantic sturgeon. The Hudson River in New York has the only spawning population in New England.

Reason for Decline: Populations of Atlantic sturgeon have declined due to overfishing, loss of habitat, limited access to spawning areas and water pollution.

History in Connecticut: Atlantic sturgeon once supported a commercial fishery in the Connecticut River, but the lack of reliable records makes it difficult to estimate the size of the population at that time.

Interesting Facts: Sturgeon are among the oldest living species of fish. They have retained many primitive characteristics, suggesting what fish may have looked like during the age of the dinosaurs. The almost two dozen species of sturgeon can only be found in the Northern Hemisphere. Seven of these species occur in North America.

During the summer, juvenile Atlantic sturgeon can occasionally be found in the lower portions of the three major rivers in Connecticut. However, these are sexually immature fish from the Hudson River that only stay a few months before heading back out to sea.

The size of Atlantic sturgeon at sexual maturity is approximately 6 feet. Age at that size varies by sex and latitude. Females are generally older than males of a similar size and are thought to live longer and grow larger than males.

Atlantic sturgeon of all sizes are seen or captured in Long Island Sound. The Sound may be an important

feeding or resting area on the way to and from spawning areas. Occasionally adult-sized (6 or more inches) sturgeon are seen in the rivers of Connecticut. It is believed that these fish are simply foraging or perhaps lost, having made a wrong turn.

Sturgeon are occasionally seen jumping clear out of the water (breaching). It is unknown why sturgeon breach, although it has been suggested that they may be attempting to rid themselves of parasites.

Protective Legislation: *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-112-45(1) and 26-311.

What You Can Do: Some sturgeon are unnecessarily killed by people wanting to learn the identity of the fish. Become familiar with various fish species by consulting identification keys and pictures before going fishing. Return all live sturgeon to the water after capture. All dead specimens should be reported to the DEP Fisheries Division. If you catch or observe a sturgeon, please report it to the Marine Fisheries Office (203-434-6043). It is illegal to keep any Atlantic sturgeon taken in inland waters. Atlantic sturgeon larger than 6 feet that are seen in inland waters may be attempting to return to spawning areas and should not be disturbed.