

Wisconsin River sturgeon-restoration project holds promise

By Jim Servi
Contributing Writer

Merrill, Wis. — Lake sturgeon longer than 50 inches were netted in last fall's population assessments on three "mid-state" Wisconsin River flowages, and years of work to restore sturgeon from the Petenwell Flowage up to Merrill should pay off soon if these maturing fish pull off successful spawns in the next few years.

Tom Meronek, of Wausau, is the DNR's Marathon County fisheries biologist and a member of the DNR's sturgeon team. Meronek is hopeful that the sturgeon are "almost to the point of reproduction, but the question remains unanswered whether they actually reproduce or not at that point."

Last fall, DNR crews netted sturgeon in three locations — Steven's Point Flowage, Petenwell Flowage, and Kilbourn Flowage in October and November.

The Kilbourn Flowage, in Adams and Juneau counties,

saw the most — and largest — fish netted, with 93 sturgeon collected, the longest measuring 51½ inches. The average length was almost 41 inches, and 63 percent were longer than 40 inches.

The Petenwell Flowage had an average of 40¼ inches for the 64 fish that were netted, with a fish that was just shy of the 50-inch mark as the largest. A whopping 69 percent extended past the 40-inch mark.

The Stevens Point Flowage was a little behind in numbers and size. The crew netted 31 fish and found a maximum length of 43 inches and an average of 35½ inches. Only 13 percent of those collected were longer than the 40-inch benchmark.

Sturgeon might be big fish, but they're not necessarily easy to find. It's not as easy as just throwing out a net and catching fish. First, crew members thoroughly scout the area to make sure there are few stumps in the area and then they stretch out 900 feet of gill nets. They work in a team of two boats — one to lift

and check the nets and the other to measure, tag, and collect pectoral fin bones in order to estimate fish ages later on. The nets are checked every 24 hours for three days.

The DNR began restoration efforts of lake sturgeon on sections of the Wisconsin River near Stevens Point in 1991. Adults were transplanted, but quickly returned downstream by moving through dams. In 1997, the DNR collected eggs from lake sturgeon below the Kilbourn dam in Wisconsin Dells and raised them at the Wild Rose fish hatchery. Since that time, more than 250,000 lake sturgeon fingerlings have been released as 5- to 6-inch fall fingerlings on the stretch of the Wisconsin River above the Kilbourn dam all the way north to the Merrill hydro dam.

An additional 2,800 yearling lake sturgeon were implanted with PIT (passive integrated transponder) tags and stocked between Merrill and Stevens Point. These PIT tags allow researchers to monitor movement and validate ages during nettings. Biologists have used the age and PIT tag information to confirm that lake sturgeon have survived from the first stockings in 1997.

As far as reproduction, Meronek said, "The males are ready right now and females are typically ready in 20 to 25 years, which means we're nearing that point."



Above: DNR fishery crew members collect eggs from Wisconsin River female sturgeon. **Inset:** DNR fishery crew members attempt to collect milt from a male sturgeon.

There is still a question of whether the sturgeon will stay in the relatively short, broken segments of the river since they have a "strong instinct to move as they mature," Meronek said.

There have been sturgeon found on trash racks of the dams on the Wisconsin River, but during high water in the spring they are able to move freely through when the spillway gates are fully opened.

Meronek receives a fair number of angler reports of sturgeon being caught below Lake Dubay, in Lake Wausau, and below the Merrill dam. Although it is still early in the process, Meronek said, "There is some potential for a hook-and-line fishery in the future, perhaps with a quota system, but first we would like to document natural reproduction."

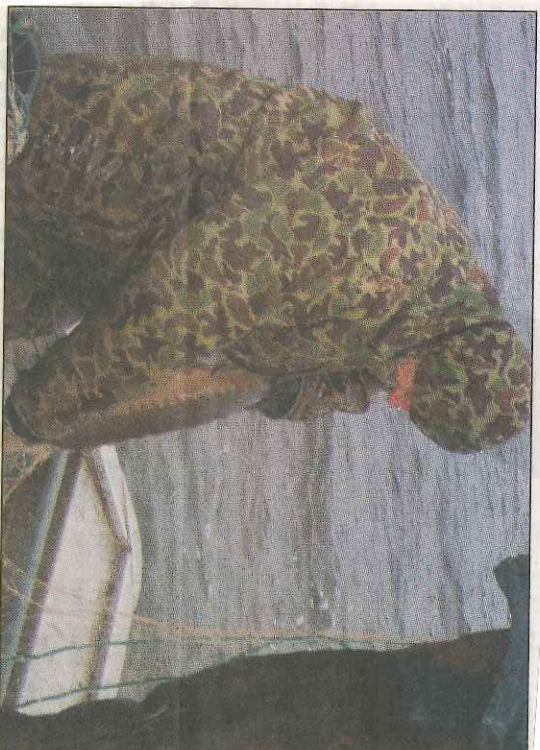


DNR fishery crew members have been stocking sturgeon fingerlings in the Wisconsin River each fall since 1997 in hopes of restoring the unique fish between the Petenwell Flowage and Merrill.

Photos courtesy of the Wisconsin DNR



The area below the Kilbourn dam on the Kilbourn Flowage is one spot where DNR crews monitor the growth of lake sturgeon.



DNR fishery crew members remove sturgeon from the gill nets used to capture fish in the spring.