

Meet the Gars

Distinguishing the four types found in Kentucky

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Gars are often called living fossils because they are among the planet's oldest groups of fishes: they existed more than 200 million years ago. Gars, which belong to the family Lepisosteidae, have long and slender bodies, beak-like jaws and large, diamond-shaped scales. The word "gar" is the Anglo-Saxon word for "spear."

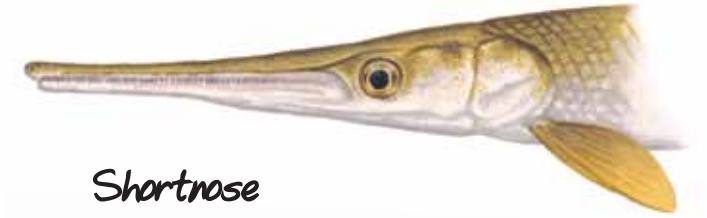
Kentucky has four native species of gar: alligator gar, spotted gar, shortnose gar and longnose gar.

Longnose gar have an extremely long and narrow snout. They can grow to 6 feet and weigh 50 pounds. The longnose gar is common throughout the state.

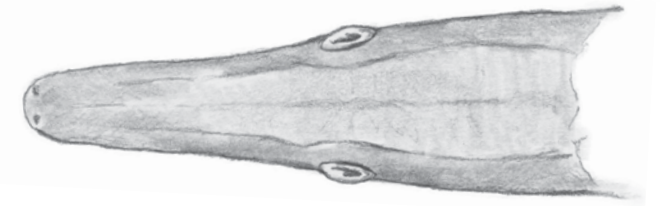
The alligator gar is the largest. It can reach 9 feet long and weigh up to 300 pounds. Unlike other gars, it has a short, broad snout and heavy body. Alligator gar once occurred in the Ohio and Mississippi river areas of western Kentucky. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources is working to re-establish native populations to these habitats.



Spotted

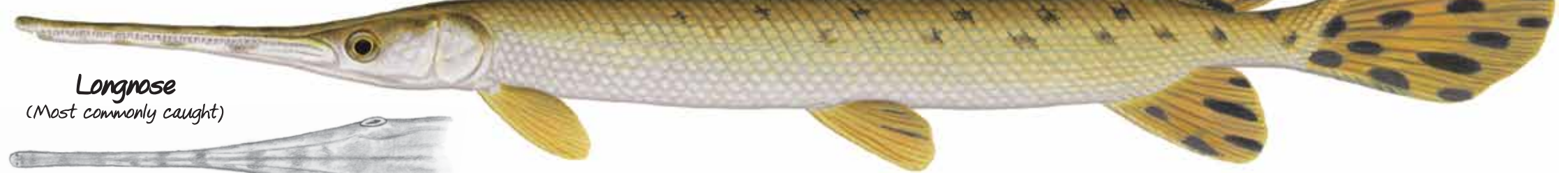


Shortnose



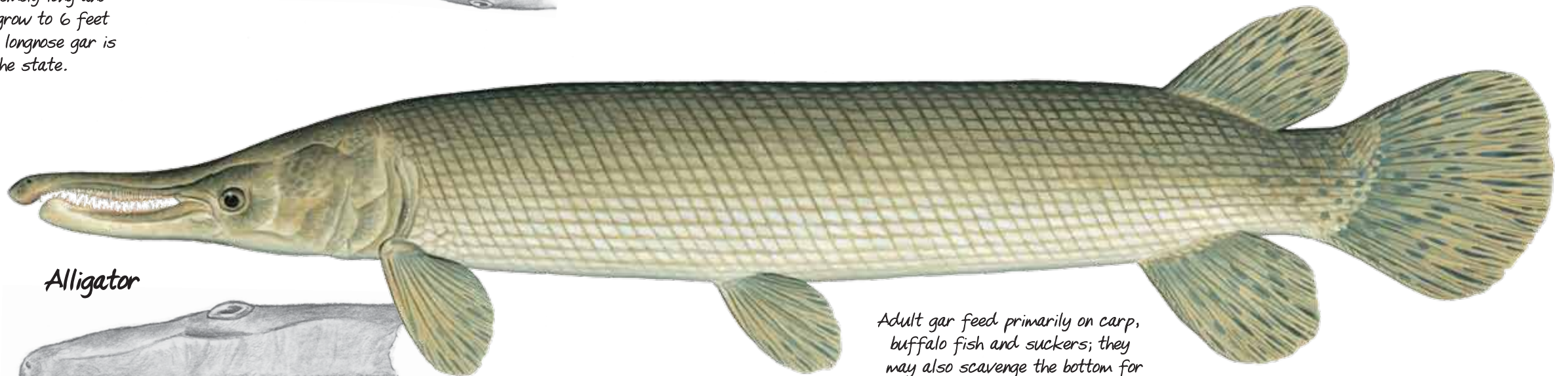
The spotted gar has a unique pattern of large spots on the top of its head and body. The shortnose gar is similar to the spotted gar, but it lacks spots on its head and body. Both species are usually less than 3 feet long and weigh less than 10 pounds. Spotted gar and shortnose gar occur in the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in western Kentucky, and the lower Green River basin.

Gars live in a variety of habitats, including slow-moving rivers, oxbows and reservoirs. They can survive in water with low oxygen levels because they have a lung-like swim bladder which allows them to rise to the surface and gulp air.



Longnose

(Most commonly caught)



Alligator



Adult gar feed primarily on carp, buffalo fish and suckers; they may also scavenge the bottom for fish carcasses. On rare occasions, an alligator gar may eat waterfowl or a small mammal.