

Lake Sturgeon

Swimming fossils return to Kentucky

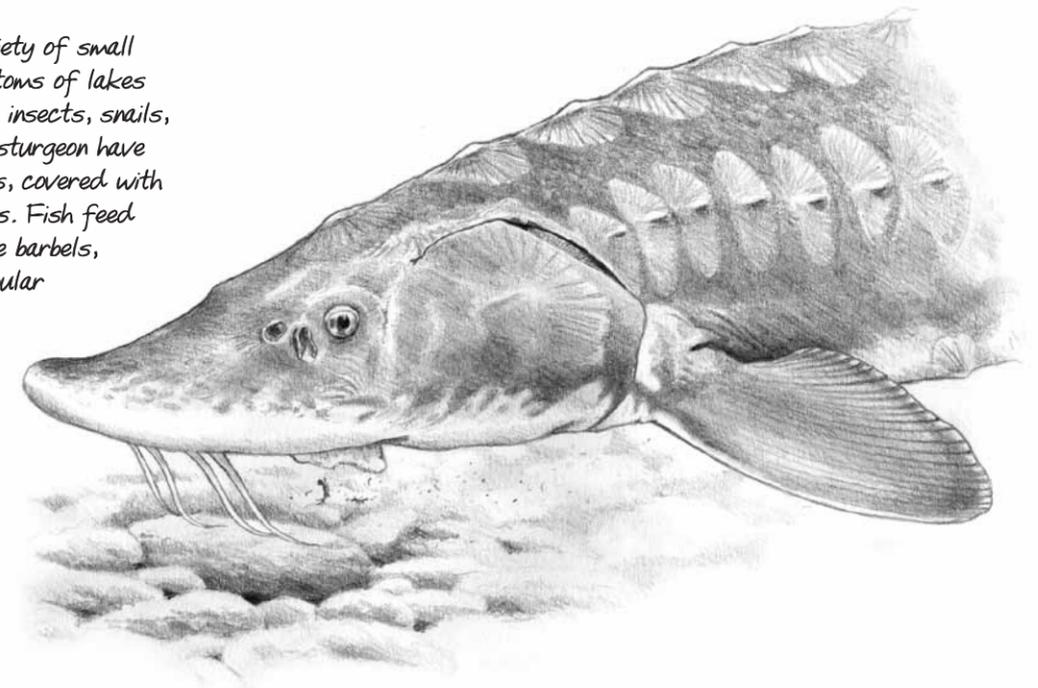
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Lurking in deep channels and pools of large rivers and lakes is one of the largest and oldest freshwater fishes in North America. The lake sturgeon is truly a giant among our native fish fauna, reaching a length of over 7 feet and weighing more than 300 pounds. Sturgeons are considered living fossils, having been around for about 350 million years.

Until the early 1900s, lake sturgeon were plentiful in the Mississippi, Ohio, Cumberland and Tennessee river drainages. By 1950, commercial overharvest, pollution, dam construction and river channelization eliminated most of the lake sturgeon populations in the southeastern U.S. The last lake sturgeon seen in Kentucky was in the Cumberland River below Cumberland Falls in 1954. Efforts are currently underway in Kentucky and surrounding states to restore this unique and important component of our aquatic ecosystems.

Lake sturgeon feed on a variety of small invertebrates living on the bottoms of lakes and streams, including aquatic insects, snails, leeches and crayfish. Lake sturgeon have four fleshy barbels, or feelers, covered with taste buds under their snouts. Fish feed by raking the bottom with these barbels, then rapidly extending their tubular mouths to suck in food.

The lake sturgeon is a slow-growing, late-maturing species that does not spawn every year. Males, which can live 60 years, participate in spawning every 2-4 years. Females, which grow larger than males, spawn every 4-8 years and live 80-150 years.



The lake sturgeon has a heavy, torpedo-shaped body lined with five rows of bony plates, or scutes. It also has a cone-shaped snout and a protractible, sucker-like mouth. Its tail has a longer upper lobe, similar to that of a shark. Young fish have plates bearing sharp, pointed hooks. With dark brown blotches covering their bodies, young sturgeon are more boldly marked than adults. As they grow, they lose their spiny appearance and become plain gray to olive-colored.



Lake sturgeon may migrate more than 100 miles to spawn. Spawning occurs in groups over shallow, gravel shoals of rivers or rocky shorelines of lakes. During this process, males thrash their tails and sometimes leap entirely from the water. One or more males will flank a female, ready to fertilize her eggs as soon as she deposits them on the rocky bottom. Females may lay up to 700,000 eggs in one spawning season.

