

Alligator Gar

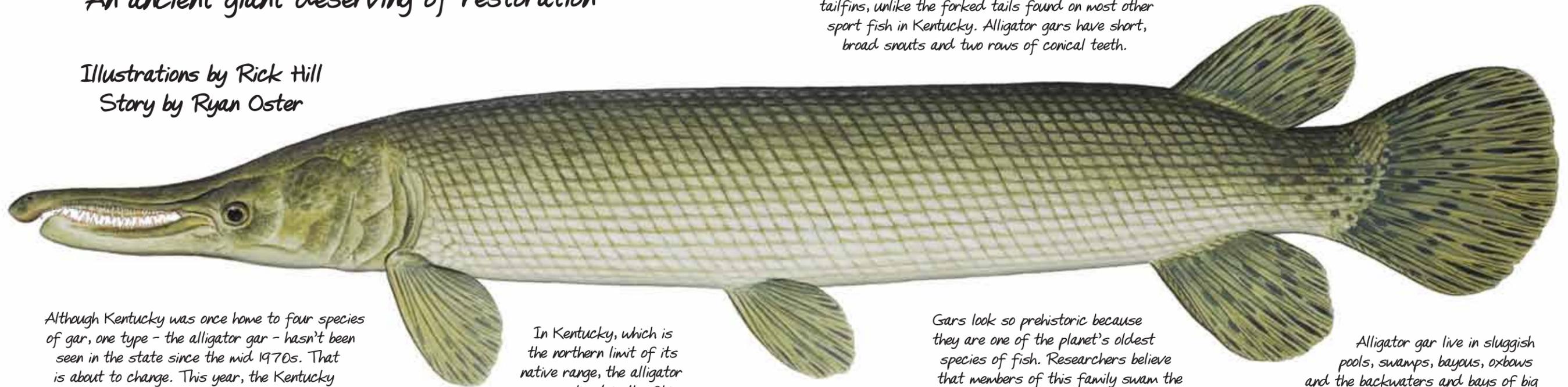
An ancient giant deserving of restoration

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Story by Ryan Oster

Alligator Gar (*Atractosteus spatula*)

The word "gar" is Anglo-Saxon for "spear" or "lance." Gars are long, slender fish with a pronounced bony snout full of sharp, conical teeth, and sharp, interlocking bony scales. They generally are green or gray on top, gray or yellowish on the sides, and have white bellies. Gars have rounded tailfins, unlike the forked tails found on most other sport fish in Kentucky. Alligator gars have short, broad snouts and two rows of conical teeth.

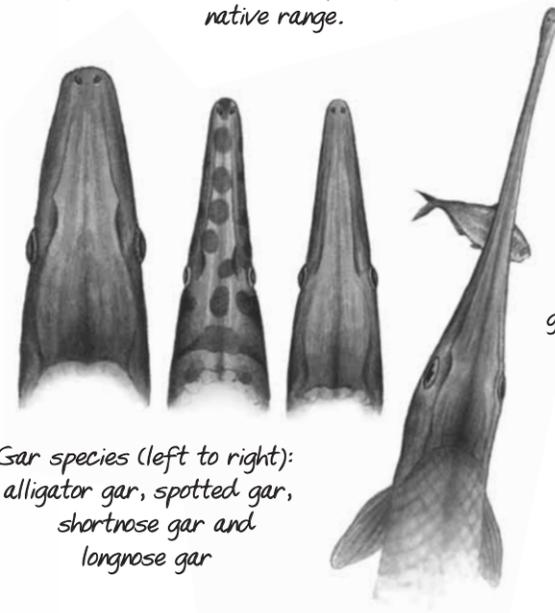


Although Kentucky was once home to four species of gar, one type - the alligator gar - hasn't been seen in the state since the mid 1970s. That is about to change. This year, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources will begin reintroducing alligator gar fingerlings to far western Kentucky, part of their old native range.

In Kentucky, which is the northern limit of its native range, the alligator gar once lived in the Ohio, Mississippi, Cumberland and Tennessee river systems. The alligator gar disappeared from Kentucky because of habitat destruction, over-harvest, decreased spawning habitat and lack of access to floodplains. Relatively stable populations of alligator gars now occur only sporadically in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

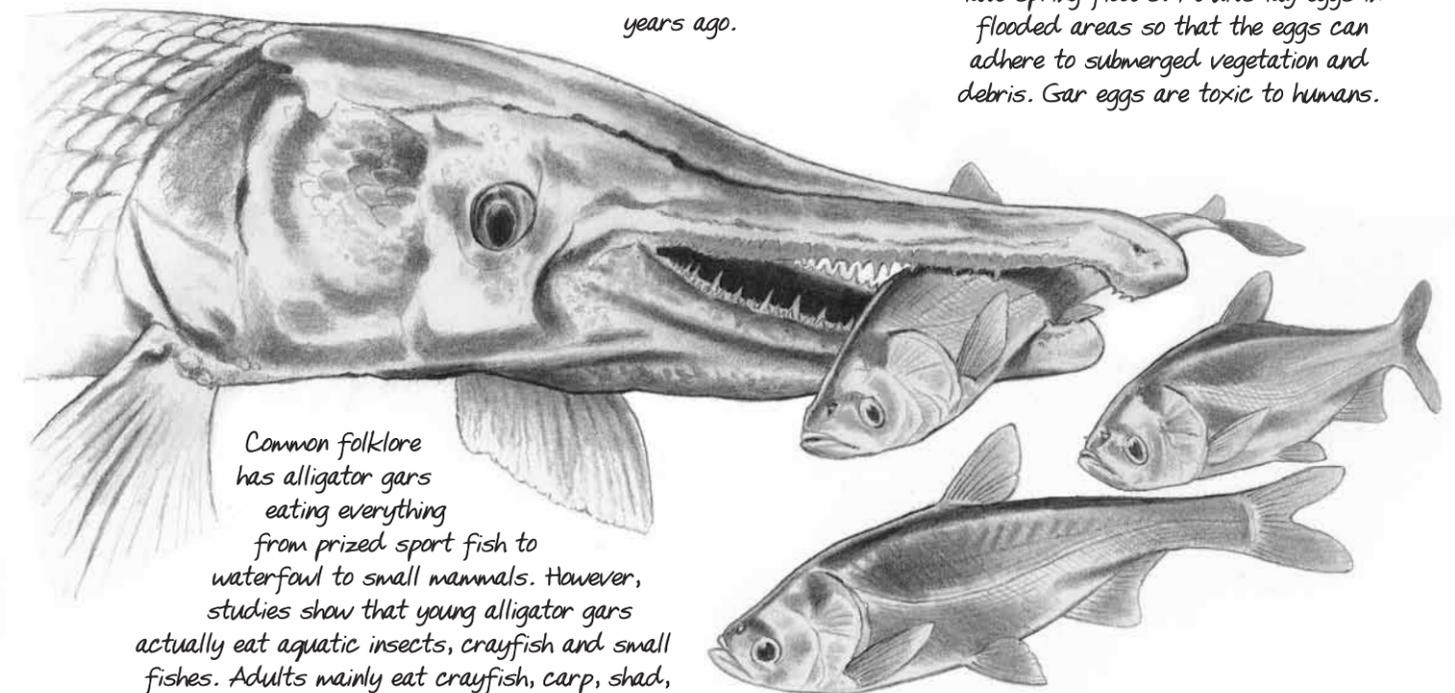
Gars look so prehistoric because they are one of the planet's oldest species of fish. Researchers believe that members of this family swam the warm shallows when giant reptiles walked the earth more than 245 million years ago.

Alligator gar live in sluggish pools, swamps, bayous, oxbows and the backwaters and bays of big rivers. Spawning typically occurs during late spring floods. Adults lay eggs in flooded areas so that the eggs can adhere to submerged vegetation and debris. Gar eggs are toxic to humans.



Gar species (left to right): alligator gar, spotted gar, shortnose gar and longnose gar

The alligator gar is the largest of the living gars and one of the largest freshwater fishes in North America. These fish can grow 10 feet long and weigh more than 300 pounds. Female alligator gars, which can live past 50 years, can reproduce when they reach 11 years old. Males live about half as long, and can reproduce at 6 years old.



Common folklore has alligator gars eating everything from prized sport fish to waterfowl to small mammals. However, studies show that young alligator gars actually eat aquatic insects, crayfish and small fishes. Adults mainly eat crayfish, carp, shad, suckers and the occasional fish carcass.