

Fishing

FOR HUGE STURGEON IN THE COLUMBIA GORGE

There's nothing quite as exciting as landing one of these prehistoric-looking fish on the Columbia.

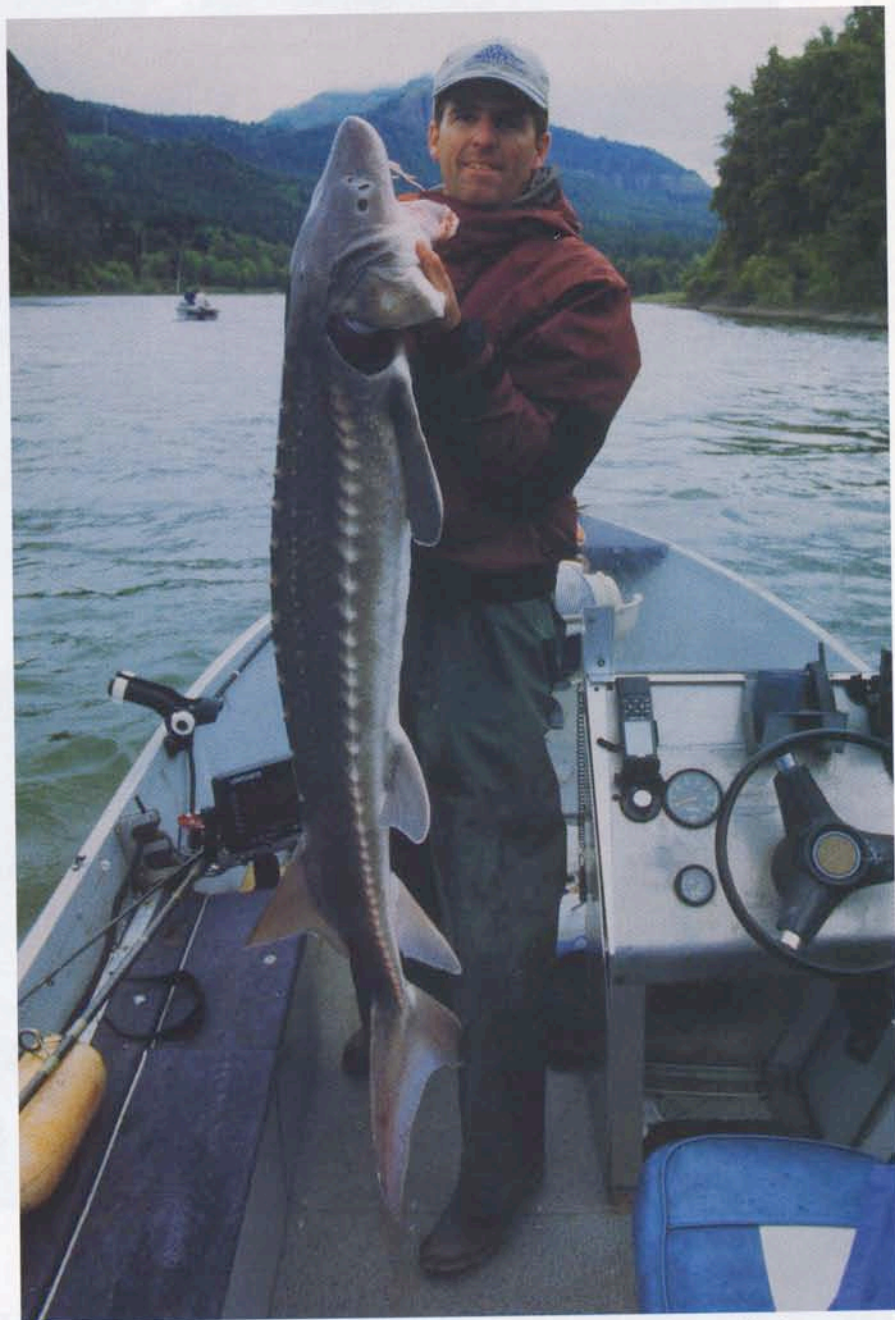
*Story and Photos
by Robert McMichael*

UNDER A BLUE sky one June morning, I watched my fish biologist brother fillet a 20-inch-long shad, thread the heavy duty nylon leader through and around the fish like you'd tie up a pork roast, and attach a really big hook to the line coming out of the shad's mouth. Then he dropped this elaborate bait from his motor boat into the Columbia and waited—for about five minutes.

After sucking the roped-up shad off the river bottom and feeling the resistance from the fishing line, the sturgeon pointed its nose skyward, propelled itself through 30 feet of water, blasted most of its enormous body vertically out of the river, and landed on its side with a splash like a Ford Fiesta dropped from an airplane. Fifteen minutes later, after being pulled downstream nearly a mile, Geoff landed the huge fish. The nine-footer weighing about 400 pounds unhooked itself just as Geoff pulled it alongside the boat by its enormous mouth.

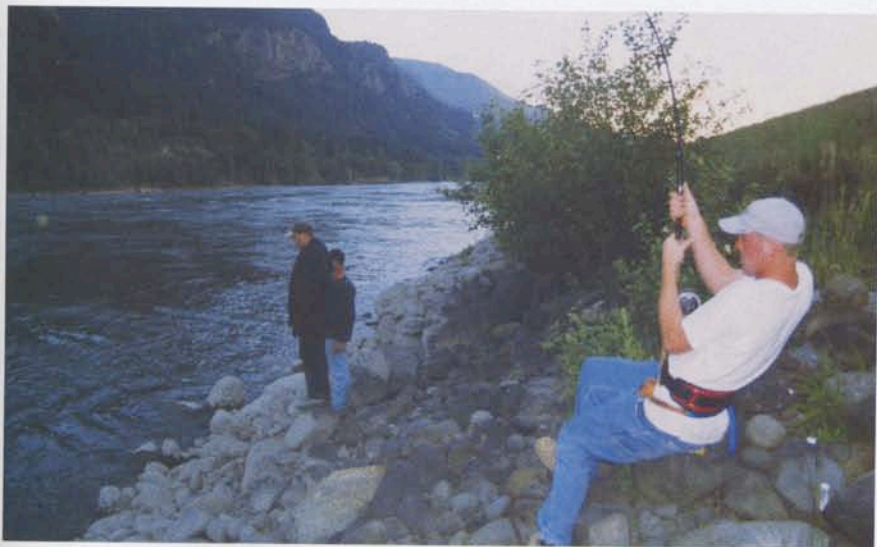
The Columbia Gorge is one of the best and most beautiful places to catch these aquatic relics. Sturgeon season on the Columbia runs year-round, but the big ones can be caught here from May to August. But fishing, I have to remind myself, isn't everything. Where you do it matters. If you drive 40 miles east of Portland on I-84 traveling upstream along the river, the Columbia Gorge will show you one of the most exotic landscapes in North America. The enormous basalt rock formations along the river make me think of countrysides I've seen only in photos. These giant rocky cliffs dropping steeply toward the river are covered with dense stands of huge, conical dark green Douglas fir. And—along the water's edge—thick layers of old alder and cottonwood.

First emerging on earth about 250 million years ago, the 29 extant species of sturgeon remain essentially unchanged. Protected by coarse skin and five rows of cartilaginous ar-



Above: Author poses with keeper (between 42 and 60 inches) caught below Bonneville Dam.

Right: These bank fishermen fought a large sturgeon for 3 1/2 hours without success.



mored plates, these fish look as prehistoric as they actually are. Like salmon and the shad we used for bait, sturgeon are anadromous—born in freshwater, living in the ocean a good part of their lives, and returning to their natal rivers to spawn.

Of the two major species of sturgeon in the Columbia River, anglers seek the white sturgeon over the green both for its size and its taste. The meat is exquisite! The largest white sturgeon on record in North America—caught in the 1920s—measured 20 feet long and topped the scales at just over one ton. Fishers in the Columbia River routinely catch “oversize” white sturgeons of 10 to 12 feet weighing 500 to 800 pounds. But you can’t keep the huge ones. Current fishing regulations on the Columbia allow recreational fishers to keep 10 sturgeons per year between 42 and 60 inches long—sturgeons that are too young to breed. So you won’t find any caviar in any “keepers,” which is the point: they want to conserve the larger breeding fish to maintain the healthy population in the river today. Sturgeons also live a long time with a potential life span of well over 100 years.

I know I’m almost there when I see the exit for Cascade Locks. I cross the Columbia on the Bridge of the Gods, and, halfway across enter Washington and settle on the riverbank to wait for Geoff and his friend Fred (another fish biologist) in the balmy, delightful weather. As dusk wanes, Geoff and Fred arrive and I follow them to our campsite in Beacon Rock State Park.

The next morning, just below Beacon Rock, we anchored for the real experience. The rock—the world’s second largest monolith (next to the Rock of Gibraltar)—served as an important landmark for Native Americans traveling downriver to the coast to trade. Now it marks the upper fishing boundary, the water upstream to the dam serving as a spawning sanctuary for sturgeon that spawn there from April through August.

As the rising sun works to lift the mist from the water, I keep thinking that the scenic part of fishing for sturgeon here in the Gorge is unbeatable. But the fishing part of sturgeon fishing takes over when you see the rod twitch in response to their nibbling the shad bait. They’ll nibble at it for some time before actually committing and sucking the bait deep into their mouths, which sets the barbless hook. Then, as Geoff’s first sturgeon did, they rip out a lot of line very quickly and usually jump. At about noon I hooked my first sturgeon, which took so much line out so quickly that Geoff

told me to tighten the drag on the reel to create more resistance. I must have tightened it too much because a moment later the line snapped and the fish was gone. By dusk we had snapped three more big fish off and called it a day.

Minutes after we dropped the bait the next morning, my rod twitched and then instantly doubled. A good start! We all waited to see a high-jumping sturgeon, but several minutes passed with no jump. Anxious from having snapped off four big sturgeons yesterday, I thought this one had shaken the hook loose, but upon cranking in some line I still felt the monster.

At the 10-minute mark it still had not showed itself. After 26 biceps-burning minutes and feeling we were about to get our first glimpse of this thing, the line snapped like a tiny hair trying to tow an elephant. The rod jerked straight,

quiet, and empty in an instant. As we motored back up to our anchor I kept my head trained on the river below hoping to see the behemoth. Nothing doing.

An hour later Fred snapped off our fifth consecutive large sturgeon, so we headed over to The Fishery, a riverside tackle shop, and installed heavier line on our reels. I begged some super heavy-duty braided leader material from a skinny guy with a fancy boat who told us “This ain’t trout fishing!”

Fred soon hooked another big sturgeon, which did the spectacular leap and splash. This made our seventh “oversize” hook-up, and we still had landed only the very first one. Fred pumped and reeled furiously, his face turning beet red and enlarging considerably. Sweat beaded at his temples, which looked ready to explode.

Twenty minutes later we finally landed that elusive sturgeon. Geoff had it by its cavernous mouth, the fish lolling about on its back next to the boat, calm as a kitten sleeping in the sun. It’s remarkable how docile these giant fish become when you get them up to the boat—they turn onto their backs and do not struggle. We took a bunch of pictures, Geoff trying in vain to move the weight of the nine-foot-long fish alongside the boat so we could get a photo of the entire thing. We removed the hook from its mouth and the fish slowly pointed itself downward and glided silently back to the river’s bottom. We looked at one another, shaking our heads, catching our breath, and thinking about next time. □

Robert McMichael teaches history at Boise State University. He writes on a variety of subjects from jazz music to fly-fishing. He spends as much time as possible outdoors when he is not teaching or writing.

FYI

Sturgeon season on the Columbia runs year-round, but the big ones can be caught here from May through August. You’ll need either an Oregon or Washington fishing license (about \$8 for one day, \$14.50 for two days in Oregon, \$6 for two days for Washington through March 31, 2001), available through some guide services or at any local tackle shop. If you want to catch keepable, eating-size sturgeons December through April are the best months.

Sturgeon facts: the best source for information on sturgeon is www.worldstar.com/~dlarson/sturgeon/SturgeonoftheColumbia. □