

FISHING FOR DINOSAURS



By Russ Gabel

There are monsters swimming in the waters of our great lakes state. Sure, we have musky, pike, salmon, and an assortment of oversized catfish, but I'm talking about real living monsters. It blows my mind to think of this, but when I'm pursuing two of my new favorite species, I'm crossing paths with fish that remain largely unchanged since they swam alongside dinosaurs. In fact, you might say, they are themselves dinosaurs...

Sturgesaurus

The St. Clair River was ground zero for my sturgeon adventure. After a bit of research, I focused my efforts on the North Channel, which runs along the town of Pearl Beach. Hitting the water in the early afternoon, I cruised up and down the river, watching my fish finder. I marked a few holes where the water depth reached down to 60 and even 70 feet, and returned at dusk to start my first night. I fished from 7pm to 2am with only slight nibbles from gobies trying to figure out what to do with my oversized ball of nightcrawlers tipped with an emerald shiner. I didn't catch any sturgeon, but I certainly heard them. One local angler described the sound of sturgeon jumping as, "someone dropping telephone poles into the water". I couldn't agree more. I may not have hooked any, but they sure put on a spectacular show, and I knew I was in the right place. At the end of that night I came to two important realizations. The first was that the only thing biting on this evening were the mosquitoes and no amount of repellent was going to save me from becoming an involuntary blood donor. The second was that the swift current and significant depth were going to require two very sturdy anchors and two very long anchor ropes to keep me in place.

Armed with determination and more bug spray than I could carry, I hit the water for my second night. At around 7pm, I scouted a deep hole where the river splits right before it spills into Lake St. Clair. The fish finder marked several long fish holding right to the bottom in 70 feet of water, so I set up there. The mosquitoes were waiting in force, but at least my new anchor arrangement was keeping me in place. Before the sun had set, a small catfish found its way into my net. It was soon followed by a large sheephead. I was encouraged to feel these fish pulling on the end of my line, but I still had hopes for something bigger. That bite came at 11:30pm. One of my rods bounced lightly, so I scrambled over and took hold. More slight nibbles registered, then the rod began to bounce harder. This looked more like the nibbles I see when I'm perch fishing, but instinct told me



to set the hook. I leaned back as hard as I could, putting a huge bow in the heavy rod. Nothing happened. It was like setting the hook into a tree stump. I leaned back more, trying to pull the heavy fish up from the bottom, and then it came alive. The fish made two staggeringly powerful runs, then we settled into a 15 minute see-saw battle before it was close enough to the surface for me to see. My jaw dropped when I saw the four-foot long silver torpedo that flashed through the beam of my headlamp as it streaked across the stern of the boat. With the rod in one hand and my oversized salmon net in the other, I somehow managed to flop this beast onto the floor of the boat. I was stunned. Hardcore sturgeon fishermen may scoff at a "little 4 foot fish", but this was an amazing experience for me. I snapped some unforgettable pictures, and released this 20+ year old fish to thrill another angler. This true river monster is not just the stuff of TV shows...with a little research and planning, you can set out with a very real chance of tangling with one.

Briefly, the bait of choice was a ball of four nightcrawlers on a large single or treble hook. This is topped off with a 4-inch emerald shiner. Locals refer to this as "surf & turf". The bait is held on the bottom using a slip-sinker rig with a 3 or 4 oz. pyramid sinker. I used my salmon trolling rods, and they worked fine. In a perfect world, I would have had a braided line rather than 20lb. monofilament. It would have cut down on line drag in the current, and given me much better sensitivity when fishing 70 feet down. Put this rig in the right spot, and hold on!

Gar-zilla

As we pulled our boat into the sheltered bay, my first thought was, "I can't believe I use to swim here!" Literally hundreds of ferocious gar were surfacing all around us as they chased schools of minnow in 20 feet of water. We positioned our boat up-wind of the surfacing fish, then shut the motor down and let the wind drift us into the school of feeding gar. As we gently dropped anchor, fish were tearing into minnows all around us. I couldn't wait to get started! First, we tied on 30lb Power Pro braided leaders onto our 14lb mainline to protect us from bite-offs. We then threaded a #8 treble hook through the back of a standard perch minnow, and used a split



shot to suspend it just 2 feet below a small bobber. As I tied rigs, I couldn't help but think that this was the very same rig, minus the treble hook, that I use to catch bluegills. But now we were after something much larger. I was casting our last bobber out when I noticed that two bobbers were already down and heading in opposite directions. Overzealous, we grabbed rods, set hooks, and promptly caught...nothing. The bony mouth of a gar is nearly impervious to all but the sharpest hooks. This, combined with their tendency to grab the minnow sideways and run, makes the gar a very difficult fish to hook up.

Time and many lost fish taught us that a 30 second count before setting the hook increased our chances dramatically. It allows the tiny hook to get into the soft corner of the mouth, or gives enough time for the fish to roll in the 30 lb. leader and become lassoed around its beak.

Once we did hook up, we learned some more things about gar. They are, hands down, the meanest animal I have ever intentionally brought into my boat. Once on the floor, they thrash around and swing their toothy mouth back and forth at anything that comes near them. I'm

pretty sure at one point I was standing on my boat seat trying to get away from the vicious onslaught. We later learned to take a chapter from gator wrestling, and cover the fish's eyes with a t-shirt to calm it down and to get a better grip. With some VERY long-nosed pliers, we were able to get the hook out with only minor injury to ourselves and the fish.

On this particular outing, we managed to boat 15 fish, and lost another 15, in about 90 minutes. It was without a doubt, the most exciting fishing I have experienced all year. If you are fortunate enough to have gar in your home waters, I encourage you to give up one afternoon of chasing bass, and set your sights on these monsters. Bring just one to net, and you may have yourself a new favorite species.