



## Lake Sturgeon Fact Sheet

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### Lake Sturgeon *Acipenser fulvescens*

New York Status: **Threatened**

#### Description

The lake sturgeon is one of New York's largest freshwater fish. Mature adults average between 3-5 feet in length and 10-80 pounds in weight, but can occasionally grow as large as 7+ feet and 300+ pounds.



Primitive in appearance, the lake sturgeon has a torpedo-shaped body that is covered with five rows of bony plates: one on top and two rows along each side. The lake sturgeon has a sharp, cone-shaped snout with four smooth barbels on its underside. Its mouth is large and there are two smooth lobes on the lower lip. The anal (bottom rear) fin is not opposite the dorsal (back) fin, but rather it is closer to the caudal (tail) fin. The peduncle (part of the body between dorsal and caudal fins) is short.

The top and side bony plates (called scutes) are the same color as the dull grey body and the peritoneum (body cavity lining) is black.

#### Life History

Lake sturgeon spawn in the spring from May-June. Prior to spawning, adult sturgeon form groups in deep holes near the spawning site. At this time, the sturgeon may perform "staging" displays that include rolling near the bottom then leaping out of the water to fall with a loud splash.

Actual spawning takes place in areas of clean, large rubble such as along windswept rocky shores of islands and in rapids in streams. The eggs are scattered by currents and stick to rocks and logs. Young hatch out in 5-8 days and grow rapidly, reaching 7.5 inches by the end of the first growing season. A mature female lake sturgeon may lay from 100,000-800,000 eggs during a single spawning season.

The lake sturgeon is one of the longest-lived and slowest to mature freshwater fish species. Female lake sturgeon do not reach sexual maturity until 14-23 years old and may live up to 80 years. Male lake sturgeon reach sexual maturity at 8-19 years old and can live to 55 years of age. In 1953, a 154 year old lake sturgeon was caught in Lake of the Woods, Canada. It weighed 208.5 pounds.

Lake sturgeon are bottom feeders. They use their barbels to locate food, then suck it into their mouths. They eat leeches, snails, clams, other invertebrates, small fish, and even algae.

#### Distribution and Habitat

The lake sturgeon is found primarily in freshwater lakes and large rivers in northeastern North America, but also occurs in the brackish waters of Hudson Bay and the St. Lawrence River. In the United States, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, Wisconsin and West Virginia all have lake sturgeon populations.

In New York, lake sturgeon have been collected in St. Lawrence River, Niagara River, Oswegatchie River, Grasse River, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, Lake Champlain, Cayuga Lake, and in the Seneca and Cayuga canals.

### **Population Status**

The American Fisheries Society has listed the lake sturgeon as threatened in all the states where it occurs. Although it is difficult to determine the specific causes of lake sturgeon population declines, several factors have been blamed, including: over exploitation of stocks due to high demand for their eggs (caviar) and smoked flesh; construction of dams that cut off spawning and nursery areas; and possibly byproducts of urban and rural development such as pollution and channelization that caused degradation of habitat.

### **Management/Research Needs**

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is collecting biotic and abiotic data on lake sturgeon populations. DEC has been using artificial propagation of this species to reestablish populations in selected tributaries of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, including the Oswegatchie River, Black Lake, the St. Regis River, Oneida Lake and Cayuga Lake.

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[Back to top of page](#)