

Sturgeon prospects are dismal

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NEENAH — During the 1978 sturgeon spearing season, a near-record 1,246 sturgeon were taken from Lake Winnebago under what were almost ideal ice, weather and water conditions.

In terms of last year, then, the probability for success in sturgeon spearing will go from one extreme to the other. The outlook for this year's season could hardly be more dismal.

The season on Lake Winnebago begins next Saturday, Feb. 10 and continues through March 1, and for all but the most determined of spearkers that 19-day season is likely to begin and end in frustration.

The ice conditions on the lake are terrible. Underneath the deep snow cover lies plenty of slush and not much ice, though certainly enough to get by on. The problem is not the ice, but the snow and slush on top of the ice.

Deep snow and slush is going to make it extremely difficult first to get a sturgeon spearing shanty out onto the frozen lake, and secondly to get that shanty effectively positioned over a suitable hole.

Ice fishermen are already experiencing the problem. When a hole is cut, water rushes up through the hole and floods the surrounding area, then quickly turns to slush, rendering the entire area practically useless in terms of fishing.

Any attempts to cut a spearing hole for a shanty will likely be met by the same result on a larger scale.

One suggested solution has been to cut the hole early, let it flood and hopefully refreeze, and then go back later and cut another hole in the same place, but this is illegal unless the cutting begins on Feb. 8, two days before the season begins.

Another possibility, one that spearkers may find more practical, is to set their shanty up high on mounds of snow or blocks of ice, above the flooding and slush level. This may cut down on visibility, but the practice should keep the floor of the shanty dry.

Figuring out a way to get a shanty set up may be the least of the spearkers' problems this year. The greater problem is going to be simply getting that shanty out onto the lake.

Due to the deep snow which covers virtually the entire lake and the slushy conditions underneath the snow, few of the usual access points are usable this year.

As of this weekend, there are virtually no plowed roads out onto the lake. Attempts to plow roads have met with failure and frustration, and the situation is not likely to change before the opening.

This may not discourage many spearkers, but it will certainly force many of them to find shanty locations much closer to shore than usual.

Those spearkers equipped with snowmobiles and the necessary equipment for pulling a shanty out with a snowmobile may have some success, but even this is an extremely

laborious task at best.

It may begin to sound like the 1979 sturgeon spearing season is not worth the effort and risk. This would no doubt be true were it not for one redeeming factor, that being that the water in most areas of the lake is extraordinarily clear. Most areas are reporting that the water is clear enough to see bottom, and even in the deepest areas visibility apparently extends to within a foot of the bottom.

Thus, those spearkers who do expend the necessary effort should find that their chances for success are good once they get set up.

There is virtually no chance that the 1979 season will even begin to approach the success of the 1978 season.

During the 1978 season, when 1,246 fish were registered, the average length of the sturgeon taken was 56 inches, and the average weight was 46 pounds. The largest fish taken, in terms of both length and weight, was a 77-inch, 120 pound specimen speared by Arno Lau of Hilbert.

A total of 32 of last year's sturgeon were found to have DNR tags on them, and one of those sturgeon carried a tag that was affixed in 1957. When tagged it was 44 inches long, and 21 years later when it was taken it was 52 inches long.

DNR officials encourage spearkers who bag fish with tags to point that fact out when registering their fish. The tags provide fish management personnel with valuable information in terms of the future of the lake sturgeon and the future of the sport of spearing them.

For those spearkers who are determined to challenge the unfortunate conditions this year, there are a number of regulations that should be kept in mind.

First of all, a legal fish must be at least 45 inches long again this year, and spearkers are urged not to throw the spear if there is any doubt in the fisherman's mind as to length. In addition, there will be no spearing on Lakes Winneconne, Poygan, and Butte des Morts this year.

Spearkers must be at least 14 years of age and must purchase a \$2.50 sturgeon spearing license. Spearkers aged 14 and 15 do not need a regular Wisconsin fishing license, but all others do, and both the regular license and the spearing license must be carried at all times while participating in this sport.

Licenses will be available at numerous outlets prior to the season, but after opening weekend the license will be available only at the County Clerk's Office in Winnebago, Calumet, Fond du Lac and Waushara counties and at DNR offices in Oshkosh and Calumet Harbor. More detailed regulations can be found in the DNR pamphlet pertaining to spearing and netting.

Following is a list of sturgeon registration stations.

On the east shore of the lake, sturgeon can be registered at Wundrow's Tavern on Fairy Springs Road, at the Fish-tale Inn on Calumet County Park Road, Parson's Harbor Bar in Stockbridge, the Fishermen's Inn at the Brother-town crossroads, the Calumet Harbor DNR station, and at Chuck Lisowe's Tap in Quinney.

On the north shore, fish can be registered at the Waverly Beach Resort off the Highway 114-10 intersection near the lake. The south shore registration station is Clarence's Harbor at Highway 55 and 151, one mile east of Fond du Lac.

West shore registration stations include Wendt's Bar and Harbor on Highway 45, eight miles north of Fond du Lac, Mac and Pac-Its Tavern on Highway 45, two miles north of Fond du Lac, Jerry's Tavern on Ceape Avenue in Oshkosh, and Payne's Point Resort on County Highway A between Neenah and Oshkosh.