

The end of the line

Sturgeon-spearfishing season ends after just three days

BY DOUG ZELLMER
OF THE NORTHWESTERN

Sheet-metal shanties glistened in the sun Monday as the tiny shacks departed frozen Lake Winnebago.

The multi-colored, portable shanties were hauled out on skids and two-wheeled carts as thousands of sturgeon spearfishers made their exodus following the shortened 1999 spearfishing season.

Spearfishing ended at 6 p.m. Monday when the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources halted the harvest to preserve the number of adult spawning females.

This year's season lasted just three days. A normal season is 16 days.

A total of 1,484 sturgeon were taken from the 138,000-acre lake this year. That included 472 mature adult females 55 inches and longer.

The season ended after 320 adult females had been speared, the DNR cutoff to end the season.

Timing may have been perfect in light of two straight days with temperatures in the mid-40s and plenty of sunshine. Shoreline ice conditions

are starting to deteriorate, said Berlin resident Ken Inda, who pulled his shanty off the Payne's Point landing Monday afternoon.

"Out on the lake the ice is still good, but the ice is breaking off at the shore," he said. "Warm temperatures aren't helping, either, and vehicular traffic is helping break it up."

Oshkosh resident Gordy Wischow Jr., who bagged a 45-pound sturgeon Monday morning, said ice on Lake Winnebago is getting soft and starting to sag.

Despite the less than ideal weather conditions, Wischow said it's a good idea to cut the season

short to protect the future sturgeon-breeding population.

"We can't keep taking thousands of sturgeons each year," he said, while talking about his catch at Wendt's on the Lake on Highway 45 south of Oshkosh.

Three days of spearfishing, some said, will ruin vacations and give fewer opportunities to bag one of the prehistoric species of fish. The shortened season, however, also is affecting businesses which usually get a big mid-winter boost from spearfishers.

Sturgeon numbers

- **Adult females:** 47 Monday; 472 total.
- **Juvenile females:** 22 Monday; 343 total.
- **Males:** 52 Monday; 669 total.
- **Total sturgeon:** 1,484.



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DNR STURGEON BIOLOGIST Ron Bruch of Oshkosh measures a sturgeon at Payne's Point Bar and Grill. The fish, caught by Neenah resident Bruce Schooley Monday afternoon, was 50 inches long and weighed 50 pounds.

Business usually triples during sturgeon season at Payne's Point Bar and Grill, said Mike Comins, who owns the tavern off County Trunk A north of Oshkosh.

"We're used to 16 days and now it's just three. That's quite a bit as far as the financial impact," he said.

"But we will survive. We have other ice fishermen who come in here."

Ann Ziemer-Wendt, manager of Wendt's on the Lake, said the restaurant had a flourishing business this past weekend with many of the clientele

sturgeon spearfishers.

"We had five-deep at the bar, so it was very good for business," she said. "A shortened season will definitely affect us, but at least we had three days."

Dick Krueger, who owns Lakeshore Mart, a convenience store and gas station across from Wendt's, said the shortened season won't put him out of business.

"I'll survive it," he said. "A lot of guys on the other side of the lake are hurting more."

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