

A man in a blue rain suit and cap is standing on a rocky shore, holding a fishing rod that is bent into a large arc. In the water in the foreground, a large white sturgeon is visible. The background shows a wide river or lake with a forested hillside in the distance under an overcast sky.

The Ultimate Fishing Challenge

By Sam Pauline

How to catch a seven-foot, two hundred pound white sturgeon — from the shore!

It was just the kind of strike I'd been looking for — a couple of powerful jerks, followed by a slow, steady pull.

I yanked the pole out of the holder and slammed the hook home as hard as I could. The sturgeon responded instantly, bursting out of the water with a monstrous, head-shaking leap — the tip of its nose rising nearly eight feet above the surface!

The fish crashed back like an old growth log, then headed downstream with a vengeance. Moments later, it made another dazzling, acrobatic vault. As we wrestled, a big Tidewater barge moved up the Washington side of the Columbia River, bearing down on my fish. As the barge moved closer, the sturgeon launched a fearsome run toward the opposite shore. I cinched down the drag as tight as I dared, trying to keep the fish from diving beneath the barge. Amazingly, it leaped a third time, now just twenty or thirty feet in front of the oncoming vessel!

My catch raced up and down the river for nearly half an hour, punctuating one of its runs with yet another magnificent jump. Finally, my arms aching from battle, I eased the splendid warrior up to shore. It measured seven and a half feet; its head almost as big around as a bull's. I'd just landed a magnificent freshwater sturgeon weighing more than 200-pounds. But more than that, I'd caught it from the shore, a seemingly impossible task. This is a feat I've accomplished dozens of times during the last five years. If you want to learn how, when and where you can do the same — read on!

The Challenge

As an avid fisherman, this is what I consider to be the ultimate challenge.

1. Land and release *a two-hundred-pound freshwater fish*.
2. Land your gigantic fish using *off-the-shelf fishing tackle*, which can be found in any well-stocked fishing store.
3. Land your fish *from the bank* – no boats allowed.

This challenge is *not* an impossible task. In fact, it's not even terribly difficult if you use some successful techniques I've perfected over the years. But first, I need to put this challenge into perspective.

The Great White Sturgeon

The great white sturgeon is arguably the world's largest freshwater game fish. Compared to many other large freshwater fish, its size, range and abundance is staggering. Sturgeon are technically an anadromous fish (migrating between fresh and salt water), much like their Northwest neighbor, the salmon. Unlike salmon, which are often caught in the ocean, sturgeon are almost exclusively captured in large freshwater rivers that empty into the Pacific Ocean between San Francisco and Alaska.

Freshwater game fish that approach the size of the great white sturgeon exist elsewhere in the world, mostly in more remote or inaccessible areas, but their numbers are a small fraction of the current white sturgeon population of the Pacific Northwest.

The only freshwater fish close to the size of a mature white sturgeon are the Pirarucu of the Amazon River, the Pla Beuk (giant catfish) of the Mekong River in Cambodia and the Beluga sturgeon of the Black Sea. The largest Pirarucu ever caught on a rod and reel weighed only 148-pounds, a comparative baby by sturgeon standards. And though the Pla Beuk can reportedly grow to about 600-pounds, only six were caught in 2003, compared to the more than 30,000 white sturgeon caught in the Columbia River alone.

The Beluga sturgeon, which once populated the Black Sea and its tributaries in large numbers, has been severely depleted by pollution, over-fishing and poaching. These sturgeon are now so scarce that fishing for them in most areas of Russia and the Ukraine has been banned altogether.

The only realistic option for the thrill of huge, freshwater sport fishing is the Columbia River below the Bonneville Dam in Oregon and Washington. This is the number one sturgeon-fishing venue in the world — and the *only* place where you have a realistic chance of landing a large sturgeon *from the shore*. It is possible to land large sturgeon from a boat in other parts of the Columbia River, and in other rivers as well, most notably the Fraser River in British Columbia. However, there is no other location in the world where bank fishing for behemoth Great White Sturgeon is as accessible and consistently successful as the Columbia River below the Bonneville Dam.



This eight-foot sturgeon weighed nearly 300 pounds

The Prize

The Great White Sturgeon is a surprisingly powerful and acrobatic prize. It is a voracious bottom feeder that bites aggressively and often. Sturgeon feed on a variety of foods, including smelt, shad, herring, sand shrimp, squid, lamprey eels and more.



Sam Trakul plays an eight-foot white sturgeon

From San Francisco to Southern Alaska, many rivers contain white sturgeon. The Columbia is the most prolific of them all, boasting a population of more than one million. And at certain times of the year, it seems like almost all of them are concentrated in the heart of the Columbia River Gorge, just below the Bonneville Dam.

Sturgeon aggressively follow their primary food sources — smelt, shad and salmon — as they move from the Pacific Ocean through the Columbia River watershed. During their annual runs, these food sources will stack up in vast numbers downstream from the Bonneville Dam, and multitudes of sturgeon will migrate to feed on them. This is why the Columbia River contains more sturgeon than any other river in the world.

Sturgeon are divided into three categories - and they're all fun to catch. About 50% are called "shakers." These are the smallest, ranging from about 15 inches to 3 1/2 feet long. A typical shaker sturgeon is 3-feet long and weighs 17 pounds, about the same size as a fully-grown Coho salmon. For many people, even a shaker will be the largest fish they've ever caught. But sturgeon go up from shaker size almost exponentially.

The next group, "keepers," range from 3 1/2 to 5-feet long and weigh between 20 and 65 pounds. During certain times of the year, and in specific locations, anglers can keep sturgeon that fall within this range. Keeper sturgeon will put up a very spirited fight, surging up and down the river with tremendous energy and power.

At the top end of the sturgeon hierarchy are "oversize" sturgeon, gargantuan fish that amaze even seasoned fishermen with their fighting power and size. The typical oversize sturgeon is an astounding 7-foot long and weighs nearly 200 pounds, though even this size sturgeon is nowhere near the top of the scale. A small percentage of sturgeon are a mind-blowing 12 to 14-feet long and weigh more than 1,000 pounds. To grow this large, sturgeon must live an extremely long time. An 8-foot sturgeon is about 50 years old, and the largest ones can live for nearly a century!

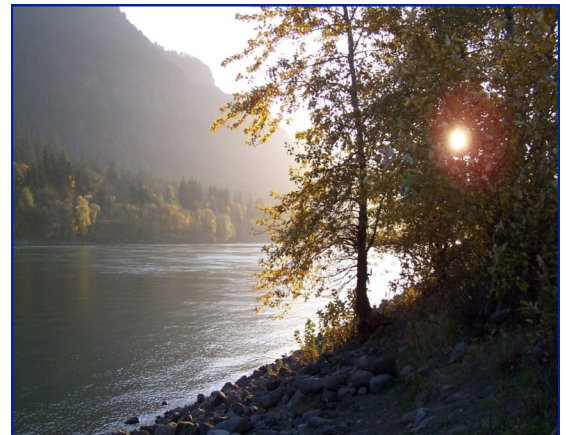
Although sturgeon are gigantic, heavy fish, they're surprisingly swift and athletic. They will launch high-speed runs that strip 200-yards of line off a reel in a matter of minutes, even with the drag tightened near its maximum setting. And they will leap free of the water like missiles in an effort to throw the hook.

The Location

The best place to catch an oversize sturgeon from the shore is within an area that's three miles downstream from the Bonneville Dam. Within this particular stretch, the Columbia River is between 250 and 500 yards across; a significant narrowing compared to other areas of the river that are a mile wide or more. This prime fishing area is rocky and deep in many spots, making it ideal habitat for oversize sturgeon.

The Washington side of the river is a better place to fish simply because the fishing hours are longer and the fishing pressure is less. Access to most of the prime spots on the Oregon side is through the Bonneville Dam complex, which opens around 7:00 a.m. and closes anywhere from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. The Washington side is open from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. year-round, and many fine fishing spots are accessible just by driving your car on the Dam Access Road alongside the river.

If you are willing to hike even a hundred yards from where you park, you will be able to fish in areas that receive even less



The sun sets on a prime sturgeon fishing area

fishing pressure. But it's imperative that you fish right on the river's edge. Many anglers fish from the higher banks because it's convenient, but their fishing success is much lower than anglers who are willing to haul their gear down to the shore.

The Season

When is the best season to catch sturgeon? You can experience good sturgeon fishing anytime between the beginning of April and the end of November. In the Columbia River, mid-May through early July is usually the best time to catch sturgeon because of the huge shad runs. If the summer months are not abnormally hot, and there is adequate rain, July and August can also be excellent times for sturgeon fishing. From September through November, the sturgeon fishing usually improves due to the big fall salmon runs. Although you are likely to catch fewer fish in the fall than you would during the spring and summer, the percentage of keeper and oversize fish you can catch usually goes up dramatically.

The very best time to fish for sturgeon is when retention is prohibited. The Oregon and Washington Departments of Fish and Wildlife strictly regulate the number of sturgeon harvested each year. They do this by limiting when, where and how sturgeon can be caught. During catch and release season, the fishing pressure drops by 90%. It's the perfect time to fish! Keeper season varies from year to year. Anglers can keep up with recent changes by visiting the Washington and Oregon Fish and Wildlife web sites at (Oregon) www.dfw.state.or.us or (Washington) www.wa.gov/wdfw.



Don Myron battles a hard-fighting seven foot sturgeon during the middle of July

Within the prime fishing seasons, some days are predictably better than others. An easy way to describe ideal sturgeon fishing weather is to remember the three Cs: cloudy, cool and calm. Given the choice between a cloudy, drizzly day that's calm and a sunny day that's windy, I'll take the cloudy day every time. Big sturgeon seem to bite better when the weather is overcast and calm. In addition, it's easier to detect the sometimes-subtle sturgeon bite when it's calm because the pole won't be bouncing in the wind.

The Gear

If you fail to use adequate gear when fishing for oversized sturgeon, you are likely to lose almost every large fish you hook. They will simply break your line or pole if your gear isn't heavy enough!

The ideal gear for sturgeon fishing is sturdy and simple. Start with a 10 to 12-foot Ugly Stick pole by Shakespeare rated for medium-heavy to heavy use. These poles are designed to hold either a level-wind reel or an open-face spinning reel.

Either way, you'll want to couple the pole with a reel that's heavy-duty. The Daiwa Sealine-X 50 HV is a level-wind reel that holds about 240 yards of 50 lb. test monofilament fishing line. I've found it to be the best reel for fighting and landing an oversize sturgeon, although it's more difficult to cast than a Penn SS 9500 open-face spinning reel, which holds about 200 yards of the same line. Berkeley Big Game Line is probably the best monofilament fishing line available for sturgeon fishing from the shore.

While easier to cast, the Penn open-face reel is not quite as efficient at wearing down a large fish as the level-wind Daiwa reel. But both reels are an excellent choice for oversize sturgeon fishing, with the level-wind reel a good choice if you are skilled at casting and the spinning-reel a better choice if you are not.

Once you have acquired a suitable pole and reel, you'll need to rig the line up correctly to successfully cast and present the bait. You must first run the line through a large plastic sinker slide, to which a six-to-twelve-ounce round or pyramid sinker is attached. The line then connects to a heavy two-way swivel, which keeps the sinker from sliding down to the hook. Connect about 18 inches of 80-pound Dacron line to the swivel and tie on a 7/0 barbless steel hook to other end, using a conventional double cinch knot to secure the hook at one end and the swivel at the other.

If you don't want to tie up the rigs yourself, you can buy them pre-tied at most fishing tackle stores. Just be sure to have extras in case you lose any to snags on the bottom. This rig and line set-up makes for efficient casting and allows a sturgeon to run with the bait without feeling the weight that keeps the bait on the bottom. You will also need a heavy-duty pole holder that you can secure on the shore.



Even a "keeper" sturgeon can weigh over 40 pounds

The Technique

Sturgeon fishing is bottom fishing, but it's bottom fishing on steroids. To lure a sturgeon, you need to put the ideal bait right in front of its nose. Sturgeon locate food more by scent than sight, and will feed voraciously on the Four S's: squid, smelt, shad and shrimp. All of these baits are available in many sporting goods stores in the Pacific Northwest. My favorite bait is Sea Wave Calamari squid because it is very hardy, doesn't fall off the hook even in swift current, and it has a naturally strong-smelling scent. However, I usually inject an additional scent called Smelly Jelly Sturgeon Feast into my bait, which seems to attract more sturgeon than unscented bait alone.



Mark Vanderzanden fights a big sturgeon from late twilight into the darkness

After preparing the bait, I pierce it several times with the hook and cast it as far as I can into the river. Then I simply place the pole in the holder and watch it carefully for signs of a bite. A sturgeon bite can be as light as a slight "tap-tap" that barely bounces the pole or it can be far more aggressive, with the fish grabbing the bait and bouncing the pole repeatedly.

One of the greatest thrills in sturgeon fishing is the rare but enthralling "suicide strike." This occurs when a large sturgeon takes the bait and hooks itself, bending the pole nearly double while it's still in the pole holder. In a matter of moments, the fish can peel dozens of yards of line off the reel. If the drag is set too tight, or you aren't paying close attention, the sturgeon can easily drag your entire rig, including the holder, right into the river.

So keep an eye on your rig!

No matter what kind of bite you're getting, you should wait until the fish has taken the bait and is jerking or bending the pole significantly. When this happens, you take the pole out of the holder and set the hook as hard as you can. When I set the hook, I yank the pole so hard I think I'm going to break it. And then I do it again and again. Although they don't have teeth, sturgeon have extremely hard mouths, and you *must* set the hook aggressively or it will not imbed sufficiently to keep the fish hooked.

The Fight

Once you hook an oversize sturgeon, the ensuing battle is often fantastic. On many occasions, I've had to follow oversize sturgeon downstream for hundreds of yards in an effort to land them. My fishing companion, Don Myron, once chased a huge sturgeon downstream for three-quarters of a mile, finally losing it after an epic two-hour struggle.

"I was lucky to keep it on as long as I did," says Don. "If I hadn't chased him he would've stripped all the line in a matter of minutes. Most of the time, those huge ones are just a standoff, although we do get our share of the biggest, despite their incredible size and power." When you land an oversize sturgeon, you'll probably become a member of the elite "Ratio Club," because you've captured a fish that weighs four to eight times the breaking strength of your fishing line. At this level of fishing, Murphy's Law is always in play, because any deficiencies in gear, line or fishing technique will lose a



Tom McGill and Sam Pauline release a seven foot seven inch sturgeon into the Columbia River



Bob McMillan hooked his fish within the first twenty minutes of fishing

fish in a heartbeat. During a long struggle, a big sturgeon will sometimes rest on the bottom, almost unmovable, as it gathers strength for more and more runs. Sturgeon are also quite skilled at wrapping line around deep-water snags in order to free themselves when the line becomes entangled. And sturgeon will roll like corkscrews, slicing line on the sharp scales that protect their backs. Despite these challenges, you can still land at least three-fifths of the oversize sturgeon you hook.

Of all the habits of great white sturgeon, the one that surprises newcomers the most is their propensity to *jump*. How a huge, bottom-feeding fish can propel itself up and out of the water so easily is a mystery to many. But the fact remains that sturgeon are able to launch prodigious leaps that almost defy gravity. And they don't jump just once. Oversize sturgeon will leap as many as three or four times in their efforts to toss the hook. Those of us who fish frequently live for these moments, relishing the drama and beauty of these incredible leaps. I'm always in awe whenever a

sturgeon jumps, even though I've seen it dozens of times. Fully two-thirds of the oversize sturgeon you hook will leap at least once.

When you battle a huge sturgeon for thirty minutes or more and finally land it, the initial experience can be overwhelming. They're so large they seem almost otherworldly. Compared to typical game fish like bass and trout, they're gargantuan monsters. So it goes without saying, you should always bring your camera. No one will ever believe you caught a fish this large unless you have the pictures to prove it!

No doubt about it: sturgeon fishing on the Columbia River is a world-class fishing adventure. One of my more memorable encounters happened on Sunday, November 9, 2004, when I accompanied my longtime fishing companion, Tom McGill, on a half-day outing. When we'd fished two weeks earlier, anglers lined both sides of the river in hopes of catching a late season keeper. Because the sturgeon retention season ended November 1st, on that calm, sunny afternoon, we had the river to ourselves. Fishing was slow for a couple of hours, but around 3:00 p.m., I hooked a



Tom McGill prepares to measure a seven-footer



There's no thrill like landing a big one!

sturgeon that appeared to be about 7-feet long. The fish leaped within moments and surged downstream on a powerful run. Fifteen minutes into the fight, I lost the fish when it tangled with a snag.

Fortunately, the fishing action didn't stop there. Within 30 minutes, Tom McGill hooked a gigantic sturgeon that battled ferociously for about 45 minutes. The fish leaped three times and stripped nearly all the line off the reel. Tom was able to stop the runs just in time, and finally managed to subdue a behemoth that measured eight-feet three inches and weighed more than 300 pounds. As twilight settled over the Columbia River Gorge, the air went completely still and the water smoothed into a glassy calm. A

yacht eased slowly up the river, several formations of geese flew overhead and scattered clouds turned a brilliant orange in the western sky. Just before dark, I looked up to see the luminous contrails of a jet streaking south. No matter where they're going, I thought, it doesn't get any better than this.

Sam Pauline is a freelance outdoor writer from Portland, Oregon and the owner of Sturgeon Masters Guide Service. Sam has appeared on "Fishing with Shelley and Courtney" and is currently involved in the production of "The Ultimate Fishing Challenge," a thirty-minute fishing video that showcases the fantastic sturgeon fishing in the Columbia River Gorge. You can see videos of the great fish that Sam's clients have caught in the Columbia River and learn more about sturgeon fishing in the Pacific Northwest by visiting the Sturgeon Masters web site at www.sturgeonmastersguide.com.

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