

# ATLANTIC STURGEON

## MY SCIENTIFIC NAME

*Acipenser oxyrinchus oxyrinchus*

## BY THE NUMBERS

Atlantic sturgeon can grow to 14 feet in length, and weigh up to 800 pounds. The largest on record was captured in Canada and weighed 811 pounds!

## HOW TO IDENTIFY ME

I have a brown and tan body with a whitish belly. I do not have scales like most fish; my skin is rough, similar to sand paper. I have five rows of bony plates, called **scutes**, along the sides and top of my body. Like all sturgeon, I have a long forked **heterocercal tail**, the top of my tail fin is longer than the bottom. My snout is hard and upturned at the tip, with four whisker-like **barbels** below, and my mouth is soft and toothless.

## WHY I MATTER AND WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING

People used to catch me for my delicious meat and eggs, which were sold as a gourmet food called caviar. There was a very large commercial fishery for me in the 1880's. Fishing continued into the 1950's but by the 1990s many states no longer allowed fishing. Decades of pollution, overfishing and damming of rivers, which prevented us from reaching our home **spawning** grounds and eliminated a lot of our good nursery habitat, caused our numbers in the wild to become very low.

## MY STATUS

In 2012, The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration listed us as endangered along parts of the eastern United States. It is illegal to fish for us, and illegal to take our eggs where we are endangered.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Atlantic sturgeon ancestors can be traced back 245 million years ago when dinosaurs roamed the earth.
- The species hasn't changed much in 120 million years, surviving even after dinosaurs went extinct.
- Those bony plates topped with sharp ridges on their sides and back are called **scutes**, making them look like "living dinosaurs."
- It spends most of its life in the ocean and coastal areas. But they migrate back to freshwater rivers where they were hatched to **spawn** and produce fish each year.
- Female Atlantic sturgeon spawn once every 2 to 6 years at ages 7 to 30 years old, depending on where they live.
- They are found from Canada to Florida (Figure 1).
- They were a reliable food source for people arriving in the 1600s and settling at Jamestown, VA, playing a major role in the history of the United States.
- Dams block them from getting back to their home spawning grounds, and their populations are very low compared to historical levels.
- There are populations that migrate back to rivers flowing into the Gulf of Maine, the New York Bight, the Chesapeake Bay, the Carolinas and South Atlantic coast.
- Adults swim up the James and York rivers of Virginia to spawn in spring and fall, too.
- Atlantic sturgeon leap completely out the water, making a loud splash which can be heard half a mile away and possibly further under water.

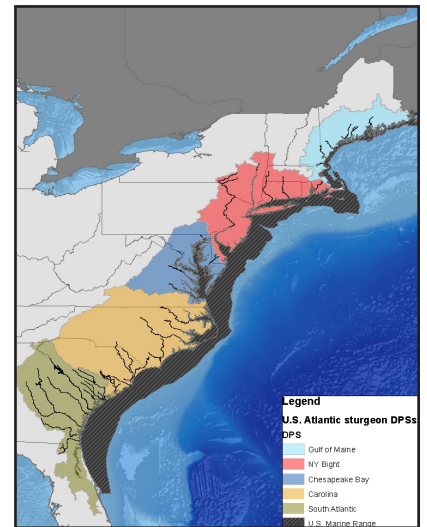


Figure 1 – Where Atlantic sturgeon are found along the United States. Credit: NMFS.

Fish illustration by Laury Zicari, USFWS, Retired.



Website: [www.fws.gov/fisheries](http://www.fws.gov/fisheries)



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## MORE ABOUT US



This young Atlantic sturgeon was raised at a national fish hatchery and stocked into the Hudson river to help boost local populations back in 1994. Scientists wanted to learn whether hatchery fishes would return back to their home river as adults to spawn, just like other wild Atlantic sturgeon. Several have been recaptured as adults off the coast of DE and NJ, and in the Hudson River, and the number keeps growing. Atlantic sturgeon don't reproduce until they are at least 5 years old in southern rivers, and as old as 34 years in northern rivers, so it takes them a long time to build up their numbers in nature.



Biologists study Atlantic sturgeon to better understand their needs for survival and to determine how healthy they are in the wild. They track population numbers over time, identify the number of males and females, and measure body length and weight. This Atlantic sturgeon was captured in the Chesapeake Bay outside of the James River.



Four whisker-like barbels hang down from their snout to help them find food on the bottom of the river or the bay.



As bottom-feeders, they use their barbels to find food, and their toothless mouth acts like a vacuum, capturing worms, small fish and other small animals living on the bottom.

### YOU CAN HELP ME

Get to know me, if you don't already. Help make me visible to people who don't have the chance to see me by sharing your stories about me. Get involved in efforts to help conserve my habitat and maintain my populations into the future.



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