

**Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Office of Resource Conservation
Division of Fisheries**

**Fish Species Management Plan for
Lake Sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*) in Illinois**

2026



IDNR Lake Sturgeon stocking in the Mackinaw River on 11/7/2023

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Introduction

Lake Sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*) populations have drastically declined in most of its native range within the Mississippi River Basin (MRB) over the last century. These declines have led to the implementation of recovery and management programs by several MRB states, as well as Upper Mississippi River Basin (UMRB) states including Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Missouri. The Missouri Department of Conservation – Fisheries Division offered the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) – Division of Fisheries a unique opportunity to acquire 11,000 Mississippi-strain juvenile Lake Sturgeon from the USFWS Neosho National Fish Hatchery with the purpose to stock Lake Sturgeon in Illinois portions of the Mississippi River and its tributaries in 2023. This unique opportunity and an increase in reports of Lake Sturgeon caught by Illinois commercial fisherman prompted the IDNR – Division of Fisheries to join in the recovery of Lake Sturgeon in the UMRB.

Lake Sturgeon were once reported as ‘very abundant’ in Lake Michigan and larger rivers of the state prior to 1880 (Nelson 1876, Jordan 1878). During the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, Lake Sturgeon numbers declined throughout their range due to commercial and recreational overfishing, habitat alterations, and an increase in the number of migration barriers in the form of low-head dams, high-head hydroelectric dams, and water control/navigation dams (Harkness and Dymond 1961, Smith 1979).

The mission of the Illinois Lake Sturgeon recovery program is to re-establish a self-sustaining and viable population of a state-endangered species in suitable waters within the State of Illinois would warrant the delisting of the species. If this plan is successful, it could provide a sport fishing opportunity for anglers. The goals and objectives outlined in this plan are intended to guide and assess Illinois’ Lake Sturgeon recovery and management efforts. It is intended to be an evolving document and will be used as an adaptive management tool by the IDNR, Division of Fisheries.

Historical Distribution

The historic range of Lake Sturgeon includes three drainages: the Mississippi River, the Great Lakes, and Hudson Bay (Priegel and Wirth 1975). Lake Sturgeon are not federally protected, but receive various levels of protection at the state level. They are listed as state endangered in Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Vermont and listed as state threatened in Nebraska, New York, and Michigan (Peterson et al. 2007). Lake Sturgeon were reported as ‘very abundant’ in Lake Michigan and larger rivers of the state prior to 1880 (Nelson 1876, Jordan 1878). Harkness and Dymond (1961) reported that on September 5th, 1942, David H. Thompson wrote Harkness a letter that stated in twenty years of almost continual fishing by the State Natural History Survey in Illinois waters, the Lake Sturgeon had not been taken except in the Rock River between Rockford and the mouth, and in the Kankakee River between

Momence, Illinois, and the mouth. It was occasionally taken along the borders of Illinois in the Mississippi, Ohio and Wabash rivers and reportedly disappeared completely from the Illinois River about 1900. Historic specimens in Illinois have come from Lake Michigan, the Rock River, the Mississippi River, the Illinois River, Spoon River, Sangamon River and Macoupin Creek (Metzke et al. 2022). IDNR Fisheries biologists have also verified individual adult fish since 2000 in the Little Vermillion River, Mackinaw River and Quiver Creek. These streams are all tributaries to the Illinois River. Since 2020, the documentation and verified reports of Lake Sturgeon collection has increased in the mainstem section of the Mississippi River near the Quad Cities between Iowa and Illinois (Jeremiah Haas, personal communication). This includes Pools 17, 16, 15 and 14 of the Mississippi River and upstream in the Rock River to the Steel Dam at Milan, Illinois. (Figure 1)

Life History and Ecological Information

Characteristics

Lake Sturgeon are one of the largest North American freshwater fishes and are the largest of three sturgeon species found in the UMRB. It is distinguished from the other sturgeon species by its conical snout, robust body, short caudal peduncle and lack of a filament on the upper lobe of the tail. It is one of the largest UMRB fishes next to Alligator Gar and is reported to reach 8 feet long and a weight of 310 pounds. Coloration varies from dark-slate to light-brown or yellowish-olive with a white belly (Harkness and Dymond 1961, Smith 1979, Pflieger 1997, Schlessler 2020). Juveniles are mottled with dark blotches (Metzke 2022). Lake Sturgeon inhabits the bottoms of large rivers and in shallow waters of large lakes primarily over firm bottoms of sand, gravel and rock. Adults can migrate long distances to areas of rocky rapids or shoals with strong wave action in the spring (Harkness and Dymond 1961, Smith 1979, Pflieger 1997). Lake Sturgeon have been known to live over 100 years (Schlessler 2020).

Diet

Lake Sturgeon are bottom feeders and actively forage using their highly protrusible mouth to suck up aquatic insects, freshwater mollusks, crayfish, and small fish from the bottom. Their diets can vary spatially and temporally depending on food availability (Nilo et al. 2006).

Reproduction

Information regarding age, growth, maturity, and spawning periodicity of Lake Sturgeon is well known from the Great Lakes and Lake Winnebago regions, but is lacking from the Mississippi River basin (Runstrom and St. Pierre, 2004). Both male and female Lake Sturgeon are slow to mature when compared to other species found in Illinois. Growth is slow and sexual maturity is not reached until 12-15 years of age for males and 18-27 years of age for females (Bruch et al. 2002). Spawning is sporadic and only occurs every 4-7 years for females, while males spawn

every 1-3 years (Harkness and Dymond 1961, Fortin et al. 1996). Lake Sturgeon usually spawn during the spring season, from mid- April to early June (Petersen et al., 2007) following pre-spawn migration (Buszkiewicz et al., 2016). Water temperatures and flow regimes have been shown to be key environmental spawning cues for Lake Sturgeon (Auer, 1996; Priegel and Wirth, 1977). Females lay adhesive eggs that require 5 days to hatch in mid-April – early June at water temperatures of 15-18° C (Smith 1979). Their preferred spawning habitat in the Mississippi River and its tributaries is relatively unknown; however three Lake Sturgeon spawning events have been observed on the Mississippi River below the Melvin Price Locks & Dam since 2015 providing some information on potential spawning habitat in Illinois portions of the Mississippi River. No reference to the presence of historic spawning locations in Illinois have been reported.

Causes of Decline

In the 1800's Lake Sturgeon populations were intentionally decimated by man, because they were thought to be “a bad, useless sort of fish” before their value became appreciated (Harkness and Dymond 1961). Lake Sturgeon populations were further reduced in the late 1800's when they were exploited for their eggs for caviar, meat for smoked steaks, swim bladders for isinglass, and for their oil (Smith 1979). By 1909 they were reported as ‘rare’ in Illinois by Forbes and Richardson (1909). What remained of Lake Sturgeon remnant populations were inhibited from recovery by inaccessible or degraded habitat and spawning areas by the construction of dams, pollution and siltation. Lake Sturgeon was the only fish species to qualify as ‘threatened’ upon the inception of the Endangered Species Act in 1973 (Smith 1979). Records of Lake Sturgeon in Illinois have been extremely rare since then.

Lake Sturgeon Management in Illinois

Goal

The goal of the Lake Sturgeon reintroduction program is to re-establish naturally reproducing populations to a sustainable level in suitable waters within the State of Illinois that would not require further stocking and to eventually warrant de-listing of the species and provide recreational opportunities to anglers.

Objectives

- 1) Enhance populations of Lake Sturgeon in suitable locations in Illinois.
 - a. Identify stocking locations that provide suitable habitat and forage base for the survival of stocked Lake Sturgeon.
 - b. Obtain genetically appropriate Lake Sturgeon eggs or fry when available from USFWS Neosho National Fish Hatchery in Missouri or USFWS Genoa National Fish Hatchery in Wisconsin. Guidance from the Upper Mississippi River

Conservation Committee (UMRCC) Fish Technical Committee for Lake Sturgeon Management in the UMRB will be used to help determine appropriate genetic strains for stocking in Illinois water bodies.

- c. Stock non-vulnerable (approximately 8 inches and larger) Lake Sturgeon into approved waters. Current IDNR Jake Wolf Hatchery production capabilities may only allow for periodic stocking in Illinois waters.
 - d. Ensure that the timing of the stocking into the approved waters occurs when the average daily water temperatures are below 70 degrees Fahrenheit for the selected receiving water body.
 - e. Mark all stocked Lake Sturgeon prior to their release by passive integrated transponder (PIT) tag, wire-coded tag, fin clip, or scute removal.
 - f. Work with partner agencies to develop cooperative agreements in border waters. IDNR Fisheries biologists will continue to participate in the development of the Lake Sturgeon Management Plan for the UMRB with the UMRCC Fish Technical Committee.
- 2) Develop rearing techniques to effectively raise Lake Sturgeon to non-vulnerable sizes.
- a. Use, as reference, the culture knowledge for Lake Sturgeon developed at the USFWS Genoa National Fish Hatchery and the USFWS Neosho National Fish Hatchery.
 - b. Use intensive culture as long as necessary to ensure maximum initial survival.
 - c. Use extensive culture as long as necessary to produce fast growing, non-vulnerable size fish.
 - d. Cooperate and use agreements with universities, scientific surveys, and private hatcheries in Illinois for production and research on Lake Sturgeon rearing techniques.
- 3) Develop standardized protocols to collect accurate biological data on survival, growth, habitat use, movement and feeding habits of Lake Sturgeon in Illinois.
- a. All Lake Sturgeon should be marked with PIT tags or a unique fin clip or scute removal for tracking fish over time and shared with partner agencies.
 - b. Utilize current standardized monitoring programs, such as the IDNR Intensive Stream Basin Survey Program, IDNR Mississippi and Illinois River Project surveys, Multi-Agency Monitoring Program (MAM), Long-Term Resource Monitoring Program (LTRM), and the Long-Term Electrofishing Program (LTEF), to evaluate biological data, such as survival, growth and habitat use.
 - c. Use commercial fishing data to monitor presence/absence and habitat use of Lake Sturgeon.
 - d. Coordinate with universities, scientific surveys, and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) for assistance in tracking stocked Lake Sturgeon.

- 4) Identify, manage, and protect habitats in Illinois that could support or have the potential to support Lake Sturgeon spawning, recruitment and survival, as well as identify limiting factors for success.
 - a. Identify and evaluate all aquatic areas in Illinois that have the potential habitat requirements necessary to support the establishment of a self-sustaining population of Lake Sturgeon.
 - b. Identify potential locations that meet criteria for essential habitat designations under the Endangered Species Protection Act (ESPA) and Natural Area Preservation Act (NAPA) and recommend those designations if they occur.
 - c. Work with partners, such as the Army Corps of Engineers to restore potential spawning areas, connectivity and the ability to manipulate water control to enhance those areas. For example, IDNR Fisheries will work with all the agencies involved in the evaluation and modification planning for the Steel Dam on the Rock River at Milan, Illinois. The installation of a modification to allow the upstream fish passage at this dam for all species, including Lake Sturgeon, will be high priority.

Lake Sturgeon Stocking Plan

Illinois' Lake Sturgeon recovery and management plan will follow research findings that support stocking as an essential component to successful Lake Sturgeon recovery (Schram et al. 1999, Jackson et al. 2002, Aadland et al. 2005, Bezold and Peterson 2008, Buszkiewicz et al. 2016). Stocking rates necessary to restore a self-sustaining Lake Sturgeon population are difficult to evaluate due to the reproductive nature of Lake Sturgeon. States with more advanced Lake Sturgeon recovery programs, such as Wisconsin and Missouri, continue to evaluate appropriate stocking rates as their programs progress. Currently, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources stocking guidelines suggest stocking 80 large fingerlings (4-8") or 40 yearlings (>8") per river mile annually for 25 years to achieve historic population densities for rehabilitation of extirpated or severely depressed stocks. This stocking rate is based on the Menominee River Lake Sturgeon population density; ideal stocking rates for different locations may vary with river size or stream order and connectivity. This information was shared to UMRCC Lake Sturgeon Restoration and Management Committee by Wisconsin and will continue to be evaluated.

Guidance from the UMRCC Lake Sturgeon Restoration and Management Committee will be used to help determine appropriate genetic strains for stocking in Illinois water bodies. A better understanding of the genetic makeup and connectivity of existing populations is essential to guide any future stocking actions. However, the full understanding of genetic diversity and effects of stocking in an open system within a metapopulation is not realistic in the altered UMRB. Adaptive management and proactive decisions may need to be made and any decisions will incorporate risk mitigation for the UMRB Lake Sturgeon population.

Assessment of Stocking Success

The assessment of stocking success for Lake Sturgeon in Illinois will be a long-term project spanning the next 20 to 50 years. The documentation of stocked fish survival through PIT tag identification of recaptured fish will help guide the knowledge for Lake Sturgeon reintroduction and management in Illinois waters. The development of sampling techniques that utilize fast-evolving technologies of underwater imaging and time frame specific sturgeon locations should continue to enhance the ability of researchers to sample Lake Sturgeon populations. Data from standardized fish monitoring programs throughout the State will be utilized for assessing stocking success.

Stocking Locations

Priority stocking locations for Lake Sturgeon are areas that best reflect the habitats necessary for optimum survival. These areas should contain key habitat characteristics that include sandy/rocky – silt/sand/clay substrates.

Public Outreach and Education

A public outreach campaign will be implemented to increase public awareness and knowledge of Lake Sturgeon to ensure support for recovery efforts. Public outreach and education will also be valuable in collecting more data on sightings of Lake Sturgeon throughout the state. Resources highlighting the importance and uniqueness of Lake Sturgeon will be made available to the public through brochures, posters, or social media. (Figure 2)

Regulating Lake Sturgeon in Illinois

Lake Sturgeon are currently listed as endangered in Illinois Administrative Rules: the Illinois List of Endangered and Threatened Fauna (Title 17 ILL. ADM. CODE, CH. I, SEC 1010). Fauna listed as threatened or endangered in Illinois may not be taken for any purpose. Accidental catches of threatened or endangered species must be released immediately.

Review of Management Plans and Regulations Implemented in Other States

Missouri – Endangered – no possession

Iowa – Endangered – no possession

Minnesota – Special Concern – no possession

Wisconsin – Hook and line season (Sept. 2 – Sept. 30) Minimum length limit 60 inches. Must purchase a harvest tag if harvest is intended and registered. Various catch and release seasons on various rivers within the state.

Indiana – Endangered = no possession

Tennessee – Endangered – no possession

Program Highlights

2023

Initial year of Illinois’ Lake Sturgeon stocking program. Three tributaries to the Illinois River, including the Sangamon, Mackinaw and Vermillion rivers were stocked with 2,400, 2,415, and 2,391 juvenile Lake Sturgeon, respectively.

Stocking sites:					
Date	River	Lat	Long	Location	
11/7/2023	Vermillion 1:	41.208714	-88.930558	57 Bridge	
11/7/2023	Vermillion 2:	41.12196	-88.842551	Streator Canoe Launch Area	
11/7/2023	Vermillion 3:	41.301816	-89.038988	Oglesby Vermillion River Boat Launch	
11/7/2023	Mackinaw 1:	40.447142	-89.690289	Wagon Sellar Rd.	
11/7/2023	Mackinaw 2:	40.439446	-89.468133	155 Bridge	
11/7/2023	Mackinaw 3:	40.569772	-89.318279	Mackinaw River SFWA Canoe Launch	
11/6/2023	Sangamon 1:	40.010939	-89.842594	Petersburg, Hurie Park	
11/6/2023	Sangamon 2:	39.862897	-89.626315	Springfield, Riverside Park	
11/6/2023	Sangamon 3:	39.840603	-89.546859	Riverton, Wheeland Park	

Table 1. Dates and locations of Lake Sturgeon stocking in 2023.

During the first year of Lake Sturgeon culture at Jake Wolf Memorial Fish Hatchery we observed a significant size discrepancy among fish. After reviewing culture literature and consulting with other hatcheries, we determined this was largely due to overcrowding. Unlike many of the species we rear, Lake Sturgeon production is limited primarily by the available bottom surface area of tanks rather than water volume. To address this, we installed four new 8-foot circular grow-out tanks. Based on discussions with collaborating state and federal hatcheries, this configuration should allow us to raise approximately 4,000 Lake Sturgeon annually while maintaining appropriate density to reduce size disparity.

We also learned important lessons regarding feeding and diet transitions. Lake Sturgeon arrive at Jake Wolf at approximately 1.5 inches in length, at which point they are transitioning off live brine shrimp and onto frozen bloodworms. At this size they cannot consume whole bloodworms, so the feed must be processed into smaller particles. Originally this was done manually using a cheese grater, but this year we transitioned to an industrial food processor, which greatly improved preparation efficiency. Fish are gradually transitioned through three increasing feed sizes until they can consume whole bloodworms at roughly 60 days. During this period, they are also moved through progressively larger tanks (5-ft to 6-ft to 8-ft) as they grow. Tanks are

cleaned daily using telescoping scrub pads, sample counts are conducted weekly, and full inventories are taken monthly to monitor survival and growth.

One additional lesson involved the transition from bloodworms to krill, which was recommended by federal hatcheries. Krill is roughly one-eighth the cost of bloodworms, making it economically attractive, but we observed that the transition resulted in temporary reductions in growth rate and slightly increased mortality, as some fish do not adapt well to the diet change. While this switch substantially reduces feed cost, it can delay the production timeline by approximately four weeks and may require a higher initial number of fingerlings to achieve desired stocking targets.

Lake Sturgeon typically exhibit very low mortality rates under stable culture conditions (generally less than 1% per month throughout the rearing process). The primary periods of loss occur during feed transitions, specifically when moving from live brine shrimp to bloodworms, and from bloodworms to krill. Each transition results in approximately 10% mortality.

As fish increase in size, stocking density becomes a critical limiting factor. Stocking delay due to warm water temperatures resulted in an increase in density to approximately 150% of recommended levels. This resulted in an increase in mortality from an average of 0.5% per month to approximately 14% for that month. This spike was attributed to disease driven by chronic stress and reduced water quality/cleanliness at elevated densities.

PIT tagging resulted in less than 1% mortality.

Daily maintenance for the Lake Sturgeon tanks averages approximately three hours of labor, primarily for cleaning and husbandry tasks. Average feeding during the rearing period was about 3.11 kg of feed per day, though this increases substantially as fish grow. With bloodworm costs averaging \$29.10 per kilogram, this equates to approximately \$90.50 in feed per day. Combined with an estimated \$150 in daily labor, the total operational cost averaged roughly \$240.50 per day over the 119-day culture period, not including electricity or other facility overhead costs.

2024

A 400 mm Lake Sturgeon was caught on July 9, 2024 in a fyke net at Treadway Lake (LaGrange Pool) by Illinois Natural History Survey as part of LTRM standardized fish monitoring. The fish was not scanned for a PIT tag; therefore we are unsure if this was a stocked fish.

A 250 - 300 mm Lake Sturgeon was caught in June 2024 by an angler in the Sangamon River near the lower stocking site, which was discovered from a Facebook fishing group.

The same angler caught another Lake Sturgeon in the same area of the Sangamon River in October 2024 that looked to be slightly larger in size. We were unable to make contact with the angler.

2025

In April 2025 an angler caught a 350 mm Lake Sturgeon below the Starved Rock L&D. We came across the picture on a Facebook fishing page. We were unable to make contact with the angler.

We have a report of 4-5 Lake Sturgeon caught (and released) in commercial fishing gear in Duck Island gravel pit (part of the Rice Lake SFWA complex) in July 2025. The fisherman indicated that one fish may have been collected twice. We plan to conduct focused surveys at Duck Island when time and manpower allow.

Juvenile Lake Sturgeon were stocked at two locations on the Illinois River in 2025.

-2,000 juvenile Lake Sturgeon were stocked into Dark Chute in the Alton Pool of the Illinois River on October 9, 2025. (39.235496°N 90.607630°W)

- 2,000 juvenile Lake Sturgeon were stocked into the Illinois River at Copperas Creek near the old lock channel in the LaGrange Pool of the Illinois River on October 9, 2025. (40.474616°N 89.889072°W)

These fish averaged 200 mm at stocking and no mortality was observed. All fish were inserted with PIT tags.

Five juvenile Lake Sturgeon were caught on October 29, 2025, in a trawl at the Peoria Lock and Dam tailwater zone (LaGrange Pool) by Illinois Natural History Survey as part of the LTRM standardized fish monitoring. The fish were identified by PIT tags to be from the cohort stocked about three weeks prior near Copperas Creek.

2026

Twenty-one of the PIT tagged YOY Lake Sturgeon reared at IDNR Jake Wolf Hatchery in 2025 were transferred to our partners at Cordova's Constellation Hatchery. Constellation's Hatchery conducted an intensive, indoor rearing of these fish to determine what growth gains could be obtained with an extra 6 months of culture. On average these fish grew 241 mm (9.5 inches) and 184 mm (0.8 pounds) from September 2025 to April 2026 with an extra six months of culture. Each of these fish had fin clips taken for future genetic analysis on parental strain. These fish will be stocked on or about April 1, 2026 near the tailwater section of the Starved Rock Lock and Dam on the Illinois River near Utica, Illinois. IDNR Lake Sturgeon stocking locations from 2023-2026 are shown in Figure 3.

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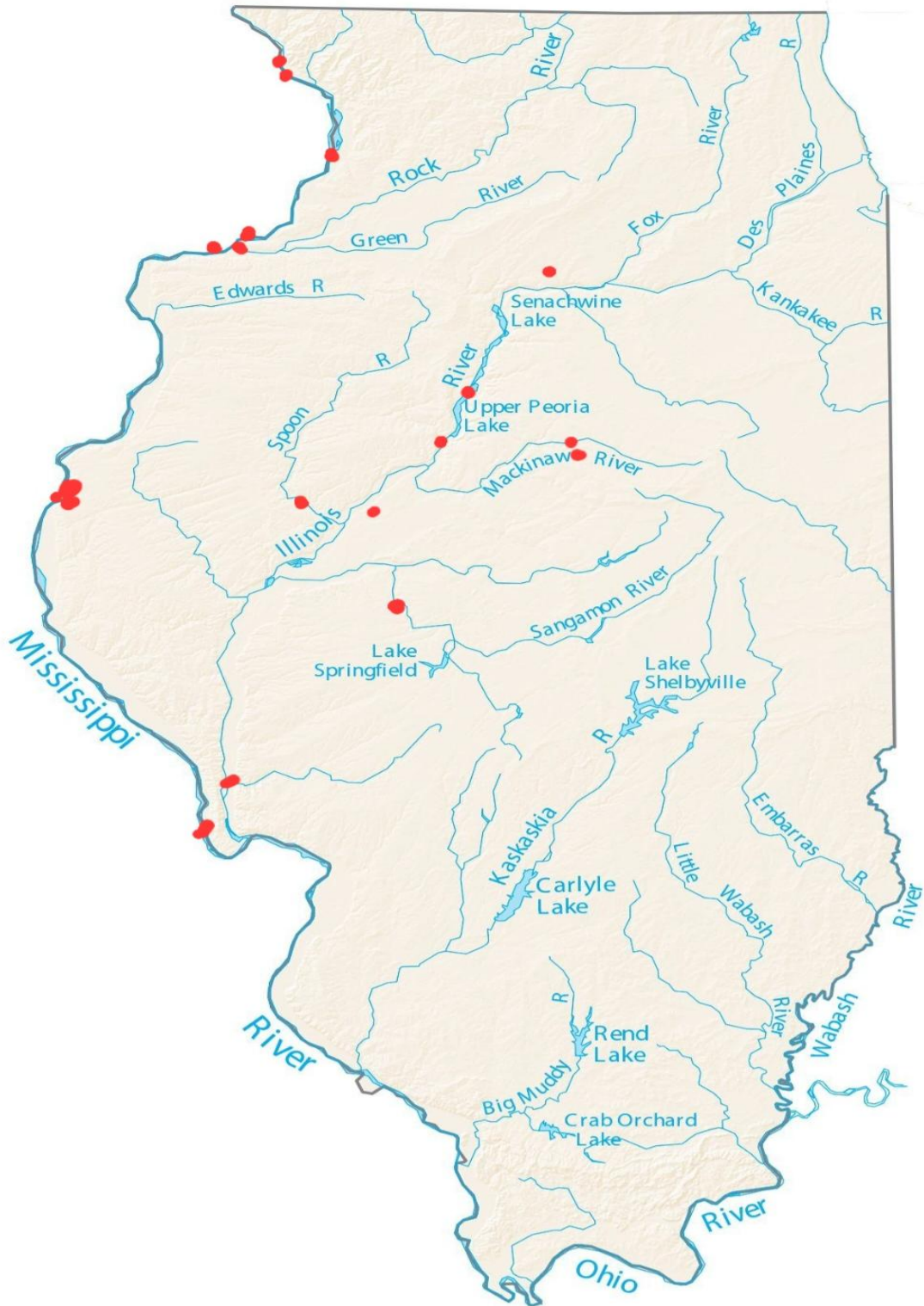


Figure 1. Contemporary era records for Lake Sturgeon since 1978.

STURGEON IN ILLINOIS WATERS

Did you know there are three species of sturgeon in waters of Illinois? With a maximum age of 150 years, the **state-endangered Lake Sturgeon** is the largest of the three species growing as large as 8 feet long and 300 pounds! Lake Sturgeon are being caught more frequently by Illinois' anglers as a result of state and federal recovery efforts. Lake Sturgeon are a protected species and **MUST BE RELEASED IMMEDIATELY**.



The **state and federally-endangered Pallid Sturgeon** can live over 40 years and reach a size of 5 feet long and 65 pounds. Pallid Sturgeon are a protected species and **MUST BE RELEASED IMMEDIATELY**.

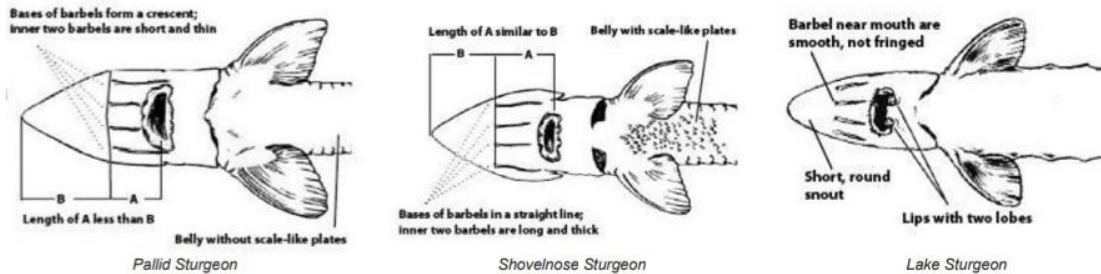


Photo credit: Missouri Department of Conservation

Shovelnose Sturgeon is the smallest of the three species, living over 20 years and rarely reach sizes over 30 inches and 5 pounds. Shovelnose Sturgeon support sport fisheries and a regulated commercial fishery in designated waters of Illinois.



Pallid Sturgeon, Shovelnose Sturgeon and their hybrids can be difficult to identify.



ILLINOIS LAKE STURGEON RECOVERY PROGRAM

Lake Sturgeon are a State-endangered fish species native to the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Lake Sturgeon are currently under review for potential federal listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The Lake Sturgeon is endangered in Illinois mainly due to the inability of the fish to reach upstream spawning areas because of the construction of dams and the destruction of spawning areas through channelization, siltation, impoundment and pollution. Excessive fishing in the late 1800s and early 1900s also contributed to the problem. Recovery and management of Lake Sturgeon is a complex, long-term effort, requiring basin-wide support from resource managers, hatchery staff, researchers, anglers, and conservation leaders; however, with committed efforts this resource may be able to flourish for future generations. In June 2023, the Missouri Department of Conservation offered the Illinois Department of Natural Resources - Division of Fisheries a unique opportunity to acquire 11,000 Mississippi-strain juvenile Lake Sturgeon from the USFWS Neosho National Fish Hatchery with the purpose to stock Lake Sturgeon in Illinois to aid in this basin-wide recovery program. For more information about the Lake Sturgeon Recovery Program in Illinois, visit www.ifishillinois.org.

Figure 2. IDNR Public Outreach for Lake Sturgeon 2026.

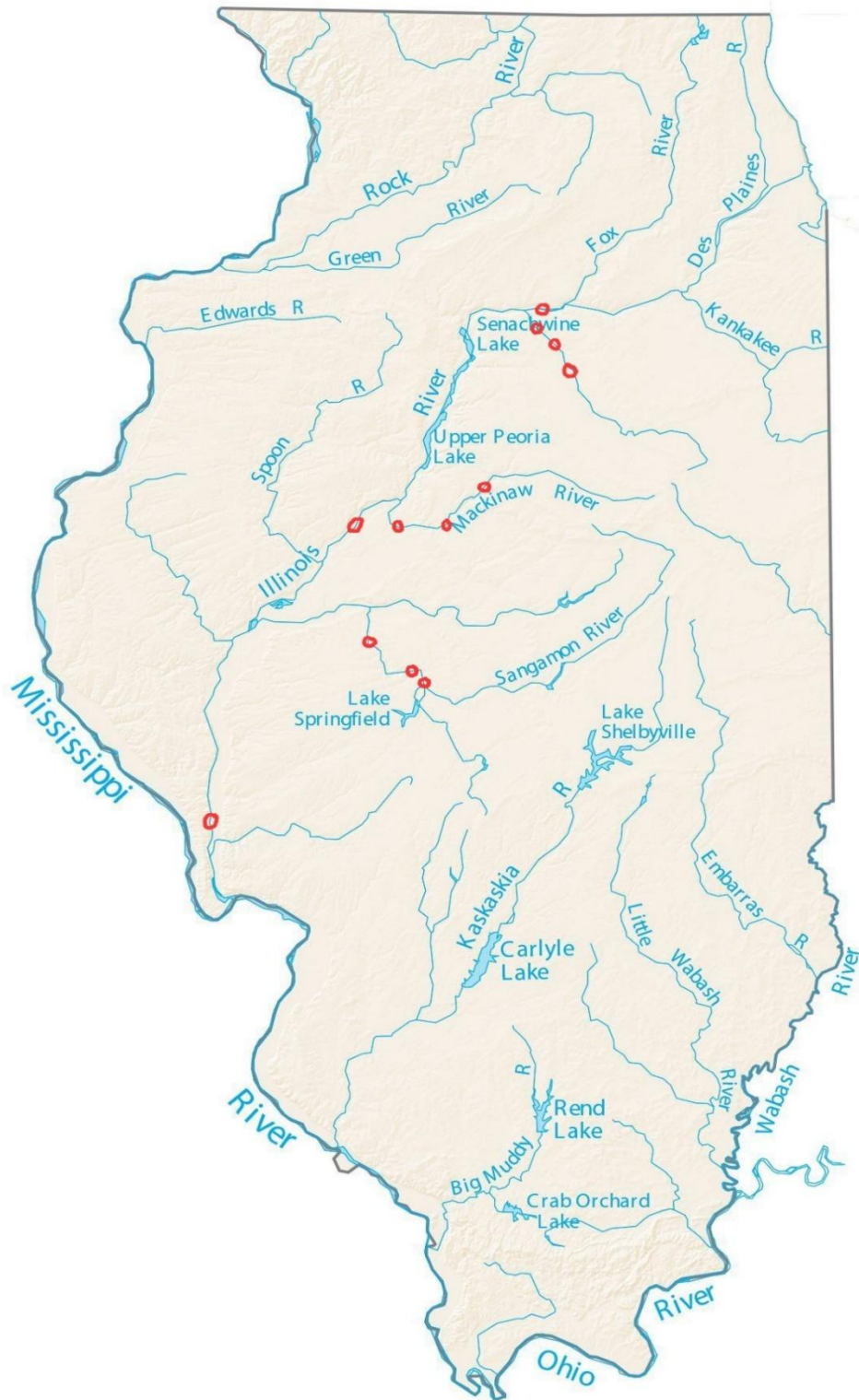


Figure 3. IDNR Lake Sturgeon stocking locations from 2023-2026.