

Atlantic Sturgeon – Dinosaurs of the Deep

What are they?

Atlantic sturgeons are large fish that have visited the Chesapeake Bay for many centuries. In one form or the other, sturgeons have been around for over 100 million years. They are larger and live longer than any other fish in the Bay.

What do they look like?

Atlantic sturgeons have shark-like fins. Instead of scales, their bodies are covered by hard plates called scutes. They have five rows of scutes: one is along the center of their backs, two are on their bellies, and the remaining two are located on each of their sides. Under the scutes, sturgeons also have very leathery skin. In the past, people have used this tough skin to make clothes and book covers.

These fish have hard snouts. Their mouths are on the underside of their bodies. Instead of teeth, the Atlantic sturgeon has four whisker-like sensors, called barbels. These barbels help them sense when there is something good to eat near them.



Photo Source: Eileen McVey, NOAA

Atlantic sturgeons live quite a long time. They can grow to be about 15 feet long and weigh over 800 pounds.

Where can you find them?

Atlantic sturgeons are a kind of fish that need to move into fresh water in order to lay their eggs. Huge adults come into the area from the open ocean in April or May. They make their way up the Bay into its large river tributaries and lay their eggs. After the eggs hatch, the young sturgeons stay in the Bay for around five years. Therefore, if you ever see a sturgeon in the Bay, it is likely to be a young one.

Atlantic sturgeon used to be quite common in the Bay. However, because of heavy fishing, pollution, and dam building, these fish are now very rare.

How do they behave?

Atlantic sturgeons are bottom feeders. They cruise slowly along the bottom of the Bay, using their snouts to turn over the sediment there, searching for their favorite foods. In fact, the European names for this kind of fish mean “the stirrer,” because of the way they look for food.

These fish have one very strange habit that scientists cannot explain. They often jump completely out of the water. In colonial times, there were many reports of sturgeons landing on the decks of ships.

What do they eat?

Sturgeons use their mouths to suck in their food. They prefer to eat insects and insect larvae, mollusks such as clams, and crustaceans such as crabs. Worms and snails are also part of their diet.

What eats them?

As adults, sturgeons have few predators. Their size and their scutes protect them from being eaten by many creatures. However, when they are in the ocean, they can be attacked by sea lampreys (an eel-like fish) and sharks.

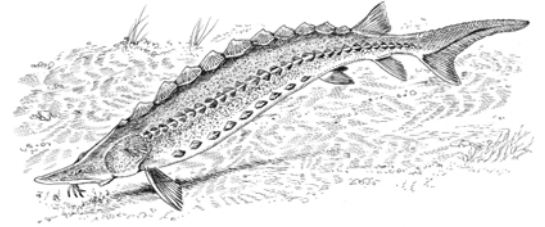
Sturgeon eggs and very young fish are often eaten by other fish.



Creature Feature

In the past, Atlantic sturgeons were an important part of the fishing trade in the Chesapeake Bay. They were valued for their meat and for their eggs, which were sold as high-priced caviar.

But Atlantic sturgeons were victims of their own success. Fishermen could sell them for a high price. Therefore, they tried to catch more and more of them. This high demand was hard to meet. Female Atlantic sturgeons don't lay eggs until they are around 14 years old. And then, they only lay eggs every two to six years.



In addition, as the region grew, dams were built across rivers that were nurseries for the sturgeon. The dams prevented the sturgeons from getting to the places where they laid their eggs.

Now, sturgeons face an even larger problem. Their diet consists entirely of animals that live on the bottom of the deep waters of the Bay. However, increased Bay pollution has meant that these areas sometimes have little dissolved oxygen. Without the dissolved oxygen, the creatures that live there—such as worms and clams—die, leaving the sturgeon with nothing to eat.

In 1990, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission adopted a plan to help the Atlantic sturgeon. Their plan requires states to strongly control the number of sturgeon that fishermen land.