

Sturgeon take surprise route from Maine to Merrimack River

By Mike LaBella / The Eagle-Tribune | Monday, August 23, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | [Local Coverage](#)

Haverhill -- A new chapter is being written in the story of a prehistoric fish living in the Merrimack River.

Once thought to number less than 100 in the Merrimack, the river's shortnose sturgeon population appears to be on the rebound, researchers said.

New estimates are that as many as 2,000 adults, in two distinct groups, inhabit the river. One group includes fish born in Haverhill's spawning grounds, while the other consists of fish born in Maine rivers such as the Kennebec and Androscoggin, which migrate to the Merrimack.

Researchers say that for much of the year, these sturgeon are looking for food in the lower part of the Merrimack -- from Amesbury to the Joppa Flats in Newburyport -- and live there from November to March.

Haverhill is the only place in the river where sturgeon lay their eggs, and that happens in the spring.

Researchers are excited "that the population seems to have increased naturally over the last 20 years," said Boyd Kynard, a fish biologist consultant and adjunct professor of fisheries at UMass Amherst.

Kynard began studying the Merrimack River's shortnose sturgeon 20 years ago. It is a species protected by law. Harming or harassing one is punishable by a fine of up to \$20,000, according to federal law.

When the state began building the new Comeau Bridge in 2003 at the western end of downtown, work was slowed during the spring spawning season of the shortnose sturgeon so the fish would not be disturbed. The new bridge opened in the fall of 2007.

Kieffer said the spawning ground in Haverhill has not been pinpointed, but it is between the Comeau and Basiliere bridges and ends around a mile upstream.

"We don't know why they select these rocks and not the rocks up river," he said.

"This is the only example on the entire Atlantic coast that has increased its numbers," Kynard said of the Merrimack sturgeon. "There are fishery agencies that would love to rehabilitate a population like this by stocking young ones like they do with Atlantic salmon. But this data says no, and that given time they will restore their own population."

Sturgeon grow to 4 to 6 feet in the Merrimack. The fish matures in eight to 12 years and can live to age 60. It has a shark-like tail and four sensory barbels that protrude from the nose to detect food.

Sturgeon are bottom-feeders that eat sand worms, mollusks and crustaceans. Harvesting for their flesh and caviar in the mid-1800s caused a sharp decline in their numbers.

Unveiling the sturgeon's secrets

One secret of the shortnose sturgeon was only recently discovered after a small number of egg-bearing females ready to release their eggs were captured and tagged last winter.

They were expected to be spawning in Haverhill in the spring, but instead moved to known spawning grounds in Maine's Kennebec River to lay their eggs, suggesting they are native to the Kennebec.

Researchers said it may be part of a previously unknown migration of shortnose sturgeon taking place and that it could account for a dramatic increase in their population in the Merrimack River.

"We have not seen that kind of coastal spawning migration in the past for the Merrimack, and it tells us the increase in numbers for the Merrimack may be a result of fish migrating from the Kennebec," said Micah Kieffer, fisheries biologist with a federal fish research center in Turners Falls.

Kynard said it is difficult to get a population estimate of the native Merrimack River sturgeon because the groups that congregate in the lower part of the river are hard to tell apart without genetic testing.

Kieffer first studied the Merrimack's shortnose sturgeon between 1987 and 1990 while he was a graduate student at UMass Amherst. Biologist Boyd Kynard led the study.

Kieffer said he can only speculate on why the fish are returning in big numbers to the Merrimack. He said factors for the return likely include improved water quality, spawning success, and a possible explosion of the Kennebec River population, forcing the

shortnose sturgeon there to feed elsewhere.

It's roughly a five-day journey for the sturgeon between both rivers and their route of travel is unknown at this time, researchers said.

City adopts the sturgeon

In 2004, Barney Gallagher, longtime writer for The Eagle-Tribune and Haverhill Gazette, suggested Haverhill capitalize on the sturgeon by naming it "Merry Mac" and using it to promote the city.

"Accounts of early life along the river tell of how important the sturgeon was to the settlers, along, of course, with other kinds of fish," he wrote. "They used it for food, they sent it back to England, they even used the funny "scales" for various things because they were bony as opposed to the usually slick scales of other fish."

Last year the Soles of Haverhill committee named one of its giant shoes "Merry Mac," Haverhill's Rollicking River Monster. Gallagher had envisioned "a big sturgeon with a big grin, leaping out of the water to greet everyone."

Organizers of the recent Haverhill River Ruckus created Sammy Sturgeon as their mascot. Sammy resembles Gallagher's character.


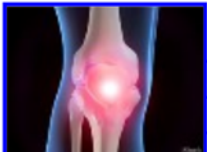

"The sturgeon has raised a ruckus in Haverhill," joked Leota Sarrette, one of the events organizers. "He's been given a bad rap so we're changing his image for the better."

Two years ago the city hoped to dredge the river, particularly in the waters off the downtown area in order to allow larger boats to travel here. Federal officials put a stop to it as the shortnose sturgeon lays its eggs among rocks that would be removed during dredging.

"If there are any activities in the river, I think it will still need a national fisheries service permit," Kynard said. "If it is in the Newburyport or Haverhill area, it will mean what it's always meant, which is to describe the activity and then they will make a decision."

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