

From the Issaquah Press, Sports Section, April 2, 2008

The Issaquah Press this week begins a monthly fishing column written by Dallas Cross a longtime Issaquah resident and fisherman. He is a retired research administrator and molecular biologist with over 20 scientific publications. He sees fish life and fishing as metaphors for human experience. Cross has fished many years in Washington for salmon, sturgeon, trout, steelhead, salt water fish, squid, shell fish and crayfish. He has also fished abroad in Mexico, Canada, Belize and Alaska. He is currently enjoying a new career as a professional fishing companion.



Dallas Cross

White Sturgeon in Pink Rhody Time

by Dallas Cross

*Acipenser transmontanus*, meaning "sturgeon beyond the mountains," is the White Sturgeon. We have lots of them here in Washington State. In fact, we have two of the four major American West Coast Rivers with big sea runs of sturgeon in the Chehalis and the Columbia Rivers. The general sturgeon season is year round with a limit of one fish per day. The Lower Columbia River Fishery has two periods when you can retain fish, Jan 1 through April 30 and again May 10th through June 24th. The best time to catch and keep sturgeon is mid-May and June when wild Rhododendrons bloom. Washington sturgeon are a "slot" fish meaning you may only keep those measuring 42 up to 60 inches, from nose to tail. On May 10 the minimum size changes to 45 inches.

Charter boat fishing is the easy way to get into sturgeon catching and actually the most productive. Ilwaco, Washington near the mouth of the Columbia River is a premier sturgeon charter boat headquarters. Sturgeon fishing here is very popular and it is well advised to reserve your spot on a charter well ahead of time, especially for weekend fishing trips. On a charter you only have to take aboard proper clothing, a pocket lunch and a pair of waterproof shoes. They furnish the necessary gear and you can buy a day license at their office. Go to [ilwacowashington.com](http://ilwacowashington.com) on the web for more information.

If you prefer to fish by casting from shore you should look for and join the fishermen with long poles along the Columbia River on the way from I-5 to Ilwaco. The Lewis and Clark Campsite Park on Highway 101, after you pass the Astoria Bridge and just before the tunnel in the road, is a favorite casting place of mine. Here you can fish comfortably from a camp chair or rock, but landing a big fish on the rugged shore can be a problem.

To catch sturgeon you should use a casting rod capable of handling two to six-plus ounce weights. Short rods of six feet with a level wind reel do well for fishing from a boat, but spinning rods up to twelve feet or longer are needed for long casts from the bank. Both smelt and herring are good bait and the sturgeon follow smelt runs eating fish that die after they encounter fresh water and wash back down stream. The bait usually washes along the bottom of the river and accumulates in eddies and swirls. Here we need to put our bait. Thus, the large sinkers are key to proper placement and to keep the bait from rolling on the bottom.

Carroll "Bearmeat" Beardsley was introduced to me as a sturgeon expert three decades ago. Carroll was the logistical chief, bear meat keeper and cook for the annual Bear Meat Festival in McCleary, Washington. The Washington Fish and Game department regularly consulted Carroll to get sturgeon census information when the sport started to grow in popularity during the 1970's. Carroll's method of fishing is echoed on most of the charter boats today. His terminal gear consisted of a large snap hook tied to the 20 to 30 pound test line, with a pyramid sinker sliding on the line above the ring of the snap hook. Sturgeon have sensitive mouths and feeler whiskers and

avoid lines with a hard feel such as monofilament. Thus, he used a 30 pound test, soft braided, Dacron squidding line, about two feet long, as a leader. To this he snelled a terminal 2/0 or 3/0 hook. To bait the hook he inserted the hook just behind the head of the smelt, and turned the hook so the point emerged through the eye socket pointing towards the tail with not much of the point protruding. He would then throw a series of half-hitch loops from head to tail on the bait actually making a trussed up package. The beauty of this package is that it preserves the bait from being torn by the current or bullheads; and the line straightens out without any knots when the hook is set.

Carroll recently passed away but I am reminded of him every time I fish sturgeon or see Scotch Broom along the roads because he ashamedly admitted to me it was his great grandfather who first brought this noxious weed to the Northwest from Scotland.

Sturgeon fishing is a great opportunity that can be enjoyed with minimum gear. You get the thrill of a strong fish that runs hard, often jumps like a trout, and one that offers a recurring reward on the home dinner plate. But most of all you get to fish with your family and friends nearby