

# Suwannee River's Sturgeon launch

*Article and photographs by Karen Parker*



The prehistoric Gulf sturgeon in the Suwannee River are huge, and they love to jump. The problem is they sometimes collide with boaters. Gulf sturgeon can grow to 8 feet long and weigh up to 200 pounds. When they leap, they carry a lot of momentum.

They move into the Suwannee River in North Florida each spring to spawn, migrating from the Gulf of Mexico. They remain in the Suwannee all summer and begin their return migration to the Gulf during September and October.

The Suwannee is considered the last “wild” river in the state. There are no man-made structures or obstructions on the river, so the sturgeon can traverse the entire length of the Suwannee. Gulf sturgeon do come up into other rivers in the state’s Panhandle, but the Suwannee supports the largest population, with more than 7,000 fish.

While sturgeon are in the Suwannee, they do not eat and can lose up to 25 percent of their total body weight. Once they

return to the Gulf, they begin to feed in earnest, gaining back the weight they have lost and then some.

Gulf sturgeon are protected and cannot be harvested. In 1991, the federal government listed them as threatened. The state listed these fish as a species of special concern in 1984. They had been harvested nearly to the point of extinction prior to their protection.

Occasionally, boaters are injured by these fish when they leap out of the water. In 2006, eight people sustained injuries in direct strikes from sturgeon. Two other boaters were injured when a sturgeon jumped in front of their vessel. When they swerved to avoid it, they hit a bridge piling and were seriously injured. So far during 2007, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has documented six air strikes and eight people injured.

Regardless of what you may have seen or read in news reports, these fish are not “at-

tacking” boaters. The fish do not target boaters. They’re just doing what they’ve been doing for millions of years... jumping. There are just more people on the river now and sometimes the two species collide.

The FWC has launched a public awareness campaign to alert boaters to these jumping fish and to urge them to go slow, especially in areas where the fish congregate.

The intent of this campaign isn’t to scare people away from enjoying the Suwannee River; it’s to let people know these fish are out there, and the best course of action to take is to wear a life jacket and keep boat speeds down. This will provide boaters with increased reaction time and the impact won’t be as bad if you’re hit doing 5 miles per hour as compared to being hit while you’re doing 25 mph.

The Suwannee is a gorgeous river that should be enjoyed, and the sturgeon are valuable natural resources that can be a source of awe when they jump. **FW**

