



Alligator gar to make return to Illinois with IDNR reintroduction

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALLIGATOR GAR

(*ATRACTOSTEUS SPATULA*)

An Overview of History, Research, and Prospects in Illinois

Prepared By: Nathan Grider, IDNR



SPRINGFIELD - It has been 50 years since an alligator gar was last caught in the state of Illinois, but within some years, the fish species should return.

Multi states are working with the **Illinois Fish and Wildlife Services** to reintroduce the alligator gar species to Illinois.

A recent story came out that said alligator gars are being reintroduced in Illinois to help bring down the Asian Carp population, which is not a fact. **Dan Stephenson**, chief of fisheries with the Illinois Fish and Wildlife Services, said that story is completely untrue. The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune have done stories clarifying the rumors that went rampant after the story appeared.

“We will stock so few of the alligator gar that there is no way it could have impact on the Asian Carp population,” Stephenson said. “When we thought about reintroducing alligator gar we never thought about Asian Carp.”

Stephenson said even National Geographic and the Wall Street Journal have contacted him in regard to the rumors that spread after the inaccurate account appeared.

The last alligator gar catch in Illinois was in 1966, it weighed 7-foot long and weighed 130 pounds and was caught with line and tackle in Mississippi River in Alexander County.

Stephenson said the purpose of the reintroduction is to attempt to bring back a fish species that once existed in Illinois that is extinct. He said if alligator gar could survive and prosper, they would become a sought-after fish for special fishing expeditions. It will take years for the alligator gars to get where they would be trophy fish, he said.

A hatchery in Mississippi will be providing the alligator gar to be introduced in Illinois.

“They send fry-size fish just after they are hatched out of the egg and used up the yolk sac,” he said. “They are the size of mosquitoes when they send them. We then will feed them over the course of the summer and get them to 12 to 18 inches long and then reintroduce them in September or October.”

Stephenson said he didn’t know if any of the alligator gar would be stocked in nearby locations like Grafton, but he said he believes South of Meredosia, which is about 70 miles away, might be the closest place they would be stocked. He said the plan was to stock some of the alligator gar in Sangamon County. One point he made is that through floods and just general conditions, fish do travel, so eventually some alligator gar could make their way to the region.

“They will redistribute in floods and also have movement and they may leave Illinois and go to Kentucky or Tennessee,” he said. “This is an experimental program to see if we can bring them back to Illinois. There were never very many in Illinois. Alligator gar are still very numerous in Texas and

Life History & Ecology

- Gar can breathe air, survive low DO
- Prefer sluggish pools, backwater lakes, swamps, and brackish water – often near the surface
- Spawning is variable: May – July in Oklahoma & July – August in Mexico
- Spawn induced by floods, move to backwaters, eggs stick to vegetation
- Maturity: Females at ~11 years and
Males at ~6 years

Louisiana.”

Stephenson said one of the reasons alligator gar became extinct in Illinois is fishermen killed them because they didn’t like them. Eventually the alligator gar habitat was lost in Illinois.

“They get 8 feet long to 300 pounds,” he said. “Female alligator gar take 11 years to become sexually mature, so it will be a long time before natural spawning takes place,” Stephenson said.

“Alligator gar do scare people with their whole appearance,” Stephenson said. “They have a prehistoric animal fossil record that goes back millions of years. They have pretty fierce teeth. I wouldn’t expect them to live beyond 30-50 years. It will be interesting to see how this goes.”