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Paddlefish:



A scenic 17-mile drive north from the agricultural community of Glendive, Montana, the Intake is considered the “Paddlefish and Caviar Capital of the World.” From mid-May through June, dense schools of paddlefish muscle their way up the Yellowstone River from North Dakota’s Lake Sakakawea to spawn.

According to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, who monitor these paddlefish, a lack of suitable spawning habitat, overfishing, and water pollution have reduced paddlefish populations in much of the U.S. except in Montana. Here, healthy waterways and tight regulations produce ample numbers of fish year after year. The paddlefish from Lake Sakakawea are so abundant that a sustainable fishery has been thriving at the Intake for the past 45 years. That’s good news for anglers who want to land one of these prehistoric giants, a species older than dinosaurs, weighing from 20 to over 100 pounds. (The largest paddlefish on record is 198 pounds from Lake Okoboji, Iowa. The Montana record is 142.5 pounds.)

“The reason for casting an exposed treble and not a lure or plug lies in the paddlefish’s unique diet,” he says. Post has been fishing for paddlefish at the Intake since he could walk. “These enormous fish, which have an average lifespan of more than 60 years, filter zooplankton from the water with comblike gill rakers by swimming with their bucket mouths agape—similar to a basking shark.” Because

From atop a stony pinnacle in Eastern Montana’s Yellowstone River, I study the stained, roily water cascading beneath me. My right hand clutches an 8-foot surf rod with a meaty saltwater spinning reel loaded with several hundred yards of fluorescent-green 60-pound-test mono. A colossal 8/0 treble hook tied a couple feet above a 5-ounce lead sinker dangles at the end of my line. Up ahead, a section of whitewater leads to Yellowstone’s Intake Diversion Dam.

“Cast into those rapids, make long sweeps with your rod, and reel in fast,” instructs Greg Post, a Montana native who operates the concession stand at the intake fishing access site (known simply as the “Intake”), which caters to over 3,000 anglers who arrive every spring to battle one of the most primitive, illusive, and bizarre-looking freshwater creatures in North America—the paddlefish.



Prehistoric Giants!

> Action from the Caviar
Capital of the World

BY **JAMES O. FRAIOLI***

Photos by the Author

Paddlefish!

paddlefish aren't designed to feed on anything larger than microscopic organisms, they cannot be caught by conventional fishing methods. Instead, anglers land paddlefish by snagging.

I make a long cast across the current and quickly reel in the slack, watching my neon line intently while the sinker tumbles downstream followed by the trailing hook. I make long sweeps of the rod, just as instructed, always winding to keep the line tight.

It takes only moments before my rod slams forward, sliding me to the edge of my slippery perch and almost into the river. Line screams off the reel as the fish bolts upstream and swims for the far bank. Impressed with its tremendous strength, I step back and brace myself on the cobblestone shoreline. The paddlefish, a mostly cartilaginous fish and distant cousin to the



shark, turns and swims downstream, stripping more line with a fury. The other anglers hold off casting while I shuffle down the riverbank, slowly gaining on my prize.

Fifteen minutes later, a two-foot paddle breaks the surface. The paddle functions much like an antenna, containing sensory receptors that enable this fish to navigate murky

▶ Getting In on the Action

PADDLEFISH WERE ONCE ABUNDANT in major rivers throughout the Mississippi River basin. Following the building of dams—many of which blocked migration routes to spawning areas—along with other forms of habitat degradation, and commercial and recreational overharvest, paddlefish populations in many areas declined radically. Recreational snagging for concentrations of spawning fish and late age-at-maturity contribute to the species' vulnerability to overexploitation.


About fifteen states still have recreational paddlefish fisheries, many turning to special regulations such as specific open seasons, creel limits, length limits, and quota systems to sustain populations. Some states also stock the fish.

Anglers still can enjoy significant paddlefish fisheries in portions of major rivers in the Mississippi River basin, in addition to those that have developed in some larger reservoirs. A few prominent fisheries are listed below, but with a little homework you should be able to find some of the lesser-known opportunities that exist for good fishing. Wherever you plan to head, be sure to check with the fishery agency beforehand about any special seasons or harvest regulations, in addition to required tags, stamps, permits, or tackle restrictions. —**In-Fisherman**

PLACES TO GO

- ▶ Missouri River, North Dakota. **Contact:** North Dakota Game and Fish Department, gf.nd.gov.
- ▶ Intake, Yellowstone River, and Missouri River above Fort Peck Reservoir, Montana. **Contact:** Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, fwp.mt.gov.
- ▶ Gavins Point, Missouri River, Nebraska/South Dakota. **Contact:** Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, ngpc.state.ne.us; South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, sdgfp.info.
- ▶ Osage River, Truman Lake, Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri. **Contact:** Missouri Department of Conservation, doc.mo.gov.
- ▶ Neosho River, Grand Lake, Oklahoma. **Contact:** Oklahoma Department of Conservation, wildlifedepartment.com.
- ▶ Arkansas River, Trimble and Ozark dams. **Contact:** Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, agfc.com.
- ▶ Cherokee Reservoir Headwaters, Tennessee. **Contact:** Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, state.tn.us/twra.



 PADDLEFISH RANGE

“She’s a big one, fifty-plus, easy,”

Post says as the biologists secure the stout female...

waters. It also keeps the fish level while it continually moves and filters plankton. The fish attempts a final run but soon tires.

“She’s coming in,” Post says, and points to a large sharklike tail propelling the fish toward shore. Now it’s feeling more like a tractor tire, and I hoist the spent paddlefish into ankle-deep water and into the waiting hands of two biologists from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

“She’s a big one, fifty-plus, easy,” Post says as the biologists secure the stout female, its gray scaleless belly laden with eggs. After dislodging the treble from the fish’s blue-speckled gill plate with a pair of sturdy pliers, vital information is recorded and a metal tag is crimped onto its lower lip. Results of this ongoing study suggest paddlefish are not overfished in Montana, especially since only 5 percent of the total population for the state is harvested for food and caviar every year. After a couple of snapshots, the fish is released unharmed. This is just one of more than 250 paddlefish that are caught and released at the Intake today.

Regulations at the Intake require catch-and-release fishing during certain days of the week, with mandatory harvest on the remaining days. Anglers need a special tag to harvest a paddlefish, with a limit of one fish per season. The season runs from May 15 until the end of June, but since the fishery is managed under a quota,

harvest can be closed before the end of June, with catch-and-release fishing continuing until the season’s end. Check with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for regulation updates.

For years, fishing for paddlefish at Glendive was primarily for sport and its dense white meat, while the roe from large females was discarded. In 1987, the Glendive Chamber of Commerce began investigating the possibility of paddlefish roe from the Yellowstone River being a saleable commodity. Today, hundreds of pounds of paddlefish roe are processed every season at Yellowstone Caviar, a not-for-profit company that blends conservation, scientific study, and utilization of natural resources.

Almost 100 percent of the roe is donated by anglers in exchange for free fish-cleaning, wrapping, and refrigeration of meat at the Intake concession stand during harvest season. The caviar is then trucked to Glendive, where it’s processed and shipped to caviar buyers, who distribute the superior product to exclusive restaurants and caviar connoisseurs around the world.

For more information about Montana paddlefishing or paddlefish caviar, contact: Glendive Chamber of Commerce, 406/377-5601, or glendivechamber.com. ■

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