Recent Sturgeon Catch May Be the Largest Fish Ever Recorded From Oneida Lake

Last week, researchers at the Cornell University Biological Field Station may have set a new mark for the largest fish ever recorded from Oneida Lake. A netting survey for lake sturgeon resulted in the tagging and release of a 139 pound sturgeon, the largest sturgeon handled since the sturgeon netting survey began 17 years ago in 2002, and possibly the largest fish ever documented in Oneida Lake.

The lake sturgeon was captured on June 19, 2019 along with 10 other sturgeon as part of research netting by Cornell University on Oneida Lake, where 12 standard sites are netted every year in the month of May, and again in June. The sturgeon are sedated, measured and weighed, and samples taken for aging, then fish are tagged and allowed to recover before being released back into Oneida Lake. The 139 pound behemoth came in at 72 ½ inches and was aged at 20 years old. This year, researchers added a larger size mesh to check for larger fish, and this fish was caught in the larger mesh size.

A large number of lake sturgeon were stocked in Oneida Lake beginning 24 years ago in 1995, as part of a statewide lake sturgeon restoration program by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) in cooperation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Sturgeon fingerlings are raised at the Oneida Fish Cultural Station in Constantia and at the Genoa National Fish Hatchery in Wisconsin, for transport back to NY waters. The recent sturgeon captures are almost certainly a direct result of the highly successful stocking program.

Once abundant in the Great Lakes region, lake sturgeon populations suffered severe declines due to overfishing for the lucrative caviar trade, dam construction on spawning tributaries, and habitat degradation resulting in listing as a state Threatened Species in 1983. Previous to the stocking program, historic newspaper accounts reveal only about a dozen sturgeon reports from Oneida Lake, mostly from the years 1856-1920, ranging up to 105 lbs. That would make the recent 139 lb lake sturgeon the largest fish ever documented in Oneida Lake.

As a result of the stocking program, angler catches of sturgeon have increased in recent years. Lake sturgeon are a Threatened Species in NY, so there is no open season for them and possession is prohibited. Anglers may not target sturgeon or try to catch them. If an angler catches sturgeon in an area while fishing for other species, they must be immediately released without harm. Anglers are encouraged to check for a small yellow tag on the dorsal (top) fin, write down the tag number and quickly return the fish to the water without removing the tag. Then call the phone number on the tag (315-633-9243) or call the nearest DEC office.

Female lake sturgeon do not spawn until they are 15 or more years old, and were often harvested before they could even spawn once. Lake sturgeon in NY grow to over 250 pounds and 7 feet long, and can live to be over 100 years old. It will be exciting to see just how large Oneida Lake sturgeon will grow in the coming years!