

Sturgeon Vignette – Winnebago Sturgeon Biologists through the years

Ron Bruch and Ryan Koenigs Winnebago Sturgeon Biologist

Managing or studying the biology of sturgeon takes years of work to really obtain an understanding of the animal and to develop an effective program that will guarantee success of a long-term sustainable population and fishery. In fact it takes many generations, not only of fish, but also of sturgeon biologists. The fish themselves live a very long time – possibly 150 years or more, with a generation time of about 25-30 years or so (generation being the time it takes for a newly hatched sturgeon to grow to an adult and begin to contribute progeny for the future). Sturgeon Biologists may also live a long time, but their careers working with sturgeon typically don't last near as long as even one generation-time of sturgeon. Also, one Sturgeon Biologist cannot do the work needed to manage or study sturgeon alone – they always have a group of very capable and professional technicians and other biologists that work with them to accomplish all tasks that are necessary to implement a successful sturgeon program.

The Winnebago System has been blessed with the longest lineage of fisheries professionals working on any sturgeon population in the state. The original biological studies and science based management program on lake sturgeon in the Winnebago System began in 1941. Here are the Sturgeon Biologists that led the programs that over time built the sturgeon population and management program that we all come to enjoy so very much today:

Dr. Ed Schneberger – 1940s

“Doc” Schneberger was one of the first fisheries biologists hired by the Wisconsin Conservation Department and the first to work on sturgeon on the Winnebago System. He initiated the first harvest assessments and aging studies on Lake Winnebago Sturgeon in 1941. Doc is the second person from the left (below the arrow) in the photo above in 1933 with a group of fellow graduate students at the Trout Lake Biological station in Boulder Junction, WI. Sitting to the right of Ed in the photo is his professor from University of Wisconsin Madison, the world renowned Dr. Chancey.



Robert Probst – late 1940s, early 1950s

Bob Probst completed the first, and one of the most comprehensive, age and growth studies ever completed on the lake sturgeon while working on the Winnebago System in the years after WWII. His work provided the first detailed understanding of Winnebago lake sturgeon age and growth, diet, and weight-length relationships on fish from 1 to over 80 years in age.

Tom Wirth – 1950s

Tom began working on the Winnebago System sturgeon population and fishery in the mid-1950s. During this time period, the fishery was rapidly expanding due to a general increasing in spearing effort and harvest along with the opening of the Upriver Lakes spear fishery in 1952. Tom conducted the first studies to determine the sex and stage of harvested sturgeon in 1954. He also was the first to conduct comprehensive assessments of the spawning fish on the Wolf River.

Photo to right shows Tom carrying a sturgeon captured from the spawning grounds of the Wolf River off County X (west of New London) in the mid-1950s.



Gordon Priegel – late 1950s–1960s

Gordon came to work with Tom Wirth in the late 1950s and his research made significant contributions to the understanding of sturgeon life history, harvest trends, and safe harvest levels. Through his work Gordon established the “5% harvest limit rule” that we follow to this day in our sturgeon management program. Through his work, he recommended that no more than 5% of the harvestable stock of sturgeon be taken in any year in order to sustain the population. Gordon also broke in a new young biologist (Dan Folz) to sturgeon work on the Wolf River in 1959-1960.



Dan Folz – 1974-1989 (aka “Father Sturgeon”)

As I mentioned above Dan Folz began working with sturgeon in the late 1950s, early 1960s, but became the Winnebago Sturgeon Biologist in 1974. When Dan took his new position in Oshkosh, the Wolf River sturgeon spawning assessment had not been conducted in 10 years (Gordon Priegel had left for a new job in Madison in the mid 1960s and the assessment was not continued). Dan also came on board at a time when the sturgeon stocks were at a very low level due to high harvests in the 1950s and high illegal harvests on the rivers and upriver Lakes in the 1930s through the 1960s. He quickly, but thoroughly, developed and implemented a new





sturgeon population assessment, as well as an improved harvest assessment. He also began to build a database to allow for the first population estimates to be made since the late 1950s. He found the stock was recovering from the low levels of the late 1950s, but had a ways to go. He worked with the founders of Sturgeon For Tomorrow, Don Czekleba of the DNR hatchery program, and Fred Binkowski of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the late 1970s to lay out a program for

developing the techniques used for artificial propagation of lake sturgeon, which up to that point had never been done before. He produced the data and understanding of Winnebago lake sturgeon that is the foundation of the program that we run today. Dan retired in 1989, but continues to work with the Winnebago lake sturgeon population. Dan was also a mentor to his successor, Ron Bruch, for the duration of Ron's illustrious career as the Winnebago Sturgeon Biologist.

Ron Bruch – 1990-2012

Ron first worked with Dan Folz in 1976 as a Student Intern in Oshkosh. He started full time with the DNR in March of 1977, and was fortunate enough to come back to work with Dan again in Oshkosh as a Biologist in 1986. After Dan's retirement in 1989, Ron took over as the new Sturgeon Biologist in 1990 – two weeks prior to the blow-out high harvest spearing season that February. During his 22 year tenure as the Winnebago Sturgeon Biologist, Ron expanded on the efforts of Dan Folz and built a sturgeon management program that is held as the gold standard world-wide for sturgeon management. In 1992, Ron formed the Winnebago Citizens Sturgeon Advisory Committee, a group that he worked with to pass 22 regulation changes during the 1990s-2000s. These regulations shape the annual spear fishery that we enjoy today, most notably the implementation of a harvest cap system, reduction in spearing hours, the lottery fishery on the Upriver Lakes, and the list goes on and on. Ron also greatly advanced our understanding of sturgeon spawning behavior, seasonal movement patterns, age and growth rates, mortality rates, and life histories. Ron's dedication and knowledge pertaining to sturgeon make him one of the most revered and respected sturgeon experts in the world. His peers respect his work so much that he has and continues to serve on the World Sturgeon Conservation Society Board and is the President of the North American Sturgeon and Paddlefish Society. The work that Ron Bruch did with the Winnebago



sturgeon population should be commended, so make sure that you thank him for his efforts the next time you see him.



Ryan Koenigs – 2012-present

I was lucky enough to be hired as a Fisheries Technician by Ron Bruch in January of 2008. I couldn't have asked to work for a better supervisor or have a better mentor. During my 4+ years working for Ron he taught me many things, but none more important than how to effectively engage the general public into making sound management decisions based on accurate data. I hope to continue to work with and learn from Ron during my career, similar to the relationship that he has with his predecessor Dan Folz. I thank Ron, Dan, and the biologists before them for advancing our understanding of the Winnebago System sturgeon population and fishery, and I look forward to the memories and challenges that lie ahead!



Three generations of sturgeon biologists: Dan Folz (far left), Ron Bruch (middle), and Ryan Koenigs (far right), Wolf River, April 2012