



# PALLID STURGEON

## MY SCIENTIFIC NAME

*Scaphirhynchus albus*

## BY THE NUMBERS

Pallid sturgeon can grow to more than 6 feet long and weigh over 80 pounds. Several of us have been aged at over 60 years old.

## HOW TO IDENTIFY ME

My scientific name means spade-snouted (*Scaphirhynchus*) and white (*albus*), which are good clues. I am also called the pallid sturgeon because I am not very colorful. Visualize a greyish prehistoric fish with a shovel (or spade) shaped head, a long pointed snout, a toothless mouth that sticks out and works like a vacuum cleaner, whisker-like **barbels**, and a body lined with **scutes**. I also have a long forked **heterocercal tail**, the top is longer than the bottom.

## WHY I MATTER AND WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING

We are an ancient big-river fish that used to swim freely throughout the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers (Figure 1). Our numbers spiraled downward during the 1900s because we were overfished for our eggs, sold as a gourmet food called caviar. Then decades of studding our rivers with dams blocked us from reaching our spawning and feeding grounds (Figure 1). Our **larval** fish also can't swim; they drift with the river currents and sometimes are unable to reach feeding grounds, and most of them die.

## MY STATUS

We were listed as federally endangered in 1990. The good news is scientists have learned more about our biology which is helping them restore us and the places we live. And our national fish hatcheries are raising and stocking us back into rivers. Returning natural water flows in the river and restoring access to our spawning and feeding grounds, are keys to our survival.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Pallid sturgeon haven't changed much in 70 million years, and their ancestors go back more than 200 million years. They truly are "living dinosaurs."
- Those pointed armor-like structures on their sides and back are called **scutes**.
- Pallid sturgeon are built for a life in muddy water. Their tiny eyes are not very efficient at finding food, but their whisker-like barbels are covered with **chemoreceptors**, like taste buds on our tongues, which help them find food.
- Pallid sturgeon live a slow-paced life. They don't mature until they are 10 (females) or 7 (males) years old, and they spawn every two or three years.
- Pallid sturgeon grow to become top-level predators as they mature, and adults feed primarily on other fish.
- Pallid sturgeon often make long upstream journeys looking for the perfect place to spawn and swim back downstream when they are finished.
- Tiny just-hatched pallid sturgeon larvae will drift in the river current for 10 days or more before settling to eat and grow. They are very vulnerable during this journey that can be more than 200 miles.
- Pallid sturgeon also are built to thrive in swift flowing water. Their flat bottom, humped back and fin position allows them to hold their ground with little effort.



Figure 1. The presence of pallid sturgeon in the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers has changed over time.

Fish illustration by Laury Zicari, USFWS, Retired.



Website: [www.fws.gov/fisheries](http://www.fws.gov/fisheries)



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## MORE ABOUT US



Thousands of hatchery-raised pallid sturgeon are stocked into the Missouri River each year. We expect some to survive for many decades and create future generations on their own.



Adult pallid sturgeon in the Missouri River above Ft. Peck Dam.



Adult pallid sturgeon in the Missouri River.



Their tiny eyes are a clue that pallid sturgeon evolved in muddy waters. Vision is not as important as other senses for finding food.



◀ Their flexible cartilage skeleton is similar to those found in other ancient fish, like sharks, but they are not related to sharks. Many of our modern fishes have a bony skeleton.

▶ Pallid sturgeon are built to thrive in moving water. They are one of few fish that can also use their fins to pull them along the bottom in a crawling motion.



## YOU CAN HELP ME

Get to know me, if you don't already. Help make me visible to people who don't have the chance to see me by sharing your stories about me. Get involved in efforts to help conserve my habitat and maintain my populations into the future.



Website: [www.fws.gov/fisheries](http://www.fws.gov/fisheries)



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