

Catching Air - Those Magnificent Jumping Suwannee Sturgeons

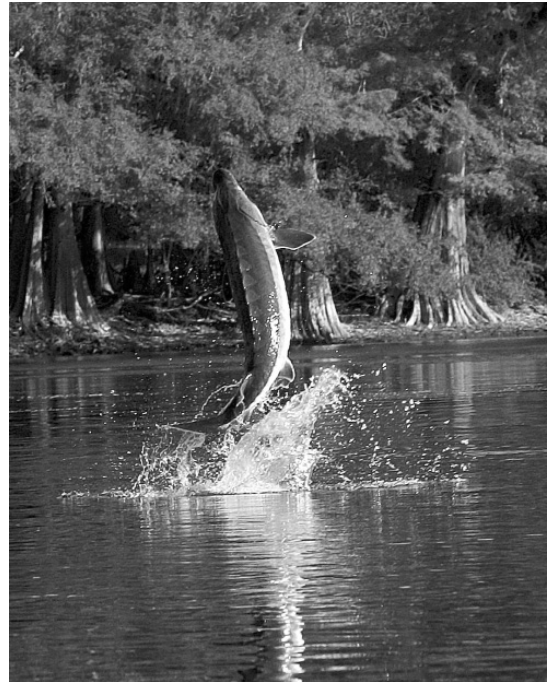
Ken Sulak

U.S. Geological Survey, Gainesville, FL

Reprinted with permission from *Coastal Angler Magazine of North Central Florida* October 2012

It starts deep at the bottom of the dark silent river, three to four powerful tail beats and three sharp acoustic clicks. Then, a sudden upturn of the body and the fish explodes upward, 100 pounds going vertical, catching air, *lots* of air. A good jump can power a big fish, six to nine feet into the air. You have to be quick to get a photo, hang time is only about a second, but an accomplished jump by a big old Suwannee River Gulf Sturgeon is impressive; a magnificent display of power. The exit is almost vertical. The tail continues to beat back and forth as the fish rises. Then, comes a half-twist of the body, sometimes a full 180-degree twist, followed by that signature loud body smack on the surface; a sturgeon version of the belly-flop. Nothing else on the river sounds like it. If you happen to be close by, the report is really impressive, if not downright scary. In the calm of the night, when the air is still, and nary a boat is stirring, that startling report can be heard from a mile or more away, even further underwater by another sturgeon. A loud splash upon re-entry isn't the end of the sequence. At the peak of its jump, the big fish gulps air, re-filling its long swim bladder. Hitting the water, it immediately powers down deep, emitting one more sharp snapping sound on the way down, disappearing into the deep for another day.

No, it is not the same fish jumping repeatedly in the same spot, but hundreds of fish in the same area, each jumping about once a day, most commonly in the early morning. Jumping is rarely a solitary event. It is Gulf Sturgeons of all sizes (1 to 8 feet long) that join in the show. In mid-summer, June and early July before the thunderstorm season really gets rolling, jumps can occur as frequently as six to ten times per minute in the best areas. The inexperienced juveniles may not quite have it down exactly, sometimes coming out at odd



Jumping Gulf Sturgeon in lower Suwannee River near Manatee Springs, 2007. Oscar Sosa photo.

angles, or forgetting to do the body twist. Then, some of the biggest fish occasionally seem to lack enthusiasm, only getting halfway out of the water, then flopping sideways.

Regardless of size or skill, jumping is an essential part of life for the Gulf Sturgeon. Jumping has nothing to do with shedding parasites, capturing prey, spawning courtship, reacting to boat noise, or attacking fishing boats. Sturgeons have been around and most likely, jumping for over 100 million years, long before humans arrived on the scene, and long before mankind invented boats and motors. Before sturgeons were commercially fished, before dams blocked their migrations, and before pollution devastated many fish populations, sturgeons existed in truly astounding numbers. Even in colonial days, when sturgeons were the dominant large fishes inhabiting North American