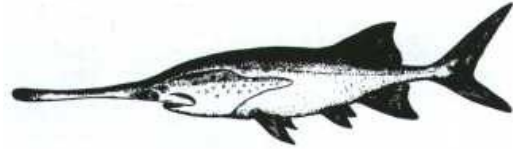


Paddlefish (*Polyodon spathula*)

Paddlefish are one of the largest, native freshwater fishes in North America, attaining lengths of more than six feet (1.8 m) and weights of more than 100 pounds (45.5 kg). In South Dakota, a paddlefish weighing more than 140 pounds (63.6 kg) was caught and released by South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks fisheries research biologists. Paddlefish (also called spoonbill) are an ancient creature getting their name from the paddle-shaped rostrum or bill, that is often up to one-third their entire body length. Paddlefish have a large, toothless mouth on the underside of their head and skin without scales, except for a patch near the tail fin.



The tail is deeply forked with the upper lobe longer than the lower. Their skeleton is mostly cartilage, with the most bone-like material found in the head. Adult paddlefish have extremely small eyes in proportion to their body size. Paddlefish color varies from bluish-gray to almost black on their dorsal surface to white on their ventral side.



Paddlefish Distribution

Distribution

Paddlefish are native to the Mississippi River basin. In South Dakota, they are found primarily in the Missouri River (and reservoirs), sometimes being observed short distances up into Missouri River tributaries such as the James or White rivers. Historically, paddlefish were free to move great distances and were recorded traveling 1200 miles. Paddlefish usually are found in quiet, slow-flowing waters. They typically swim continuously near the surface.

Natural History

Paddlefish are a unique species, representing a link from modern times to our historic past. In North America, fish in the sturgeon family represent the only close relative to the paddlefish. Their closest relative is another species of paddlefish found only in a large freshwater river in China.

Paddlefish are long-lived, with some fish known to exceed 30 years of age. Male paddlefish generally mature at about 5 to 8 years and females at 8 to 12 years old. Large females can produce over a half-million eggs. Paddlefish spawn in early spring when water temperatures approach the mid-50 F range. Females deposit their eggs over gravel bars in large free-flowing rivers. Immediately after being fertilized, the eggs sink to the bottom, sticking to the first object contacted, and hatch approximately seven to nine days later. Newly hatched young, which look very different from the adults, are carried by currents into areas where food is available. At about one month old, the young paddlefish look very similar to the adults.