

A fantastic fishing tale



DNR staff weighs paddlefish in January 2011. Paddlefish is a threatened species in Wisconsin.

DNR FILE

WISCONSIN TEENS LAND A RARE PADDLEFISH.

Alec Riddle

On July 23, my friend, Logan Thomas, and I were out fishing for flathead catfish at the Prairie du Sac Dam from a boat. We had been out for about two hours with minimal luck when suddenly one of the rods went.

I grabbed it and hooked into a 22-inch sheephead. As soon as I started to unhook the fish, one of my other rods went off, except it wasn't the normal tap-tap-tapping hit. It was more of a slow pull.

I tugged and my line felt like it was wrapped around a rock or a tree because of the way the line tension stayed steady. I gave the line a good hard yank to try to free the line and that's when all of a sudden the red, 50-pound braided line shot out of my hands like a truck was on the other end.

Acting quickly, my friend and I took off our shirts to use as gloves to prevent our hands from being burned by the

line. We knew at this point that something huge was on and we could feel every pump of the fish's tail through the responsive braided line.

For the next 25 minutes we fought the creature with only our hands, taking turns to prevent us from injuring our hands when the fish went on runs. After pulling in over 150 yards of line we finally saw the beast — a paddlefish.

The fish was massive and covered in a half dozen lampreys. By this time a nearby boat of men fishing for musky had motored over to watch the fight. They too were amazed by the size of the fish.

With a heave from my friend, we had

the paddlefish on the rear deck of the bass boat. We quickly detached all seven lamprey and removed the mangled hook from the fish's gill plate. As soon as the fish was free of rusty hooks and lamprey, we set it in the water, only to get splashed by the beast.

My friend and I looked at each other in astonishment. We guessed the fish was about 100 pounds. My friend lifted me into the air, the same way as the fish. I weighed 120 pounds when the fish was caught and he declared without question that the fish weighed as much, if not more, than me.

I am 5-feet-5 inches tall and the fish's overall length stretched about a foot over my head. The belly of the fish was bigger than both of us combined. Wisconsin, I know, has strict laws about keeping paddlefish in the water so we didn't take the time to measure the length, girth or weight.

My friend's dad has been fishing the Wisconsin River since he was a kid and can't recall a bigger paddlefish that he or anyone else has caught. Who knows, maybe this fish was a state record, but we will never know for sure. My friend and I share all the credit on the catch. It was a team effort.

Paddlefish, I have learned, are descendants from an ancient lineage of fish which has changed little since the time of the dinosaurs. Since they filter feed, they compete with other filter feeding species for the same resources. Sadly, because the paddlefish is a threatened species, most people will not have the opportunity to see a paddlefish because of how rare they are. The dam at Prairie du Sac is one of a few places in Wisconsin where you can find them in larger numbers. But the species can be found in other parts of the state along with other states like Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky and Missouri. 

Alec Riddle is 15 years old and writes from Middleton.



PADDLEFISH

Paddlefish, listed as a threatened species in Wisconsin, prefer large rivers and their lakes. They spawn over mud or gravel in early spring during high flows. Spawning occurs from early May through early June. To learn more, visit dnr.wi.gov and search keyword "paddlefish."