

Fishing for Sturgeon on the California Delta and Sacramento Area



Introduction

Sturgeon fishing is one of the most exciting types of fishing in all of California. In this paper, I'm going to share some methods and ideas to get you started on landing one of these giants!

Seasons

White Sturgeon are native to the delta. They spawn February-April in the upper stretches of the Sacramento River near Knights Landing. Sturgeon can be caught year round in the lower stretches of the delta, Suisun Bay and San Pablo Bay.

The best months to fish the delta are October-November and again in April-May. These times tend to be better because the water is warmer. The 56 to 64 degree range is ideal.

A lot of people target sturgeon during the winter months simply because not much else is going on. When the water temperatures drop below 50 degrees, the fishing can get tough. Some anglers prefer to switch to lamprey as bait during cold-water conditions.

When to Fish

One of the most important factors for sturgeon fishing is knowing the tides. I'll cover the tides in the next chapter, but there are other factors that can affect the bite.

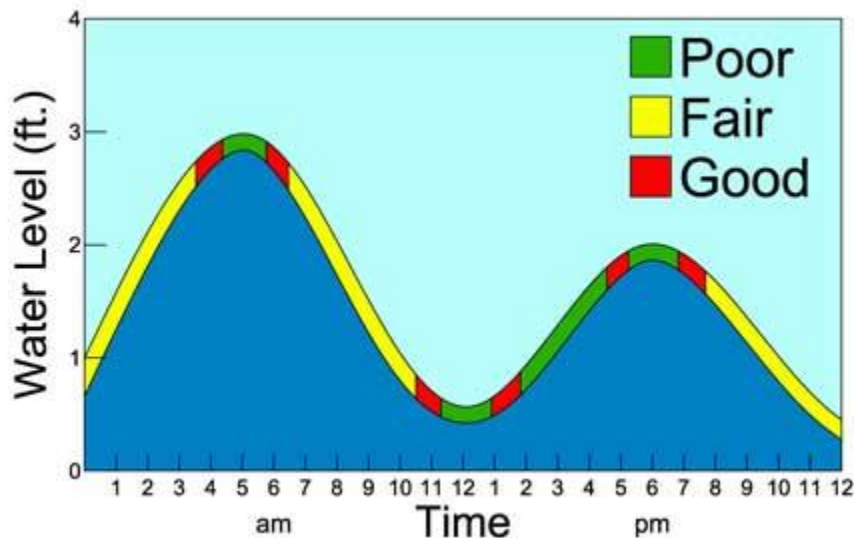
Water temperature is a factor with all types fishing. Sudden changes in water temperature are usually bad for fishing. It may take a week or two for fish to adjust. Fish increase their activity levels in warm water. When water temperatures drop, fish become slow and lethargic. Low barometer readings are bad for sturgeon fishing. Below 29 is bad news.

When fishing upriver in the late winter, dirty or muddy water usually brings fish into the system. During heavy runoff from rain, fish move closer to the bank. Look for current breaks near the shore and fish on the slow side of the break.

Tides

Tides cause water movement due to the gravitational pull of the sun and moon. Depending on the alignment of these heavenly bodies, tides will vary from day to day. Some tides cause the water level to drop or raise as much as six or seven feet at a time. Other tides may only move the water level a few feet at a time. The tides in the lower delta cause the river to move one direction, become slack, and then move in the opposite direction. Tides around 4.5 in the delta are good. Big tides are better in San Pablo Bay.

Tides are one of the most important factors while fishing the delta. The best bite window usually happens when the tide starts to change directions (see red areas on the chart below). For example, if you are fishing a strong outgoing tide the current is usually moving pretty fast. When the current starts to slow down, the action will usually pick up. They normally slow down during the slack tide. When the tide starts to move again, they will bite again. Once the current picks up the actions usually slows back down.



The tide chart above mainly applies to the delta areas where the tides move the current in both directions. Once you move above Walnut Grove on the Sacramento River system the current moves downstream all of the time. This will vary depending on the amount of water being released upstream by the dam operators. Above Walnut Grove, you will get a faster current on the outgoing tide and a slower current on the incoming tide, but the current never changes directions. The water level will still rise and fall due to the tides. Once you get above Verona the tides won't have much impact on the water flow.

As with all factors involved in fishing, predicting action using tides is not an exact science. There will be days when the fish defy logic and bite during unexpected tides. I've caught fish during all tides, and I've also been skunked during all tides. I use the tides as a guide to plan my fishing trips around the times that I hope will be the most productive.

If you get stuck fishing a slow moving tide and you aren't getting any action, move to deeper water. Deep water will have more current than shallow areas.

Fish tend to favor different tides at different locations. You will need to keep track of which areas are most productive during incoming or outgoing tides. I've noticed that the outgoing tide has been much better than the incoming tide in the delta areas that I normally fish.

Outgoing Tide (Ebb Tide)

The outgoing tide moves downstream towards the ocean. It is usually faster because it moves with the flow of water. Because of the speed, it is usually dirtier and more prone to stir up weeds. This seems to be the best tide for sturgeon fishing.

Incoming Tide (Flood Tide)

The incoming tide moves upstream away from the ocean. It is usually slower because it moves against the flow of water. Because of the speed, it is usually clean and less prone to stir up weeds. The incoming tide is usually slow for sturgeon fishing, but you still can pick up fish.

Slack Tide

The slack tide can be good for sturgeon fishing. This tide can be good when the water is cold.

Neap Tides (small tides)

Neap tides occur the day before, during, and after the first and third quarter moons (a three day period). Neap tides are small, or soft tides. They usually produce a slow current, less water level change, less sediment and less weeds.

Spring Tides (large tides)

Spring tides occur the day before, during, and after the full and new moons (a three day period). Spring tides are big, or hard tides. They usually produce a strong current, high water level change, more sediment and more weeds.

Locations

One of the most important aspects of all types of fishing is location. If you don't present your bait to a fish you will not catch anything - it's as simple as that.

In the delta, some people like to fish on slopes because they sturgeon move up onto slopes to feed. Look for gradual depth changes, contours and small humps or holes. Fish along the edges of these features.

Deep holes are popular places to fish for sturgeon in the upper stretches of the Sacramento River. Anchor above a hole and cast into it.

You want to fish an area that has a silt bottom, not rocky. Look for current breaks. If you see some fast moving water, a current break and some slow moving water, fish on the slow edge of the current break. If you see an eddy of swirling water, fish on the outer edge, in the main current. Fish between fast current and eddies (swirling current). Sturgeon don't like regular eddies, but deep holes have underwater eddies that sturgeon like. Clam beds are also good. Mark them with your GPS for future trips.

I strongly advise that you buy a map of the delta. There are several good maps available that show depths, fishing areas, and boat ramp access.

Tackle

Rod

When choosing your rod it is important to pay attention to the tip. You will want to use a soft tipped rod so that you can detect the subtle bites that sturgeon produce. You also want the tip to be soft so that the fish can't feel the resistance during the bite. A strong backbone is a must when choosing a rod, since white sturgeon can grow to lengths in excess of twelve feet. A good choice is a 7.5' to 8' light to medium action rod that is 15-30 lb test rated. I prefer composite fiberglass/graphite rods because of they have a soft fiberglass tip and a strong graphite backbone. I'm currently using an Ugly Stick Tiger model BWC 2200 7'5" Light 10-30 lb line. Phoenix makes some nice sturgeon rods.

Reel

Use a bait casting reel that has enough drag pressure to handle really large fish like sturgeon. Most mid-sized casting reels with a level wind will do the job.

Main Line

I've been using 65 lb test Power Pro super braid spectra for my main line. After you catch a fish using braid, you should check to make sure that the fish did not rub on the line and fray the braid. Sturgeon are notorious for rolling in the line when hooked. Sturgeon have sharp spines along their bodies and also have skin that feels like

sandpaper. Abrasions are hard to detect when using braided line. I personally would rather be safe than sorry and just cut off any damaged line.

Leader Line

I've been using 80 lb test clear P-Line original monofilament leaders. I tie my leaders to 18 inches in length to make them as short as legally possible. You want a short leader because you want the bait on the bottom. Sturgeon are scavengers that primarily feed on the bottom.

Some people use wire leader because it is heavy and keeps the bait on the bottom. I don't like wire because it gets kinks in it. A good choice for wire is 60 lb test or 40 lb 7-strand wire. If you buy a pre-made wire leader shorten it to 18 inches.

When tying your leader, add a ¼ ounce bullet sinker above the hook to help keep the bait on the bottom

Sinkers

I use pyramid sinkers for sturgeon because they stay put. Clip your slider to the flat side of the sinker. Your goal with sturgeon is to keep your bait resting on the bottom at all times. I normally use 8 to 24 ounce sinkers. Adjust your sinker size to the depth and current.

Be sure to carry a variety of sinker sizes, because in deep areas you may need as much as 24 ounces to hold the bottom. Change sinker sizes with tide and current changes.

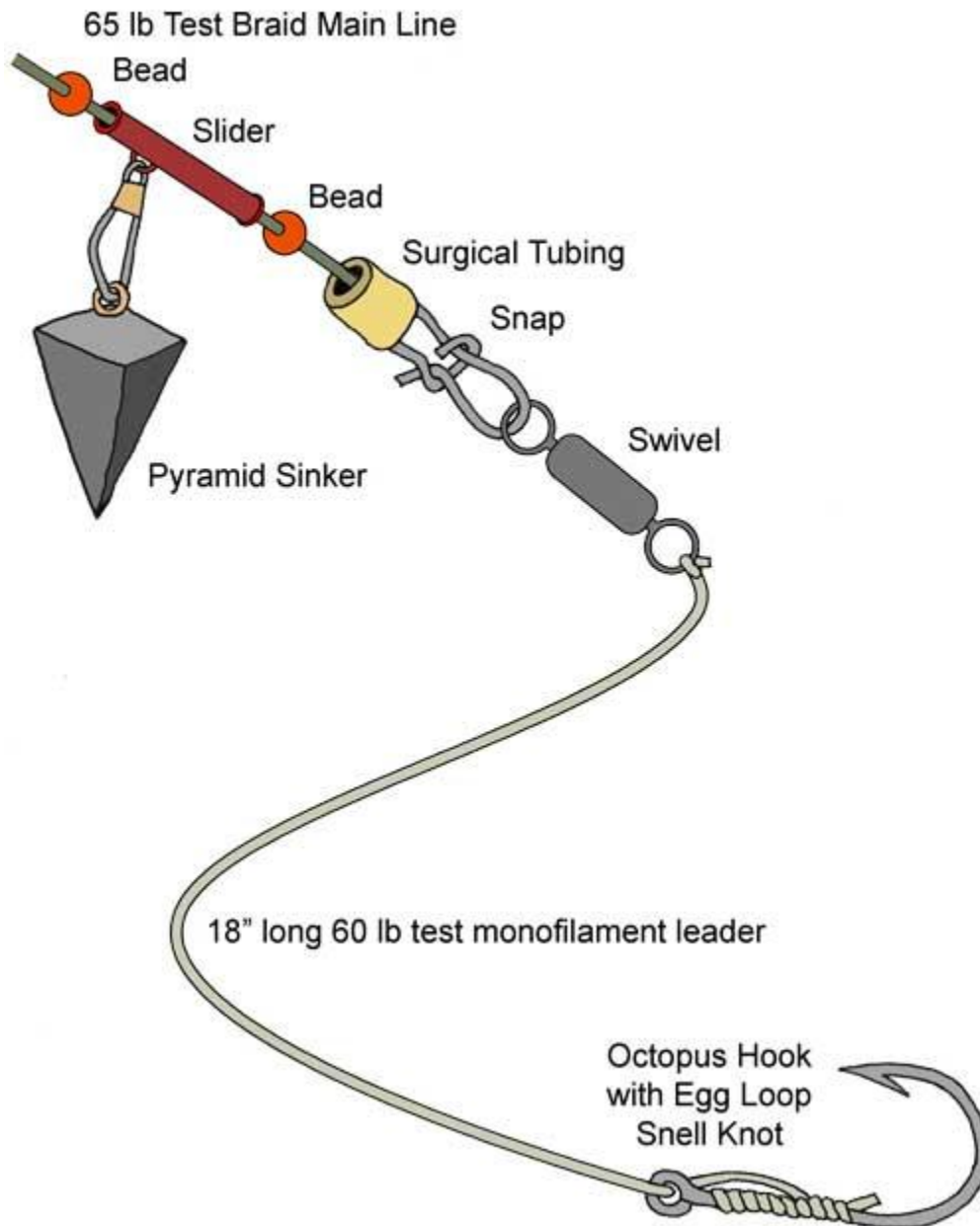
Sliders

You will want to use a slider to attach your sinker to the main line. I like to use a metal slider because plastic sliders don't hold up to braided lines – they get grooves. I replace the stock snap with a heavy duo-lock snap on the slider. The stock snaps will pop open when casing heavy sinkers.

Hooks

I like size 6/0 to 8/0 Owner K-Hooks. I normally tie egg loop snell knots to my hooks. To make the hooks legal in California, you need to file and sand off the barbs. I use a Dremel tool to make quick work of them.

Setup



Sonar

Locating Sturgeon with sonar is very important. A good sonar unit that has GPS with a map that shows contours is helpful. Search an area for fish with your sonar. Using your electronics is 90% of the battle.

Move in straight lines with the current. Look for arches on the bottom and jumping fish when choosing a location. You can also move in a zigzag pattern across slopes or flats looking for fish. When you find fish, anchor. There is some disagreement amongst anglers weather you should

anchor upstream or downstream of fish. The most commonly held theory is that sturgeon move with the current in the delta. Fish travel against the current only when they are moving up upstream to spawn. In either case, you will want to anchor in the path that the sturgeon are traveling. I normally anchor 200 yards downstream of marked or jumping fish.

Don't use the fish symbols on your sonar because they are inaccurate. You want to look for big arches on the bottom which is an indicator that sturgeon are present.

Sturgeon feed right on the bottom, and seeing fish up high on the sonar means that they are moving through. Sturgeon are sensitive to sound, so turn off the sonar while fishing. Mark good spots with GPS for future trips.

Bait

Bait is one of the most important aspects of sturgeon fishing. The scent produced by your bait is the main link between you and the fish. Use fresh bait whenever possible..

I like to use a combination of several different baits. My favorite combination is salmon roe, lamprey, and pile worms all on the same hook. Another good combination is threadfin shad and pile worms. This combination will catch you both striped bass and sturgeon.

Salmon Roe

Uncured Salmon Roe is my favorite bait for sturgeon fishing in the delta. I attach my roe using a roe snell knot which is commonly used by salmon and steelhead fisherman. If you don't use this knot use some magic thread to wrap your roe to the hook. I like to use 8/O Owner cutting point hooks with roe.

If you get a lot of junk bites, switch to roe balls. You can put your hook directly through a roe ball - no thread or special knots are needed. For tips on processing and storing roe for sturgeon fishing click [HERE](#).

Uncured salmon roe and lamprey on a hook. The white stuff below the roe is a cotton ball soaked in shrimp oil.

Sardines

Use on slack tides for sturgeon. Sardines definitely put out more scent than any other bait. The smell of sardines can stay on your hands for several days, so if you have a significant other I would suggest using gloves unless you want to spend the night on the couch.

There are many different ways to use sardines.

The most common method is to fillet the sardine. I like to use a 4" section of sardine fillet. The sardines that you can buy at the Asian markets tend to be smaller than the ones available at bait stores. Both work, but the bait store sardines tend to be fresher

because they are flash frozen when harvested. When buying sardines at bait shops, look for blood in the eyes. These are fresh sardines that you want to use for bait.

There are lots of different ways to up the sardine onto your hook. Some people weave the hook through sardine. Others use the Wright Wrap. Try different folding methods to see which one is catching fish.

Sardines are very soft and can fall off of the hook easily. When small fish are biting, some people use wrap thread around their sardine fillet to keep it from falling apart. I like to use Miracle Thread, which is an elastic thread that can be purchased at most tackle shops. You can also cure your sardines before fishing.

Pro-Cure Brine-and-Bite will toughen up your sardines. Mix it up and add the whole frozen sardine the night before you fish. You can also make your own home made brine.

Brine Recipe for Sardines

Take sardines, fillet them and layer them in a plastic container with sea salt and olive oil. Keep the fillets in the refrigerator overnight. This will toughen them up quite a bit. While you are at it, you can add some scent to the mix.

I like to add or inject Pro-Cure Sardine oil to my sardines to give them some long lasting scent.

Shad

Try to buy fresh shad whenever possible. Avoid shad that are bloody. When the stomachs are ripped up on fresh shad it means that they have been handled roughly. After you buy shad, throw them in a small ice chest full of icy water. Now throw about ½ cup of rock salt into the mix. This will help to toughen up the shad, and will preserve them if you end up freezing them.

Most people butterfly the shad to disperse scent into the water.

This is done by partially filleting one side of the shad. You leave the fillet attached with enough skin to keep it from separating. Clean your knife each time you cut shad to remove scales that will tear up your next piece of bait.

The best size shad for sturgeon fishing is about 2" to 3" in length. Try spraying your shad with some Bang Shad scented spray before casting out.

Pile Worms

Pile worms work well for both striped bass and sturgeon. If you fish the lower delta a deadly combination is shad and pile worms on the same hook. You can use a threader to thread the worm onto the hook. Be careful - these things can bite!

Ghost Shrimp

Use Owner 6/O cutting point hooks with ghost shrimp. Use miracle thread to wrap your shrimp to the hook.

The stuff in this photo wasn't very fresh! Get live ghost shrimp if possible.

Grass Shrimp

Put several grass shrimp on your hook at one time. Use miracle thread to wrap your shrimp to the hook. Fresh or live grass shrimp can be expensive.

Mud Shrimp

Use Owner 7/O cutting point hooks with mud shrimp. Use miracle thread to wrap your shrimp to the hook.

Herring

Herring are similar to sardines but smaller in size and usually more expensive.

Mackerel

Mackerel are similar to sardines but are tougher. They will stay on the hook longer but are more expensive than sardines.

Anchovies

Anchovies are similar to sardines but are a little bit tougher. You can butterfly fillet anchovies similar to shad.

Lamprey (Eel)

Lamprey is very tough and will stay on the hook when small fish or crabs are biting. Cut into 4" to 6" strips with scissors, and then cut grooves into the tail end of the strip so it flaps like a pork rind. Use a double surgeon's loop knot attached to an 8/O Owner cutting point hook.

You can re-use and freeze lamprey many times. In fact, you can catch multiple fish on the same piece of lamprey because of its long lasting scent.

Nightcrawlers

There are some people who swear by these. I've never used them, but I wouldn't count them out either. I've never met a fish that didn't like to eat nightcrawlers.

Scents

Sturgeon have poor eye sight and feed primarily using their sense of smell. Adding scents to your bait can only increase your chances of attracting fish. I recently read an article by a sturgeon fisherman on the Colombia River that uses cotton balls soaked in Pro-Cure scents for bait.

The amino acid L-Lysine that is found on your hands is also produced by fish predators like sea lions. Fish are going to shy away from anything that reminds them of a predator. This is why I always wash my hand with scent-free sportsman's soap before handling my tackle or bait. It's the little things that can make the difference between a good outing and getting skunked.

Some Good Scents for Sturgeon

- Bang Shad Scent
- Pro-Cure Scents make a variety of attractants for sturgeon
- Mix 3 ounces of anise with 5 ounces of Pautzke salmon egg nectar

Technique

Setting Up

After you get anchored, set up your rig and put on some bait. I usually start out by casting the rods straight behind the boat. If nothing happens after about 45 minutes cast the rods out at a 45 degree angle. This way, you cover a wider lane that fish might be traveling along.

I try to stay quiet out there as to not scare the fish. I normally have two or three pre-baited leaders soaking in a Tupperware container of scents in the cooler at all times. I'll rotate between them so I always have fresh bait ready. I check my bait or change it at least every 15-20 minutes, more often if I'm getting junk bites. Every five minutes I lift my rod, shake it a little, and set it back down. This cleans off the silt and debris from the bait while releasing more scent into the water.

Put out drift sock to keep from swaying with the wind. You want to try to keep the boat still since sturgeon bites can be tough to detect. If it gets really windy you may have to hold the rod to detect bites. I personally prefer to leave the rod on the balance beam and look for variations in the bouncing motion caused by the wind.

When you get a lot of grass on your line move over to another spot. The west bank of the Sacramento River and Sandy Beach are notorious areas for weeds and debris. Sometimes moving over a few hundred feet will remedy the problem. If you can't get away from the debris, check your bait at least every 15 minutes and clean off the weeds.

The Bite

Despite their large size, sturgeon tend to produce a small bite. Their bites are normally referred to as "pumps". Typically, here is what you will see:

Rod slowly bends down about 8 inches

Rod rocks back up about three inches

Rod slowly bends down about 8 inches

This pattern will repeat until the rod rocks all the way down to the water

Now you can see the value of the balance beam. If your rod was in a rod holder, as soon as the fish started off with the bait, they would immediately feel the resistance of the line. In some cases, they will drop the bait under these circumstances.

When I see a sturgeon bite, I immediately hold my hand over the rod grip to prepare for the hook set. On the second or third pump, I set the hook. Try to set the hook when the rod is starting to pump downward. The upward and downward motion of the pump is caused by the sturgeon cleaning the bait in and out of its mouth. When the rod is going down the sturgeon is sucking the bait into its mouth. When the rod is going up the sturgeon is spitting the bait out of its mouth.

Remember - if you are using braid you don't need to set the hook super hard. Doing so can snap your line, swivel, or rod. Warning: be extra careful about accidentally grabbing the braid when you grab the fore grip of the rod. When you set the hook the line will pull out a little and can severely cut or burn your hand.

There is an art to reading bites on a balance beam that you will acquire after some experience. Not all sturgeon bites look the same. Violent shaking bites that move quickly up and down are usually small fish trying to break up or pick apart the bait. Really slow tugs that go up and down six inches are usually crabs. I normally let these bites go without setting the hook. The bites I'm looking for are slow rocking bites. This usually indicates that the fish has taken the bait and is moving with it. I normally set the hook when the rod is parallel with the water. Sometimes the fish will just slam the rod down to the water - this is usually a guaranteed hookup. If you get a bite and the rod starts moving up instead of down set the hook! This means that a fish picked up the bait and is moving upstream towards the boat.

Don't be shy about setting hook until you are more familiar with the different bites styles. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a crab pull and a sturgeon bite. When in doubt - set the hook! If you miss the fish set your rod back down and wait. In many cases the fish will come back for more. If you don't get another bite for several minutes, reel up and check your bait.

Don't take your eyes off the rod. If you don't pay attention a fish can pull your rod out of the boat if the beam is not secured. Some people attach a rope with a clip to their reel or rod so that fish can't pull their rod overboard. I normally fish with my reel in lock-down mode for sturgeon. If I need to take a nap or decide to eat lunch or cut bait I'll turn on the clicker and put the reel in free spool mode. This ensures that that a fish can't rip the rod out of the boat when I'm not ready.

The bite differs depending on bait. With shrimp baits, the fish clean off the bait by sucking water through the gills. Set the hook right away with these baits. With sardines, shad, pile worms or Roe fish load up and swim away.

Landing Sturgeon

After you hook a sturgeon, remember to keep steady pressure on the fish at all times. Loosen up the drag if you had it locked down for the hook set. Don't tighten down your drag if you hook a fish that doesn't fight. It could be a big fish that doesn't know that it's hooked. If the sturgeon runs towards you, make sure to reel up the slack as fast as possible. If the fish makes a wild run, let it run by loosening the drag. They will eventually ease off. Sturgeon can make wild runs of over 100 yards at a time. They also will jump out of the water. If you hook a monster sturgeon, you may have to pull anchor and chase after it with your boat. It is always a good idea to use a quality float attached to your anchor. When a big fish is hooked you can release the anchor rope and the chase is on. Don't get spooled!

Keep steady pressure on the fish at all times. Slowly pump your rod up and reel down the slack until the fish is landed. Follow the fish around the boat as needed. Don't get cut off by the motor, drift sock or anchor rope. Start out with a loose drag and slowly tighten it as the fish tires out.

Play out big fish until they roll over on the surface. In most cases, sturgeon will blow bubbles when they are tired out. Net the fish head-first when they reach the boat. You will want to use the largest net within regulation.

Be careful when handling sturgeon! They have rows of bony plates and spines running down the length of their bodies. They also have sharp gill plates and skin that feels like sandpaper. I always use a net or Boga-Grip to immobilize sturgeon so I can remove the hook and release them. Unlike striped bass which routinely swallow the bait, sturgeon are usually hooked in the mouth.

Sturgeon travel in schools, so keep other lines in the water when you hook a fish. A second fish may be near.

Cleaning Sturgeon

1. Cut the top row of scutes off of the top of the fish.
2. Cut off the pectoral fins (side fins by gill plates).
3. Cut the skin just behind the gill plates all the way around the outside of the fish.
4. Cut the skin just before the tail all the way around the outside of the fish.
5. Lay the fish on its belly and fillet down on one side of the spine until you get all of the meat off.
6. Repeat for the other side of the spine.
7. Remove fillets from carcass and cut each fillet in half.
8. Remove skin and trim off any red fat.

This site has a good video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEbJP0ZwDdc>

Tips

- A black box is a device that puts off a positive charge into the water which is supposed to attract fish. I've never used one, but some reputable anglers have sworn by them. Set black box at lowest setting to attract sturgeon.
- Sea lions in the delta ambush stringers from upstream, so be on the lookout. Normally, you can hear them surfacing for air before you see them. If you see one approaching, you might want to pull in any fish on stringers until the sea lion has passed.
- When you see a lot of jumping sturgeon, the bite is usually pretty slow. I've heard that the reason that sturgeon jump is to clean the buildup of sand, dirt and silt out of their gills. You will notice other bottom feeders like carp doing similar acrobatics. I've had days on the water where I've seen 40 to 50 sturgeon jumping around my boat and didn't have one bite all day.