

A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



Shortnose Gar

Swimming Fossil

The long(nose) and the short(nose) of it is one species of gar is considered extirpated in North Dakota and the other isn't.

Longnose gar are reported to be native of the Red River basin though the Game and Fish Department has no record of them in the state. The only gar species found in North Dakota is the shortnose and only in the Missouri River System, typically in backwaters.

While arguably one of North Dakota's oddest-looking fish species, what the shortnose gar has going for it (besides being the species not extirpated) is a super short list of predators. Because of its hard, diamond-shaped scales, shortnose gar are nearly impervious to danger, and adult fish have no

known predators except humans.

Even before taking their first swim, young-to-be are nothing to be fooled with, either. Shortnose gar eggs are large and green, and poisonous to those warm-blooded vertebrates, humans included, nosing around in shallow water looking for an easy meal.

The shortnose gar looks like a fish from another time. It has a long snout, toothy jaws, and its dorsal fin is set back near the tail. Sometimes referred to as a living fossil, this fish can be seen basking nearly motionless near the surface of quiet Missouri River backwaters.

The shortnose gar is a proficient predator and feeds on what's most available (alive or dead), from crustaceans, to insects, to fish. Rather than pursuing prey, this fish is better

described as an ambush predator. With its long jaws and wicked sharp teeth, the gar lies in ambush and catches prey with a sideways attack.

The shortnose gar is also tolerant of very warm water, and even seems to bask under these conditions. Biologists tell us the shortnose gar has a gas bladder that can serve as a lung. While all fish have bladders used to regulate buoyancy, the gar's bladder can extract oxygen the fish swallows from the air.

As a result, the shortnose gar can survive in waters nearly depleted of oxygen, while other fish die. This, when you think about it, works out well for this toothy fish not above feeding on something already dead.

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