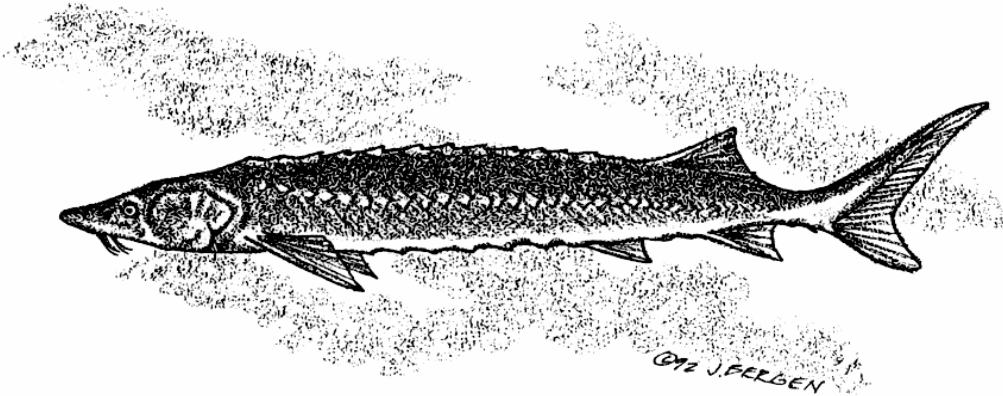


Monsters of the Estuary

by Kenn Oberrecht



Cars, motorhomes, and tractor-trailer rigs ride the rising arches of the McCullough Bridge over Coos Bay, their occupants unaware of the life-and-death drama unfolding in the dark depths below. Beneath the surly surface swirls of water ebbing ever seaward, a torpedo-shaped monster in search of its next meal glides silently and effortlessly, like something oiled, past bridge piers and rip-rap.

In a single sweep of its powerful tail and a subtle turn of the tail's long upper lobe, the huge fish overtakes its hapless prey and consumes it in one slurp.

Characteristic of its species, which developed 40 million years ago, this sleek predator displays a single dorsal fin atop a muscular body wrapped around a skeleton of resilient cartilage. The largest of its kind in North American waters, the great white moves freely from the depths to the shallows and back again. In a single sweep of its powerful tail and a subtle turn of the tail's long upper lobe, the huge fish overtakes its hapless prey and consumes it in one slurp.

Slurp? Slurp! Is this the right word to depict the mayhem of a marauding great white shark with enormous jaws full of teeth best described as indestructible self-sharpening shards? Well, no. Our great white's mouth is more like a vacuum-cleaner hose. While it shares some characteristics with sharks and comes from the same geological era, its habits and

habitats are considerably different. Our bay monster is the white sturgeon. Its prey might have been a smelt, herring, or ghost shrimp. Sixteen known species of sturgeon swim the fresh, brackish, and salt waters of the northern hemisphere, seven of them residents of the United States. Here on the West Coast, we have two species: the white and the smaller and rarer green sturgeon.

Most sturgeon are anadromous fishes, moving freely from the ocean into the estuaries and rivers to feed and spawn. The green sturgeon, however, which grows to about seven feet and 350 pounds, seldom enters fresh water and seems to prefer the brackish estuaries.

This is a brute of a fish, capable of growing to 16 feet or longer and weighing more than 1,500 pounds. It's a slow grower, though, and often a late breeder, characteristics that call for special measures to assure the survival of the species.

The white sturgeon is tolerant of a wide range of salinity. From Monterey, California, to the Gulf of Alaska, it moves from the ocean and edge of the continental shelf, into the estuaries of large coastal rivers, and often far up the rivers. Some individuals spend most or all of their time in the estuaries and rivers. In fact, dam construction on the Columbia and Snake rivers has landlocked whole populations of white sturgeon many miles inland from the ocean.

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Like other sturgeons that flourished for millions of years, the white was nearly wiped out in a brief span from the 1880s to the 1920s. No laws protected the great fish then, when commercial fishermen took so many for their tasty flesh and valuable roe that the brood stock was nearly depleted.

White sturgeon seem to be holding their own now, but only persistent efforts will ensure their survival. We'll need to continue our studies of these ancient creatures, strictly enforce the laws that protect them, and preserve the estuaries that rear and feed them.

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