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Paddlefish Season Opens March 15th With New MDC Tagging Project

MARCH 09TH 2015 BY DEE LOFLIN

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Missouri -The annual spring paddlefish snagging season is a popular pastime for thousands of anglers starting March 15 and running through April 30. The state's major paddlefish snagging waters include Lake of the Ozarks, Harry S. Truman Lake, Table Rock Lake, the Osage River below Bagnell Dam, and the Missouri River. The season for the Mississippi River is March 15 through May 15 with a fall season of Sept. 15 through Dec. 15.

The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) makes paddlefish snagging possible in the Show-Me State through annual stockings of about 38,000 foot-long fingerlings raised at its Blind Pony Hatchery near Sweet Springs and released into Lake of the Ozarks, Truman Lake, and Table Rock Lake, plus several thousand into select rivers.

According to MDC Fisheries Management Biologist Trish Yasger, dams and other barriers to spawning areas have eliminated sustainable natural reproduction in these waters.

“Without annual stocking by Conservation Department staff, this popular pastime and food source would go away,” Yasger said. “We manage and monitor paddlefish populations around the state, but need help from snaggers to learn more and to better manage this popular game fish.”

SNAG A TAG – GET A REWARD

Yasger is leading a new five-year tagging project by MDC to help monitor paddlefish harvest rates and improve species management. The project began this winter, and success depends on snaggers reporting tagged fish.

Yasger explained that, from January to mid-March each year through 2019, Department staff will place numbered metal jaw tags on about 2,000 paddlefish netted in each reservoir -- Lake of the Ozarks, Truman Lake, and Table Rock Lake -- and about 1,000 fish netted in the Mississippi River. All fish captured are weighed, measured, jaw tagged, and released.

She encourages snaggers to report all tagged paddlefish and to NOT remove tags from undersized (sublegal) paddlefish.

“We will send a special ‘I caught a Missouri paddlefish!’ t-shirt to each snagger who returns or reports their first tag on a legal-sized fish,” Yasger explained. “Rewards will not be given for sublegal fish. All returned and reported tags for the season will be placed into drawings each summer for a small number of cash prizes with a grand prize of \$500.”

Tags or photos of tags from harvested paddlefish must be submitted for rewards. Snaggers must include the following information with each tag:

Date caught

Location of catch including reservoir or river, mile marker, and county

Tag number

Fish length from eye to the fork of the tail

Snagger’s name and complete address

Report tags by calling MDC at 573-579-6825 with the information, or mail the information with the tag to: Missouri Department of Conservation, 3815 East Jackson Blvd., Jackson, MO 63755.

FISH FACTS AND REGULATION REQUIREMENTS

Also known as “spoonbills” because of the shape of their snouts, paddlefish take seven or eight years to grow to legal size. The fish feed on plankton and other microscopic prey. These filter feeders therefore do not take bait from hooks and must be snagged using large hooks that catch in the mouth, gills or other areas of their bodies.

Unless exempt, anglers must have a current fishing permit to snag or to operate a boat for snaggers. The daily limit is two paddlefish and snaggers must stop snagging after obtaining the daily limit on Lake of the Ozarks and Truman Lake and their tributaries, and the Osage River below Bagnell Dam. The minimum legal body length for paddlefish at Lake of the Ozarks, Truman Lake, Table Rock Lake, and their tributaries is 34 inches, measured from the eye to the fork of the tail. The minimum legal body length is 24 inches on the Osage River below Bagnell Dam and in other Missouri waters. All paddlefish under the legal minimum length must be returned to the water unharmed immediately after being caught.

The Wildlife Code of Missouri requires the head, tail, and skin to remain attached to all paddlefish while on the water so paddlefish should not be cleaned until off of the water. Also, extracted paddlefish eggs may not be possessed while on waters of the state or adjacent banks and may not be transported. Paddlefish eggs may not be bought, sold or offered for sale. Additionally, paddlefish or their parts, including eggs, may not be used for bait.

Yasger reminds snaggers to help sublegal snagged fish survive to grow larger.

“Do not land paddlefish with gaffs. This can fatally injure sublegal fish. Use large landing nets,” she said. “Remove hooks carefully and get sublegal fish back into the water as quickly as possible. Wet your hands before handling fish and avoid excessive handling. Do not pass them around for photos and hold fish firmly to avoid dropping them. Never put fingers in the gills or eyes.”

FISHING FORECAST

Yasger said that paddlefish snagging is dependent on weather conditions, primarily water temperature and flow.

“Paddlefish are easiest to catch when they swim upstream and congregate below dams in response to warm spring rains,” Yasger explained. “The best snagging conditions occur when water temperature reaches 50 to 55 degrees and there is an increase in water flow. This prompts them to move upstream to spawn.”

She added that paddlefish season often gets off to a slow start.

“We don’t usually see a lot of big fish being caught on opening day,” Yasger said. “Harvest early in the season is typically dominated by local fish and small males with the

occasional large female. As water temperature and flow increase, you will start seeing more of the larger females.”

However this year’s peak action could be delayed by unusually cold winter weather.

“The extremely cold weather we experienced in February is still being felt in stream temperatures,” she explained. “A spell of unusually warm, sunny weather could speed things up a little.”

Yasger added that MDC released an especially large number of fingerlings into Lake of the Ozarks, Truman Lake, and Table Rock Lake in 2008. The more than 164,000 fingerlings released are now eight years old and should start providing good numbers of fish for snaggers to harvest.

Learn more about Missouri’s official aquatic animal and get weekly snagging reports and advisories from MDC online at mdc.mo.gov/node/5399.

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