

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
2026 Lake Sturgeon Spearing Season

Winnebago System
WBIC 131100



Photo Credit: Dan Christopherson



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Introduction and Objectives

During the Lake Winnebago spearing season, all harvested lake sturgeon are registered with the WDNR. The system harvest caps for the 2026 spearing season were 350 juvenile females (<55"), 732 adult females (>55"), and 1,226 males and determined using the most recent 5-year average abundance estimates for the Winnebago System lake sturgeon population (about 24,500 males and 16,200 adult females). The Upriver Lakes fishery was allocated 10% (73 fish) of the adult female harvest cap and 20% of the juvenile females (70 fish) and males (245 fish) harvest caps. The department utilizes all the information collected during the spearing season to continue to monitor the Winnebago System lake sturgeon population.

WATERSHED INFORMATION

REGULATIONS

Daily Bag and Size Limit: Harvest only occurs during the February spearing season. One lake sturgeon per season at a 36 inch minimum length.

METRIC DESCRIPTION

Length frequency distribution (LFD) is a graphical representation of the number or percentage of fish captured by half-inch or one-inch size intervals. Smaller fish (or younger age classes) may not always be represented in the length frequency due to different habitat usage or sampling gear limitations.

SURVEY METHOD

During the lake sturgeon spearing season, all lake sturgeon harvested are registered at DNR designated registration stations where lake sturgeon are weighed (lbs.) and measured (inches to the nearest tenth). Sex and stage of maturity is also recorded. Any external or internal tags are recorded.

Results

2026 SPEARING SUMMARY

During the 2026 spearing season, 1,539 lake sturgeon were harvested throughout the Winnebago System (1,261 from Lake Winnebago and 278 from the Upriver Lakes; Figure 1). 54 lake sturgeon were harvested over 100 lbs. throughout the Winnebago System. The length distribution of both females and males throughout the Winnebago System continues to indicate a healthy population (Figure 2). The average length for males was 54.9 inches and 60.6 inches for all female lake sturgeon. It is a good indicator of recruitment for the Winnebago System when we see lake sturgeon harvested around 36 inches (Figure 2). The proportion of harvested lake sturgeon that were PIT tagged was 20%, which is very similar to the other spearing seasons.

There were 11,350 Lake Winnebago licenses sold this year. This is down from the 12,000 sold last year (Table 1).

Figure 1. Map of harvest on Lake Winnebago and the Upriver Lakes by area. Values indicate number harvested of juvenile females, adult females, and males, respectively, as well as totals within each area of the system. Stars are the different registration stations including the total number of lake sturgeon registered at that station. Exact values can be found in the appendix.

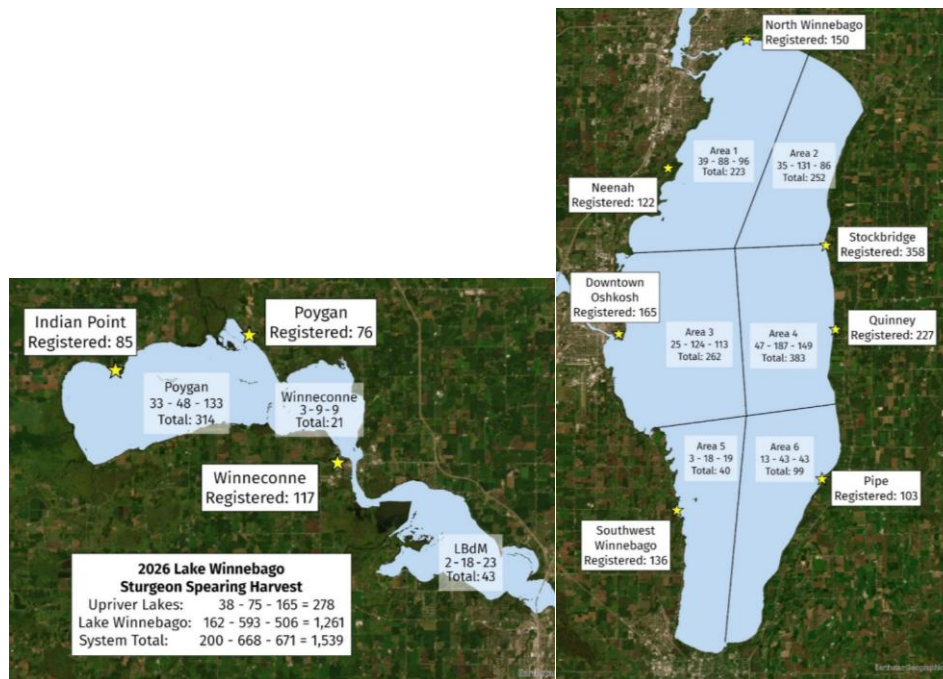


Figure 2. Length frequency histogram of lake sturgeon harvested during the Lake Winnebago System during the 2026 spearing season. Exact values can be found in the appendix.

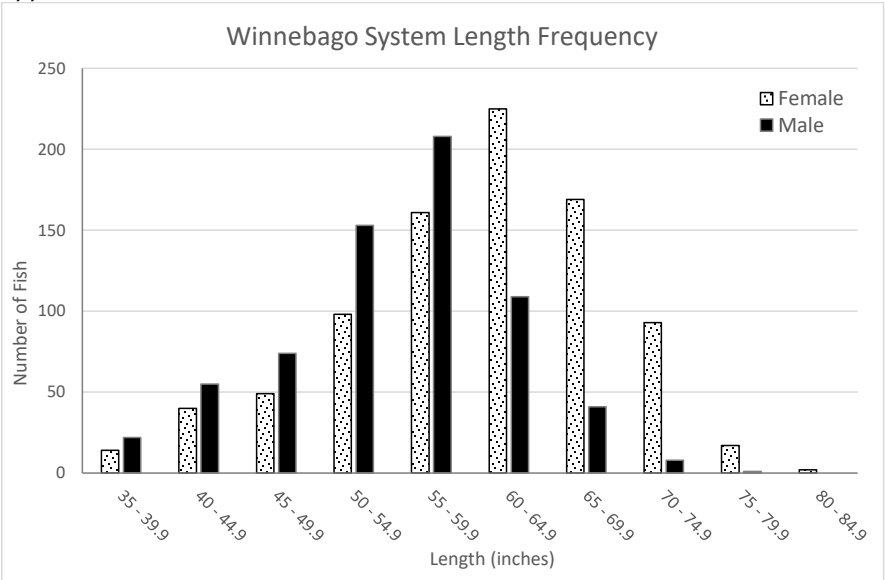


Table 1. Survey information for the Winnebago system.

Station	2026	2025	2024
Shanty Counts	3,019	3,340	468
License Sales	11,350	12,200	13,060
Upriver Applicants	11,738	9,618	9,106

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LAKE WINNEBAGO SUMMARY

1,261 lake sturgeon were harvested from Lake Winnebago (Figure 1), with the success rate in 2026 of 11.1%. This success rate is higher than the 8% average. 43 lake sturgeon were harvested over 100 lbs. on Lake Winnebago. This comes to about 3.4% of the total harvest was over 100 lbs (Figure 3). The largest fish harvested on Lake Winnebago was an F4 female, weighing 138.1 lbs.

The Lake Winnebago season closed after 10 days. This is the first time it closed early in over a decade due to the highest harvest opening weekend in a long time. This is because the opening weekend came with plenty of safe ice and great water clarity around the lake. There was a similar number of shanties opening weekend seen on Lake Winnebago compared to last year (Table 1). 779 lake sturgeon were harvested between the first Saturday and Sunday of the season. Warm weather after opening weekend created some access issues which likely caused the sharp decline in harvest throughout the week.

UPRIVER LAKES SUMMARY

The Upriver lakes season lasted 3 days. The last time the Upriver season was this short was 2022. 278 lake sturgeon were harvested from the Upriver lakes (Figure 1). The success rate for spearers with an Upriver tag was 57.4%. There were 11 lake sturgeon harvested Upriver over 100 pounds, including the largest fish harvested for the season: a 148.9 pound, 75.4 inch, female.

Over 11,000 people either purchased a preference point or applied for a tag. This is about 2,000 more people than in the last few years (Table 2). Successful applicants needed 9 points to be drawn for a tag. This is up from the 8 points necessary for the last 4 years.

Table 3. Upriver Lakes Spearing Season Application Information for 2026

Number of Preference Points	Number of Applicants for Lottery	Number of Winners	Number Purchased Preference Points Only
14	0	0	1
13	0	3	8
12	0	9	24
11	2	15	37
10	11	72	67
9	143	401	203
8	504	0	415
7	353	0	563
6	291	0	629
5	288	0	760
4	276	0	913
3	263	0	908
2	295	0	1,027
1	761	0	2,496
Total	3,187	500	8,051

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Figure 3. The percentage of lake sturgeon harvested over 100 pounds from 1978-2026. Exact values can be found in the appendix.

