Historical Notes on American Eels (*Anguilla rostrata*) in the Upper Midwest

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Eels of the genus *Anguilla* have been a source of fascination since at least the time of the ancient Romans, who kept them in specially constructed ponds (Higginbotham, 1997). Evidence of continued interest in eels as a commercial resource, in their conservation status, and in the mysteries of their life histories is provided by the recent publication of several books on eels for professional (Dixon, 2003; Tesch, 2003) and general (Fort, 2003; Schweid, 2002) audiences. Scharpf (2001) provided a review of eel biology for the aquarist interested in keeping eels in captivity.

The American eel (*A. rostrata*) breeds in the Sargasso Sea and ascends river systems tributary to the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Greene (1935) noted that the eel might have reached the upper Great Lakes at one time (i.e., during postglacial times), only to die out as southern outlets for glacial meltwater were abandoned. At the time of European settlement, the distribution of the American eel in the upper Midwest would have been generally limited to those portions of the Mississippi River drainage not blocked by barrier falls. (Routine access to the upper Great Lakes via the St. Lawrence River system was blocked by Niagara Falls.) Although Clinton (1815) discounted the possibility that young eels could migrate upstream against the swift waters of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers to take advantage of the then seasonal connection between the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan basins, subsequent collections have well documented that eels penetrate the upper Mississippi River drainage as far as Minnesota (Eddy and Underhill, 1974) and Wisconsin (Becker, 1983), as well as the Illinois River (Sparks and Starrett, 1975). The ability of eels to penetrate far up into tributary streams and even to bypass at least some barriers by wriggling over damp terrestrial substrates is now well documented (e.g., Dutil et al., 1989). Evidence that eels have used canals to gain access to the Great Lakes (see below) suggests the likelihood that they could also have used the occasional natural connections that occurred in such low areas as those where canals were subsequently built. Indeed, Richardson (1836) provided evidence of what was recognized even then as the surprising capture of an American eel in a tributary to Lake Huron.

Subsequent to European settlement, the geographical distribution of the eel in the upper Midwest was affected primarily by three processes: (1) the construction of dams or other artificial barriers to upstream movement that denied or diminished access to areas previously used; (2) the construction of canals or other artificial connections that allowed access (or easier access) to areas at least sometimes blocked by natural barriers; and (3) stocking. A fourth process, the translocation of small eels in the ballast water of ships, was first hypothesized by Crossman (1991, Table 4) and was used by Lyons et al. (2000) as a possible explanation for the occurrence of a very small eel (total length: 157 mm) in the Blackhoof River in the western Lake Superior basin (Cochran, 1981; also mentioned by Waters, 2000, pp. 525-526), but translocation has not been actually observed to occur. X-radiography of the Blackhoof specimen permitted an estimated vertebral count more consistent with the American eel (< 110) than the European eel (*A. anguilla*), but it remains possible for an American eel to have been transported inland from the North American coast.

It has been assumed that dams have made it more difficult for eels to ascend the Mississippi River (e.g., Eddy and Underhill, 1974; Hatch et al., 2003; Fremling, 2005). However, the navigational locks associated with the dams

along the main channel of the Upper Mississippi presumably permit easier passage for eels than would be the case if the locks were not present. Schmidt (1988) observed numerous eels below a dam on the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities.

Several canals permitted eels to gain access to the upper Great Lakes (Hubbs and Lagler, 2004). These include the Welland Canal, completed in the 1820s, which permitted ships (and eels) to by-pass Niagara Falls. In addition, eels may have used the Chicago Drainage Canal, completed in 1840, to move from the Illinois River drainage into Lake Michigan, and the Portage Canal, first opened in a rudimentary state in 1837, to move from the Wisconsin River to the upper Fox River in the Lake Michigan drainage. In any case, eels have been reported from the Upper Great Lakes in Minnesota (Eddy and Underhill, 1974; Cochran, 1981), Wisconsin (Becker, 1983; Fago, 1992; Lyons et al., 2000), and Michigan (Bailey et al., 2004).

The American eel is readily identifiable, even by the general public. In the upper Midwest, both in its native range and in the Great Lakes drainage, it is apparently encountered infrequently enough that captures of eels are often considered newsworthy. Becker (1983), for example, listed a number of newspaper accounts of eels in Wisconsin, all published during the years 1950-1976. More recent examples include Minnesota Sea Grant (1979) and Olivo (1997).

The purpose of this note is to present historical data on the American eel in the upper Midwest. This information may be of interest in light of recent concerns about the status of this species (Haro et al., 2000; Anon., 2004, 2005). Many of the records presented below were obtained during a survey of newspapers on microfilm for historical records of lake sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*) in the Lake Michigan basin (Cochran and Elliott, 2003). This survey concentrated on newspapers published in the latter half of the 1800s and early 1900s in Wisconsin and Michigan cities located on tributaries to Lake Michigan. In addition to recording all references to sturgeon, the technicians conducting the search were instructed to photocopy any mentions of other fish species as well. Details within the stories that referred to "eels" permitted confidence in identifying the fish as American eels rather than lampreys, which are often referred to as "eels" by the general public. These details include implications that the eels were caught by anglers (who rarely catch lampreys) and the reported sizes of the fish they caught (eels are generally bigger than lampreys). As was the case with lake sturgeon, newspapers would sometimes mention the capture of eels in distant localities, perhaps reprinting information obtained from other newspapers.

19th-Century Michigan

Prior to European settlement, the American eel might have occurred naturally in the small portion of the Upper Peninsula contained within the Mississippi River drainage, but access to that area was blocked by the construction of dams on the Wisconsin River. Hubbs and Lagler (1964) noted (in greater detail than in the more recent 2004 edition) that eels were stocked into Michigan waters from 1877 to 1891. This could explain the following newspaper accounts, listed in chronological order:

> *Saint Joseph Traveler-Herald* (3 June 1876): "Dick Stines took a silver eel from the Saint Joseph river at the railroad bridge, one day this week. It was a fine fellow measuring three feet and three inches." [Berrien County]
>
> *Allegan Journal* (21 May 1881): "Large eels are being caught in the Kalamazoo river at Kalamazoo." [Kalamazoo County]
>
> *Allegan Journal* (4 June 1881): "Large numbers of young eels were seen in the river above the dam last week." [Allegan County]

Although some of the other records in this list might conceivably be explained by eels moving through canals into the upper Great Lakes drainage, this account of eels in the Kalamazoo River upstream from a dam is most easily explained by stocking.

> *Grand Traverse Herald* (24 May 1883): "An eel three feet four inches long and weighing five pounds was recently caught in the Fawn River in St. Joseph's county."
>
> *Grand Traverse Herald* (14 June 1883): "Grass Lake fishermen are catching Whitefish and Silver Eels." [Benzie County]
>
> *Holland City News* (23 May 1885): "An eel 2 feet 10 inches long was taken by spear from Bayou Creek last Tuesday night."
>
> *Grand Traverse Herald* (27 May 1886): "An eel weighing 8 pounds was speared the other day in the bay near Goodrich's dock."

19th-Century Wisconsin

Several Native American tribes that inhabited Wisconsin had words for "eel" (Kuhm, 1928). This suggests that they encountered eels with at least some regularity.

Fewer accounts of eels were encountered in Wisconsin newspapers than in Michigan. The earliest story was recycled

"A Fish Story"

The following anecdote appeared in the *Evening Wisconsin* (4 February 1871) under the heading "A Fish Story":

[From the *New York Post*, January 24]

The last fish story comes from New Jersey. Lately, in the interior of that State, a mild-looking countryman entered a railroad car bearing a bundle tied up in a handkerchief, which he placed under his seat at the end of the car. After traveling along for about an hour, a lady sitting in front of the countryman was observed to move uneasily in her seat, and to cast savage glances at the seemingly respectable man sitting by her side.

In a few moments another lady still further to the front "became uneasy," and at last, rising in her seat, requested if some gentleman in the car would protect her from an elderly-looking gentleman by her side, and whom she stated had insulted her.

A dozen persons offered their assistance, and before the accused could speak in his own defence his hat was jammed over his eyes, and he was dragged to the rear of the car.

While there, and carrying on with the avengers a war of words as to what the indignity meant, still another lady rose, also seated further up the car, and accused a gentleman sitting behind her with improper conduct. A rush was made for insulter number two, but that gentleman vigorously defended himself with a large walking stick he happened to have (and which by the by was one cause of the last trouble, his accuser stating that he had indecorously been rapping her ankles under the seat with the same), and while the struggle to get at him was still in progress, somebody in the front of the car shouted "There's a snake on the floor." A scene then ensued. The ladies in the car clambered up on the seats and many got on the arms and backs of the same. One elderly maiden managed to stand on the backs of two seats, in the best circus manner possible under the circumstances, while a young mother threw her baby into a parcel rack, and then hung convulsively to a ventilator.

The confusion awoke the country man, who, on being told of the snake, first felt in his bundle, and then exclaimed, "I'm blamed if that old eel haint got loose," started for the front, and soon returned grasping firmly an immense eel, which he had first caught, while out fishing, but which, when brought into the car, had managed to get out of the bundle, and had wended its way to the front, loveingly caressing the different varieties of ladies' garters which he encountered on the way. Apologies given and received straightened everything in that car; but the hat that was jammed down, and the countryman leaving at the next station, no blood was drawn.

from an eastern newspaper, but it provides an indication of interest in the species:

> *Daily Wisconsin* (27 February 1857): "An Eel Story. – A singular effect of the cold weather is recorded by the Nantucket Mirror. It says that when the ice broke up last week, the whole Eastern shore of Long Pond, from Jeremy's Cove to the Narrows, was found filled with eels to the depth of two or three inches, so thick that a spear thrust in at random, by way of experiment, took out ten. Where such an enormous body of eels came from, is a mystery."

Except for a humorous anecdote (see "A Fish Story," above), subsequent accounts concerned eels within Wisconsin:

> *Evening Wisconsin* (21 July 1868): "A silver eel three feet long and weighing 8 pounds was recently taken from La Crosse river." [The La Crosse River is a tributary to the Mississippi River in southwest Wisconsin.]
>
> *Oshkosh Northwestern* (5 June 1873): "Eels are caught in the Wisconsin river at Wausau." [Marathon County]
>
> *Oshkosh Northwestern* (5 June 1873): "A black eel, three feet long, weighing five pounds, was caught in Milwaukee the other day." [Milwaukee County]
>
> *Oshkosh Northwestern* (26 June 1873): "Stocking the Fox with Shad. On Friday some of Seth Green's men, under directions from the Government, deposited in the lower Fox at Appleton, just above the dams, fifty thousand shad and four thousand eels. The shad were only four days old and so small that a person would have to look twice to see one. They were about as large as pin heads. The eels were about two inches in length. The fish were transported direct from Seth Green's breeding ponds in New York state, and were

brought in fifteen tin cans, such as are made for that purpose. It is expected that these young shad will work up stream and eventually stock Lake Winnebago. A shad matures in three years, and if those deposited in the Fox are not exterminated with nets, we may expect to draw a few of them out with a line in a year or two or three." [Outagamie County]

Evening Wisconsin (18 May 1875): "An eel was captured in Rock river, six miles below Watertown, the other day." [Jefferson County]

Evening Wisconsin (17 July 1875): "An eel, about three feet in length, was captured in the Wisconsin river, at Portage City, on Monday night." [Columbia County]

Oshkosh Northwestern (29 April 1886): "A six pound eel was recently caught in the Fox River at Green Bay." [Brown County]

Eels were not included by Becker (1983) among the species stocked in Wisconsin, but, as noted above, they were also stocked in Michigan in the 1870s (Hubbs and Lagler, 1964). The eel reported from the Fox River in 1886 may have been among those stocked earlier near Appleton. Of more interest is the account of eels caught in the Wisconsin River at Wausau in 1873 and Portage in 1875, because they provide evidence that eels were able to penetrate at least that far up the Wisconsin River drainage prior to the construction of dams. For example, the Kilbourn Dam (7.9 m) was built near Wisconsin Dells in 1907-1910, replacing a lower (2-3 m) log dam present from the mid-1800s to 1910, and, farther downstream, the Prairie du Sac dam (12.5 m) was constructed over the period 1911-1914 (Lyons, 1993). Today, upstream movement in the Wisconsin River is blocked by the Prairie du Sac dam, and there are no documented collections of eels from further upstream (Becker, 1983; Fago, 1992).

Records of Eels from the Green Bay Drainage (Lake Michigan), 1984-2000

During a 16-year period when I lived in Brown County, Wisconsin, and my field work was concentrated in the vicinity of Green Bay and its major tributary, the Fox River, I recorded several occurrences of eels. Some were collected in a sea lamprey assessment trap (Schuldt and Heinrich, 1982) set below the east end of the DePere dam on the lower Fox River, approximately 12 km upstream from Green Bay, usually from the beginning of April to mid-June each year (1979-1999). The trap was lifted five times per week.

18 May 1988 – a former student, Henry Quinlan, then employed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), reported that another WDNR worker observed an angler catch an eel in the lower Fox River (the angler thought he had caught a sea lamprey).

8 May 1990 – student Joe Marks, the son of a commercial fisherman, brought me an eel caught in a fine mesh pound net set by Tom Peters for yellow perch along the west shoreline of Green Bay, just outside the mouth of the Suamico River. Total length: 80-90 cm.

14 October 1990 – Joe Marks brought me an American eel caught by his father in a commercial drop net set for yellow perch along the western shore of Green Bay.

13 May 1991 – an eel was collected in the sea lamprey assessment trap (water temperature: 18°C). This was the first eel collected in the assessment trap, but I recorded in my notes at this time that I had been seeing or hearing about one or two caught in the Fox River or Green Bay each year.

5 June 1991 – an eel was collected in the sea lamprey assessment trap (water temperature: 20.5°C). It was marked with a Floy tag of the type used by the WDNR, but the number was illegible.

February-March 1993 – student Max Brosig found eel scales in otter scat collected along the Suamico River near Pittsfield, Brown County.

10 June 1993 – an eel was collected in the sea lamprey assessment trap (water temperature: 17°C).

Although a sea lamprey assessment trap was set below the DePere dam each year beginning in 1979, American eels were not captured until 1991. This may simply reflect a trend for trap catches to become increasingly diverse in response to improved water quality in the Fox River (Harris and Kraft, 1993). My lack of records of eels caught by any means after 1993 might be indicative of a true decline in the Green Bay system. It might be instructive to examine catch records for sea lamprey assessment traps that have been set in other tributaries to Green Bay (i.e., the Oconto, Peshtigo, and Menominee rivers) to check for similar trends.

Observations Below the Prairie du Sac Dam, 1988-1989

As noted above, the Prairie du Sac dam on the Wisconsin River is a barrier to upstream movement by eels. That eels do indeed make it up the Wisconsin River as far as this barrier is indicated by the following records. All eels were

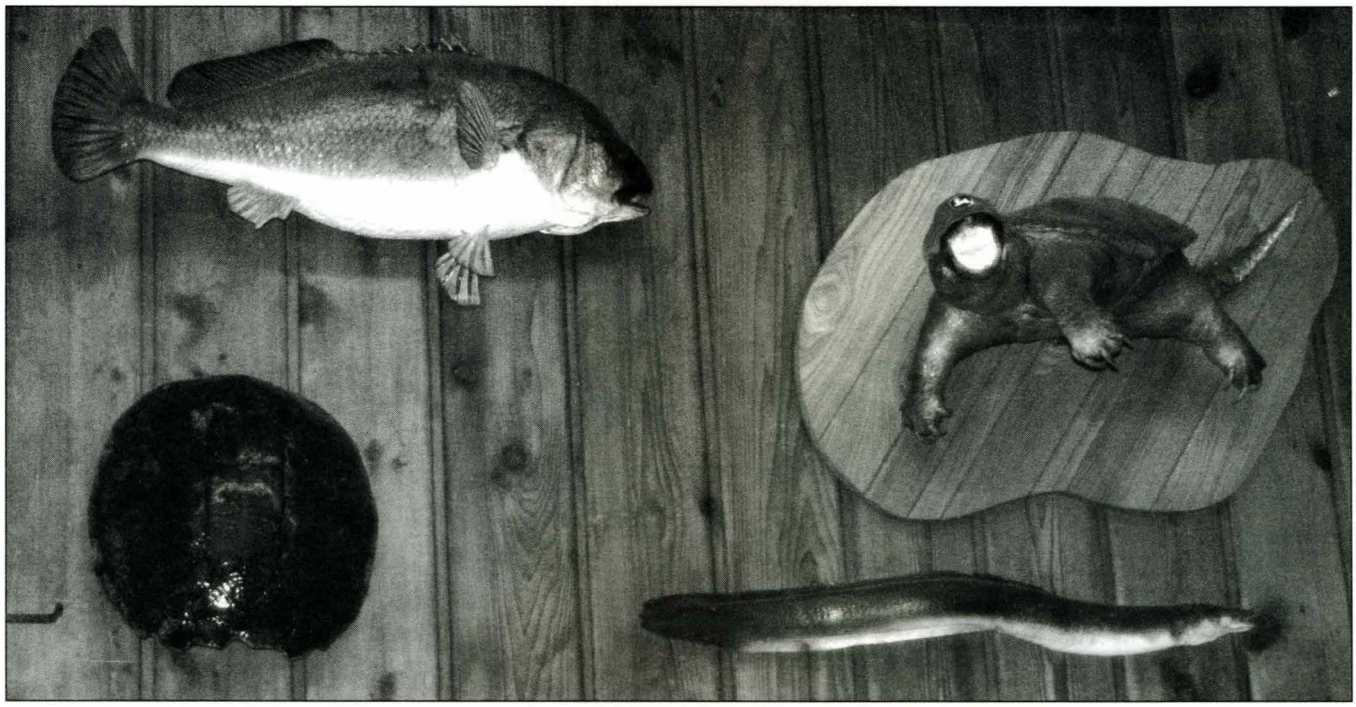

Fig. 1.
An American eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) on the wall of the Mauer Brothers Tavern in Elba, Winona County, Minnesota.
Elba is in a region dominated by trout streams of the Whitewater River Valley, but the Mississippi River borders Winona County to the east.

collected or observed during surveys below the dam with a boat-mounted electrofisher (pulsed DC).

> 23 June 1988 – One eel, roughly 50-70cm long and with a fish hook in its mouth, was collected near the face of the dam spillway. It was kept for display at the state fair.
>
> 28 July 1988 – One eel was collected.
>
> 15 June 1989 – Three eels, approximately 50 cm long, were caught along the face of the spillway within a span of 5-10 minutes.
>
> 10 August 1989 – One eel was observed near the spillway.

General Discussion

In addition to specific points discussed above, two general conclusions emerge from this historical analysis.

First, the distribution of the eel in the Upper Midwest has shifted historically in complex ways as a result of the construction of canals and dams and the influence of stocking. Consider, for example, the Fox River drainage upstream from Lake Winnebago in the Lake Michigan basin. Prior to European settlement, eels might have taken advantage of an occasional high water connection between the Wisconsin River drainage and the Fox River drainage near Portage to colonize the latter. After the mid-1800s, they almost certainly used the canal that was constructed to connect the two systems and, beginning at the same time, they could have used a canal connecting the Illinois River to Lake Michigan to gain access to the Fox River from its downstream end at Green Bay. They were probably already using the Welland Canal, constructed in 1829, to gain access to the Upper Great Lakes. Stocking of eels into the lower Fox River in the 1870s may have led to a temporary increase in eel numbers in the upper Fox. Access via the Wisconsin River system would have been blocked with the construction of the Prairie du Sac dam on the Wisconsin River in the early 1900s, but entry into the system from the downstream end would have continued. Numbers of eels in the upper Fox during the 1900s presumably fluctuated as various factors affected the ease with which eels moved through the Great Lakes and lower Fox River (e.g., water quality, the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, reduced boat traffic through the locks on the lower Fox). Finally, in 1988, the Rapide Croche lock on the lower Fox River was sealed to prevent upstream movement by sea lampreys (Cochran, 1994), and this action presumably blocked access by eels as well. Today the upper Fox River is presumably cut off from colonization by eels at both ends.

Second, it would seem that the American eel in the Upper Midwest, where it is relatively uncommon, suffers from a "novelty" effect that may reinforce its local rarity. When eels get captured in this region, they tend to be kept rather than released. They may get taken back to the lab or to the nearest college or university, where they are put into aquariums or where they join previous captures as pickled specimens in teaching collections. They may get taken to a taxidermist and end up on a tavern wall (Fig. 1). Some of this is understandable, but in an age of digital imagery, some is avoidable. I have been guilty of keeping eels in the past, but I can state from experience that it doesn't take more than one specimen to teach an ichthyology class, and because they are easy to identify, eel specimens don't take a beating from students the way some other species do. It may be time to promote a "catch and release" policy with respect to this fascinating visitor to our inland waters.

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