

Tishomingo National Fish Hatchery Gets Alligator Gar

Craig Springer

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, POB 1306, Albuquerque, NM 87103
Craig_Springer@fws.gov

How do you hold a 120-pound alligator gar? Away from its toothy jaws if you value your fingers. That's how U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) biologists in Oklahoma handle theirs—carefully. And they've been handling a few of them lately.

Surprisingly little is known about this huge fish, which, ironically, is the second-largest freshwater fish species in North America. It's a knowledge gap that FWS fish biologists hope to fill. The first step is to catch alligator gar.

"It's pretty hard to wrestle a 100-pound giant into an electrofishing boat," says FWS fish biologist Brent Bristow. "They're pretty hard on nets, too. So we've gone another route—angling."

With the help of local anglers who know where to find the not-so-common alligator gar, Bristow has been able to put numbered jaw tags on several large specimens, hoping to get a handle on the population size in the Red River above Lake Texoma.

The alligator gar populations have diminished over the years across much of the lower Mississippi River basin and biologists want to turn that trend around.

Part of the solution is better understanding the species' habitat needs. The other part is knowing their biology. Toward that end, some of the alligator gar wrestled ashore by hook and line are taken alive to FWS's Tishomingo National



Gary Wyatt of Tishomingo National Fish Hatchery hangs on to a huge alligator gar (*Atractosteus spatula*). The alligator gar is the second-largest freshwater fish species in North America. David Hoke/FWS photo.

Fish Hatchery in Tishomingo, Oklahoma. There, fish biologists will experiment in inducing spawning, and also find ways to implant radio transmitters under an armor-like scale plating.

"Following radio-tagged fish in the wild could yield a wealth of information on a fish that's in decline," says Kerry Graves, manager of the Tishomingo hatchery. "The radios will give us a way to learn what specific habitat they need—plus learn their habits like seasonal migration patterns."

Although knowledge about the alligator gar is limited, we do know that their immense bodies tip the scales at 300 pounds. That's a fact not to be overlooked in questioning the fish's value as a sport fish.

This big river behemoth has been the unfortunate subject of legend—a mythology that hasn't lent itself to admiring this truly unique fish. And in some cases it's led to sheer wanton waste.

"Some folks think that just because it grows so big that it harms game fish populations," says Graves. "That just isn't so. There's no favors being done by wastefully killing alligator gar. If anything, gar help keep down the numbers of rough fish, like carp. Ponder this: would you rather catch a 10-pound carp or a 100-pound gator gar?"

A weighty question indeed, and one that conservation-minded anglers don't have to ponder too long. 