

# Fish in the Red River



River Keepers

A northern caught in the Red River.

The Red River is home to over 70 species of fish, including catfish, muskellunge, northern pike, bass, walleye, carp, drum, sauger, and lake sturgeon, among others. The large number of fish present in the Red River makes it a desirable location for fishing and the low levels of pollution in the Red River means the fish can be safely eaten.

## Catfish

Channel catfish are the most common game fish within the Red River and its tributaries. They are slow growing and can measure up to 30 inches in length. Some channel catfish have been aged at 24 years old and can grow to be more than 30 pounds. Catfish are very distinct looking, with four pairs of barbels around their mouths and scaleless bodies. They live on a diet of minnows, other fish, snails, clams, frogs, and vegetation.

## Carp

Carp is the only non-native fish species present in the Red River. They were originally brought to the area from Europe, and since then their populations have grown dramatically in the Red River. Carp spawn from early May until late June. They broadcast their eggs over flooded vegetation and often enter tributaries to spawn. Many people enjoy fishing for carp because they put up a strong fight and generally taste good.

## Lake Sturgeon

The lake sturgeon is an enormous fish and can reach lengths of up to 15 feet and live to be 100 years old. They were once common in the Red River and many of its tributary streams up to the early 1900s. However, they do not reproduce until they are in their twenties, and many variables such as fishing pressure, dams,

excessive development, and pollution prevented the fish from reaching that age. As a result they were essentially eliminated from the entire Red River Basin. Today Manitoba, Minnesota, and North Dakota have developed a joint management plan to increase the number of lake sturgeon in the Red River. Until there is a sustainable population there is no open angling season for them on the Red River.

## The Fish on Display

The stuffed fish on display are all species commonly found in the Red River. Northern pike are one of the easiest fish to catch because they bite lures and bait so willingly. Most northrens caught are two to three pounds, but anglers regularly catch trophy northrens of over 20 pounds.

Walleye are the most sought after fish in Minnesota and North Dakota. The average walleye is about 14 inches long and weighs slightly over a pound. The sauger is a close relative of the walleye, but its distribution is more limited. The two species look similar, but you can tell them apart by looking at the lower part of the tail, which is white on a walleye but not on a sauger.

Drum are abundant in much of Minnesota and North Dakota. A typical freshwater drum weighs about two pounds. The drum gets its name from the distinctive rumbling sound that the male makes during the spring breeding season to attract mates.

White bass are between ten and sixteen inches long and weigh between one and four pounds on average. They are carnivores and easy to catch with live bait.

## Dams

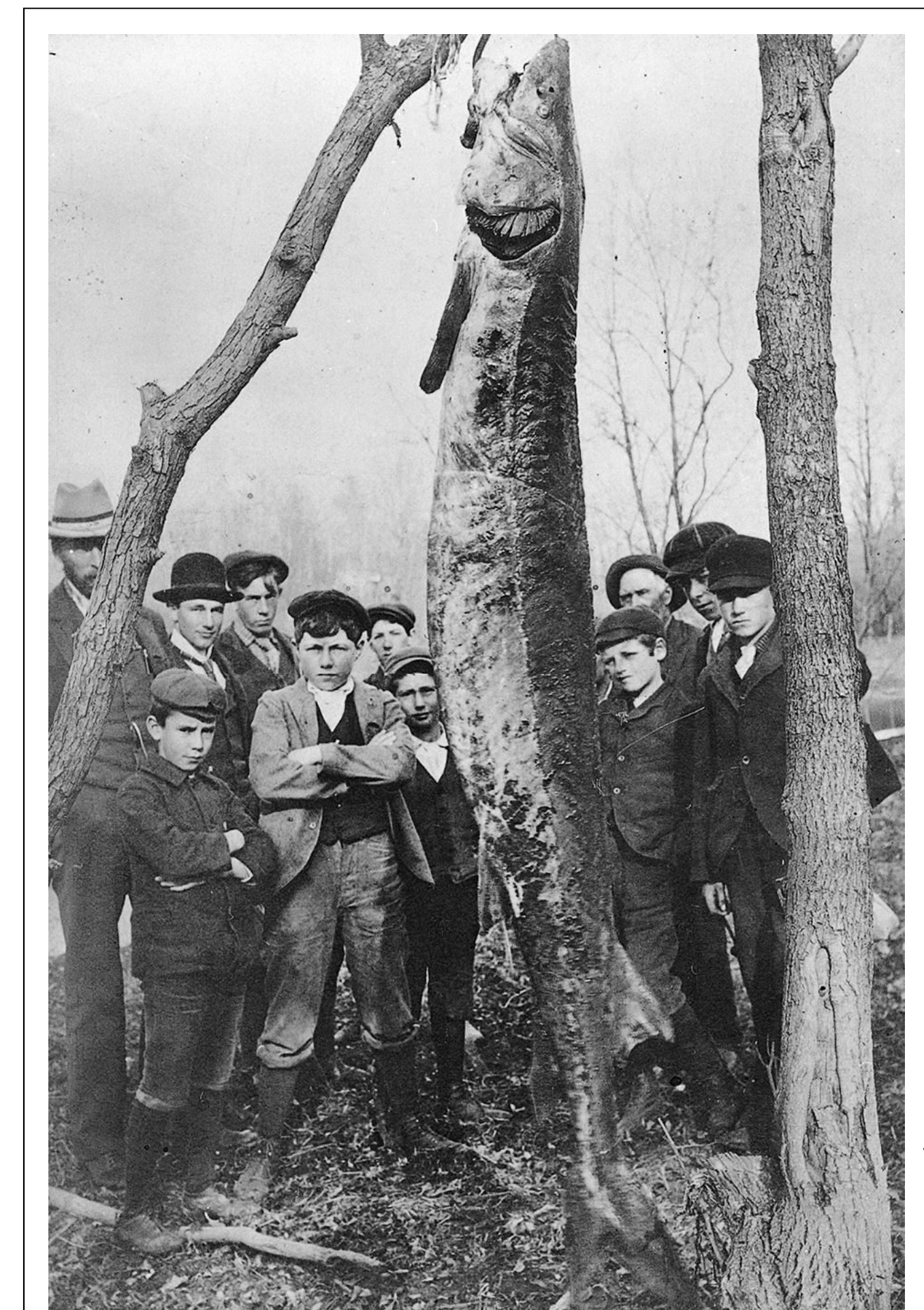
The Red River has eight low-head dams, and many of its tributaries have them as well. Low-head dams are dangerous, because as water rolls over the dam, it creates a hydraulic current that pulls objects back to the face of the dam and to the bottom of the river. Called a hydraulic roller effect, this has caused many people to drown at these dams. These dams also inhibit upstream fish movement because of the roller effect and the vertical wall of the dam presents a barrier that fish cannot swim over. Because many fish must move upstream to spawn, dams have hindered the populations of many fish species.

As of 2009, five of the eight dams have been retrofitted with inclines made up of large rocks and boulders below the dams. The rock passage eliminates the hydraulic roller effect and provides large boulders for fish to rest behind which allows fish to move over the dams and to their spawning areas.

## Helping Fish Populations

People living in the Red River Valley can help the river's fish and wildlife populations by keeping their grass clippings out of the river and by using minimal amounts of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Pollutants can enter the river through storm drains and drainage ditches and can be harmful to the river's aquatic life. Fish in the Red River currently contain acceptable levels of pollutants, but this could

change over time as development continues.



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A lake sturgeon caught in 1905 in the Roseau River, which flows into the Red River.



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A catfish caught in the Red River.

