

Despite bad reputation, longnose gar are great sport for anglers



Dan Morey displays the 43-inch longnose pike he caught during the last week of April in Presque Isle Bay. Contributed photo ERIE TIMES-NEWS

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I was tuned in to Turner Classic Movies the other night when an old Robert Mitchum picture called "Night of the Hunter" came on.

I'd seen it before, but watched it again because it contains one of my all-time favorite fishing scenes.

A young boy and his uncle are sitting in a boat staring at their bobbers. Uncle Birdie gets a hit,

sets the hook, and comes up empty. He reels in to find that something has cut his line. The boy asks him what it was.

"Meanest, orneriest, sneakiest critter in the whole river," says Uncle Birdie. "A gar."

He goes on to describe his toothy nemesis as a "slimy, snag-toothed, bait-stealin' so-and-so!"

"Night of the Hunter" was filmed in 1955, but anglers' attitudes toward this voracious prehistoric predator haven't changed much. Just ask any Presque Isle crappie angler who's been bit off time and again by the same pesky gar. Chances are they won't use terms like "fascinating creature" or "great sport fish," yet both of these descriptions are entirely accurate.

Presque Isle Bay is home to two species of gar: the spotted gar, which is endangered and off-limits to fishing, and the more common longnose gar. Both have beaklike snouts full of razor-sharp teeth, olive to gray coloring, and beautiful black-blotch camouflage. The spotted gar is smaller, more heavily spotted, and has a shorter, broader snout. They are curious fish and sometimes swim right up to me while I'm wading in the lagoons. If you see them, don't cast in their direction -- they're endangered.

The gar you can legally target in Pennsylvania is the longnose. They frequent weedy shallows, like the stretch between the Erie Yacht Club and the head of the bay. Gars have a swim bladder that connects to their throat and acts as a primitive lung. This adaptation allows them to survive in warm, stagnant water with extremely low oxygen content. On brutally hot, windless days, you can see them wallowing on the surface, sucking air and soaking up rays.

Longnose gars eat small fish throughout the day, but often go into a feeding frenzy around dusk. Cast out anything that imitates a minnow and you'll get a hit -- explosively. The hard part is hooking them. Longnose have incredibly narrow, bony beaks -- there just isn't much to sink a hook into. I generally throw smaller single-hook inline spinners or weedless spoons, which results in roughly an 8-to-1 hit-to-hookup ratio.

You can increase your odds by using treble hooks, or resort to a rope lure. A rope lure is nothing more than a piece of unraveled braided nylon rope, fished like a soft-plastic bass worm. When the gar bites, his teeth become hopelessly entangled. Though rope lures are highly effective, I seldom use them.

If you plan on releasing your gar, you'll have to spend an annoying amount of time freeing all those nylon strands from the fish's teeth.

Once hooked, longnose are great sport. They often leap from the water, thrashing their beaks spastically, trying to throw the lure.

Presque Isle is the best place in the state to fish for these ancient brawlers, so the next time you get bit off by a gar, don't curse him ... put on a steel leader and catch him!