# paddlefish

*Polyodon spathula*

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| Kingdom: | Animalia |
| Division/Phylum: | Chordata - vertebrates |
| Class: | Osteichthyes |
| Order: | Acipenseriformes |
| Family: | Polyodontidae |

## Features

Although its average weight is two pounds, the state record paddlefish weighed 107 pounds and was almost six feet long. It has a flat, broad, paddle-shaped snout; a long tapered gill cover; and no scales except for a patch on the upper lobe of the forked tail. The snout contains an elaborate system of sense organs. The body is gray to blue-gray on the back and sides with a white belly. The skeleton is mainly cartilage.

## Natural History

The paddlefish lives in large rivers, preferring slow moving water over four feet deep. It is found in the border rivers and lower reaches of their large tributaries. It formerly was common in natural lakes in Dickinson County, but is now absent. For spawning it requires a large free-flowing river with gravel bars that will remain flooded for the duration of the spring spawning period. It eats microscopic crustaceans and insect larvae filtered from the water as it swims about with its mouth open. It swims continuously in open water and may leap out of the water. It does not seem to have a home range and may swim hundreds of miles. It reaches maturity at age seven. It may live 20 to 30 years. It spawns in April or May. Eggs are scattered over silt-free sand or gravel bottom in a large free-flowing river. Floods of several days' duration are needed for spawning to be successful, as the gravel where the eggs are deposited is normally out of the water. Eggs are sticky and attach to objects on the bottom. Eggs hatch in about nine days. Over exploitation and changes in our large rivers have greatly reduced the numbers of paddlefish in our waters.

## Habitats

interior rivers and streams; Mississippi River; Missouri River

## Iowa Status

uncommon; native

## Iowa Range

Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and lower reaches of tributaries

## Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.