

## IN DEFENSE OF THE

# Antediluvian Gar

There's nothing pretty about gar fishing, but they do pull line and they do play rough. BY CHRIS DUERKSEN

**W**hy do so many Florida anglers diss gar? I think the number one explanation is quite simple—it is easy to get them to bite, but seemingly impossible to catch them! Anglers just can't take that! Their bony, narrow mouths and rows of needle-like teeth make it extraordinarily difficult to sink a hook into. Add this to the fact that if you do get them to the net, you must remove the hook from a muscular, bony-plated fish that will definitely try to bite you.

To make matters worse, though reputed to be respectable dinner fare, cleaning gar is an odious exercise that begins with cutting off tough armor with tin snips even before you can get down to the challenging task of filleting the meat from their bony body. (There are some good tutorials online for rookie gar filleters.)

Thus it comes as no real surprise that few anglers in Florida will admit to targeting gar and have zilch knowledge about how to catch them—despite the fact they are eager biters and terrific fighters.

Florida is home to four species of gar—long-nose, Florida, spotted, and alligator. The long-nose gar swims the waters of south and central Florida, overlapping the Florida gar in the Apalachicola drainage. Similar to, but slightly smaller than the long-nose, Florida gar dominate the area to the north of the Apalachicola drainage and into the Florida Panhandle, giving way to the spotted gar farther west. The alligator gar is by far the largest member of the gar family—growing up to 10 feet long—and is found only in low numbers in the western Panhandle. It is a protected species open to fishing only by special permit. The long-nose and Florida gar are the two species Florida anglers are most likely to run into.

I've nurtured a bit of a fascination with gar since a memorable day in the Everglades. In my kayak, I rounded a point in the lake I was exploring and spied fish blasting bait on the surface in a small cove. Big bass, I thought. No sooner did my plug land than something exploded on it, something strong. My smile turned sour when I saw it was a long, slender fish with a big snout—definitely not the trophy bass I was already bragging about in my mind to my buddies. I knew it was a gar. On the second jump the lure came flying back at me, a timely long-distance release!

I pedaled closer and could see literally hundreds of gar cruising just below the surface. I cast again and immediately a 3-foot gar slashed over and nailed it... and again after a brief tussle he slipped off. After this scene was repeated several times, I skulked



Alligator Gar



Longnose Gar



Florida Gar

A fourth gar, the spotted gar, is similar to Florida gar but limited only to the far northwestern corner of the state.