

Antediluvian Gar

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off. But, I couldn't help thinking, maybe there's a system to catch those fish? A sensible method for targeting gar as a fun addition to a day of fishing?

A little homework revealed an incredibly interesting creature, one that has been around for 100 million years, coexisting with and ultimately surviving the dinosaurs. The Florida and long-nose gar are close cousins, the main distinguishing features being the shorter length of the Florida gar's snout and the fact it has spots all over rather than mostly on the tail like the long-nose. It's all packaged in a handsome brownish-bronze to olive color. The long-nose tends to run larger, with the FWC's Big Catch Program calling for a minimum entry of 40 inches or 15 pounds.

All gar prefer similar habitats—shallow lakes, backwaters and canals without much current. They feed on fish and crustaceans. Because of their narrow mouths that don't open very

wide, their favorite food is small fish that they usually pursue on the surface and in shallow water. They often will lie on or swim slowly near the surface and nail any unsuspecting prey that happens too close to that death-trap of a mouth.

Female gar are bigger than the boys, and can they reproduce—over 30,000 eggs at a laying February through April. Gar don't build nests, but their eggs are protected from marauding predators by a toxic coating. The girls and boys meet up in weedy, shallow, quiet backwaters. All gar have swim bladders that allow them to breathe air directly as well as through their gills, and big scales armored with a tough, enamel-like coating. They live 17 to 20 years. No wonder they have survived for millions of years. Their only real enemy in Florida is supposedly alligators—certainly not anglers!

Doing a little research online, most of what I could find about best gar lures came from Texas anglers fishing for giant alligator gar. A mainstay of their fishery is a "rope lure" that's made by unbraiding a short stretch of nylon rope, adding a little weight like a jig head, and using it without a hook. The idea is that the gar's teeth will get tangled up in the rope. And it does work. White seems to be the lure color of choice. The best live bait is reportedly a 4"-5" shiner on a treble hook through the nose.

The experts also offer some tips on presentation. Gar feed mainly close to the surface, which means sight fishing is an exciting possibility. The pros further suggest casting behind gar and bringing the lure up slowly to their sides, letting it rest, then nudging it slightly to trigger a strike. Once you get a gar to bite, put light pressure on the fish and let it tug and pull and writhe to further become entangled in the rope strands or swallow the live bait.

PUTTING THE RESEARCH TO WORK

After fashioning some rope lures of my own and fishing them along South Florida's Tamiami Trail, I discovered a problem: Long-nose gar don't have teeth in the large size or numbers alligator gar do to successfully entangle a rope lure. My brilliant idea was to add small treble hooks that would fit in the gar's narrow snout and penetrate its bony mouth. I pulled out my fly-tying vise and went to work.

Fast forward a week, and I was back at the canal with several newly designed rope lures. I had shots at a few gar, but not in the numbers I ran into on my earlier outing. Thinking maybe they had migrated to a hidden lake I could see on Google Maps, I slid under the bridge, trying to avoid clipping my noggin on the mud dauber nests above. Emerging into the lake, I cast my rope lure towards a disturbance...and it worked! A gar immediately nailed the lure. I applied steady but light pressure with my rod as the experts advised. He jetted out into the



Slow, backwater canals are usually loaded with gar, and in clear water it's fun sight-casting to them.