Gar Fishing on the Mazon River

Story and Photos
By Mark Leigh

We had all the ingredients for a great day of fishing—a sunny summer morning, two avid anglers, knowledge of gar on the Mazon River and a camera to document success.

Bill Meyer, a member of Big Brother Big Sisters residing in Morris, and his Little Brother Zach Huvila, 14, are fanatic gar anglers. The fish of the day was the long-nose gar, a peculiar-looking slender fish with an alligator-like snout in excess of 6 inches. The refraction of the water makes most of these fish—often sighted sunning near the water's surface—appear to be 3 to 4 feet long. Some really are.

On the appointed morning, Meyer and Huvila each arrived with two fishing poles—one baited with shad on a bobber and another baited with a rope lure. The strategy of the day was to cast out the baited hook and rest its pole on a forked stick and then work their rope lures.

When a gar strikes a rope lure its numerous, sharp teeth get caught in the rope fibers. The sales pitch for this gar lure should be: "Works better than a hook, won't get snagged on logs, can't hurt children—or catch other species of fish."

When a gar hits a baited hook, the technical advice is to not set the hook immediately. At first, gar run with the bait in the end of their snout, making it difficult to set the hook. The recommended time to set the hook is on the gar's second run, which might be after a couple of minutes, when the bait is in or near the gar's mouth. According to Meyer, a fisherman would be fortunate if able to land a gar on 50 percent of the hits.

In the course of about 90 minutes, Huvila had three hits on his shad-baited pole. Even though he patiently waited as long as 5 minutes before trying to set the hook, he was unsuccessful in landing a fish.

Meyer caught the first fish of the day on a shad-baited hook, a 2- to 3-pound catfish that lifted our spirits. Although he likes to eat catfish, Meyer didn't have time to clean the fish, so it was released.

Huvila soon had a strike and run on his baited hook. Waiting, he hoped the fish would make a run from the shoreline,

(Lures by Jack Barnett, Gainesville, Georgia (geocities.com/GarManJack). Photo courtesy In-Fisherman.)

Bill Meyer and Zach Huvila used both baited and rope lures while fishing for gar on the Mazon River. Hookless gar lures (right) are available commercially.

Patience is required when removing a rope lure from a sharp-toothed gar. Huvila's 43-inch fish was his second-largest catch.

increasing the chances of properly setting the hook. When the line started going out, Huvila reared back and slammed the hook home. He had the fight of a big gar on his line—a 43-inch fish and the second largest he had ever caught.

As the designated quitting time approached, Huvila caught a gar on his rope lure.

Releasing any gar on a rope lure—let alone the 39-inch fish Huvila caught—requires patience and dedication. If an angler just cut the line and released the gar with a tangled up snout, the fish would surely die. Cutting the rope lure and pulling the strings out is not easy and requires precaution to avoid sharp teeth on a fish that could start thrashing at any moment.

Huvila safely released the gar, ending a memorable morning on the Mazon River and three encounters with long-nosed gar.

Although Huvila is a youngster, he has an awareness of how precious his time with Meyer is. Spending time with an adult friend and role model is a favor when one temporarily gives up working their lines to help a friend land a fish.

Whether for bluegill at the farm pond, trout in the city park or gar on the river, spending a few hours fishing with a child is a wise investment of your time.

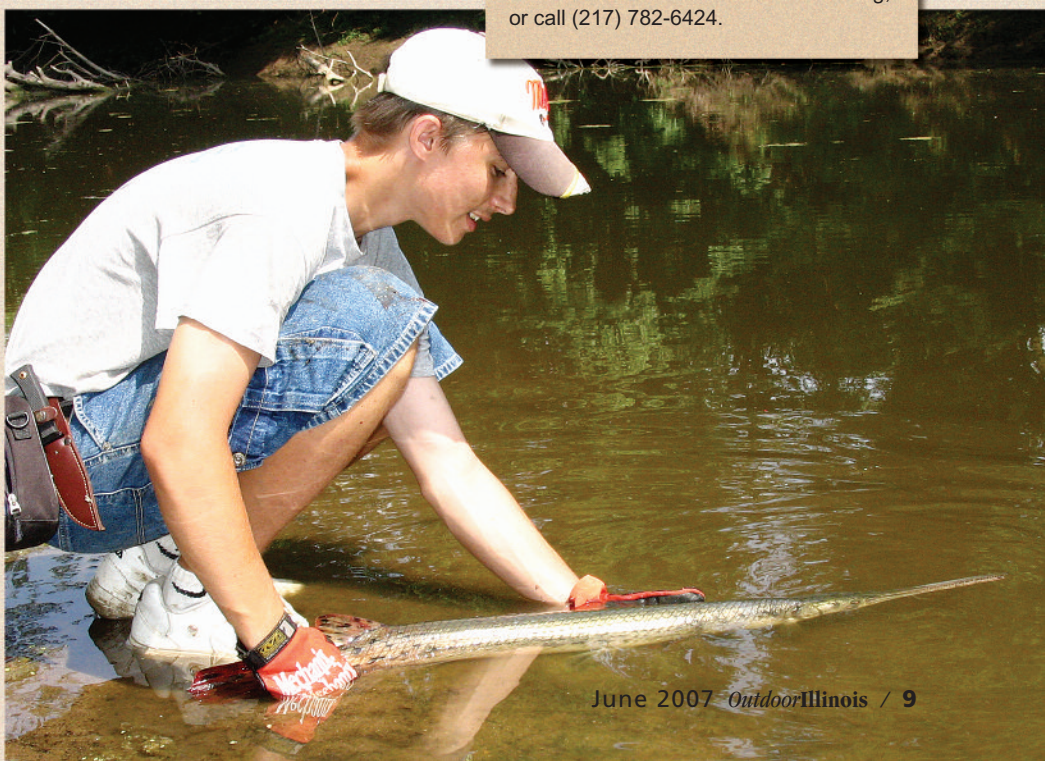
Huvila plans on returning to another child when he turns 18.

Fishing for gar—or any other fish—is an excellent activity for adult volunteers to share with youth. Camaraderie develops between people who experience the wonder of nature together. Cooperation is fostered in fishing—choosing a spot to fish, carrying gear and food, and deciding when to quit. Courtesy gets a workout, making sure one angler doesn't infringe too closely to another's lines or

Equipment Loan Program

Don't have the equipment to take a youngster fishing? DNR and partner agencies make loaner fishing equipment available at approximately 175 locations around the state. For a list of participating sites, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/fish/index.htm or www.ifishillinois.org, or call (217) 782-6424.

Many youth are waiting for someone to come forward to be their Big Brother or Big Sister. Many of them love to fish. How about it anglers? Give the Big Brothers Big Sisters agency in your area a call, or visit www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org to learn more.



Zach Huvila released his long-nosed gar, anticipating another outing and a chance to reel in the toothy predator.