

rivers, jumping was in full swing. The colonial naturalist, Mark Catesby, observing Atlantic Sturgeon jumping in the Savannah River in the early 1700s, summed it up very elegantly:

*“...in May, June and July, the rivers abound with them [sturgeons], at which time it is surprising, though very common to see such large fish elated in the air; by their leaping some yards out of the water; this they do in an erect posture, and fall on their sides, which repeated percussions are loudly heard some miles distance in still evenings; it is also by this leaping action that many of them are taken, for as some particular parts of the rivers afford them most food, to those places they resort in greater plenty. Here the inhabitants (as the Indians taught them) place their canoes and boats, that when the sturgeon leap, these boats and canoes may receive them at their fall. It is dangerous passing over these leaping holes, as they are called, many a canoe, and small boat having been overset by the fall of a sturgeon into it.”*

Using underwater acoustic investigations near Manatee Springs State Park in 2011, the USGS Sturgeon Quest research team has learned that sturgeons “talk” to each other. They communicate by producing loud sharp snaps, often emitted in an evenly-spaced series of three: snap-snap-snap. For about a mile of river, the deep channel below Manatee Springs serves as a sturgeon summer “holding” area, one of about ten such holding areas in the entire river. Put a high-end hydrophone in the water when no boats are around and what you hear are lots of snapping sounds, punctuated by those loud jumping sounds. In 2011, our Sturgeon Quest team recorded these snapping sounds and discovered that each snap has the same characteristic wave form, frequency, and duration. By strange coincidence, a few days later, a diver called to report hearing repeated snaps or clicks while diving near Troy Springs. He initially suspected a gear malfunction, but nothing seemed amiss. Then he realized that the chorus of snapping sounds had to be coming from a group of

nearby sturgeons. Nice visual confirmation that those snapping sounds are Gulf Sturgeon vocalizations.

Yes, you might see a sturgeon jump just about anywhere up and down the river, but the real action is in these deeper holding areas. If you do not have a boat, the pier at Manatee Springs is a great place to view jumping sturgeons. Another great viewing spot is from the old railroad trestle crossing the Suwannee just north of Old Town, now part of a hiking and biking path. Hundreds of these great river beasts congregate, hanging out deep, resting for the season after a winter of intense feeding out in the Gulf. They like it deep and dark, where they can rest without bucking the strong surface current, down where secretive sturgeons can hide in the tea-dark water. Sturgeons do not feed in summer, so they are rarely hooked by anglers. If they did not jump, you would never know that the Suwannee is home to about 15,000 impressively large fish. No, they are not seeking refuge from summertime warm water. That is an old myth, borrowed from up north where midsummer water temperatures are a real problem for cold-water fishes, adapted to northern waters. Down here in Florida, those sturgeons have been around for maybe 50,000 to 100,000 years, certainly since the end of the last ice age (15,000 years ago). Gulf Sturgeons are nicely adapted to our warmer waters. These aren’t snowbirds suffering in the Florida heat. They can handle summer water temperatures up to 90 degrees, no problem. The Suwannee normally hovers around 75-80 degrees in summer, rarely heating up like other Gulf Sturgeon rivers. Sturgeons actually begin to settle into holding areas in early spring, when the river is still cold. Carrying a lot of fat from five to six months of winter feeding in the Gulf, they congregate in long deep runs below deeper holes, hovering down below the current where the swimming is easy. Each holding area is a safe haven for hundreds of sturgeons, April through September, where they can hang out and slowly digest 20 percent of their body mass without feeding. Particularly, during periods of low water, sturgeons concentrate in these deep holding areas. Jumping activity gets intense then and so does the level of sturgeon communication by clicking sound production.

Loitering in the deep, conserving energy, and hovering just about the bottom, requires neutral buoyancy. In the same way that a SCUBA diver stays neutral by inflating his buoyancy compensator (BC), a