



NEWS RELEASE

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ENDANGERED RAZORBACK SUCKER SPAWN FOR FIRST TIME IN UTAH'S WHITE RIVER

LAKESWOOD, Colo. – In late June, Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program (Recovery Program) researchers discovered endangered razorback sucker larvae for the first time in the White River in eastern Utah. This clearly documents successful razorback sucker reproduction in that reach of critical habitat, most probably by hatchery-raised and stocked fish.

One of four species of endangered Colorado River fish, razorback sucker have been extremely rare in the White River until recent years. The species was listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1991. The other endangered fish species are Colorado pikeminnow, humpback chub and bonytail.

The larvae were found after U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) biologists observed razorback sucker in spawning condition while conducting Colorado pikeminnow population estimates on the White River.

“We know that razorback sucker are spawning in the Green River, but we’ve never had evidence that this has occurred in the White River,” said Service Biologist Aaron Webber. “When we saw so many razorback sucker in the White River in spawning condition this spring, we decided to take our research a step further to see if we could find some larvae.”

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Biologists identified four backwater areas in the lower 24 miles of the White River where they thought drifting larval fish might enter. Using light traps set in those locations, they collected several half-inch larval fish that they identified as razorback sucker from one of those habitats located about 5 miles upstream of the Green River confluence.

The identify of the larvae was further confirmed by Colorado State University's Larval Fish Laboratory (LFL) in Fort Collins, Colo.

“We used a computer-interactive key and guide to distinguish the larvae from other species of sucker that live in Upper Colorado rivers,” said LFL Research Scientist Darrel Snyder. “The key and guide were developed by the lab over a 25-year period and incorporate over a hundred potentially diagnostic early-life-stage characters, such as pigmentation patterns, numbers of muscle segments (*myomeres*) in the body and developmental state relative to size.”

Razorback sucker raised at the Ouray National Fish Hatchery near Vernal, Utah, have been stocked in the Green River since 1995. Researchers continue to capture greater numbers of stocked fish in reproductive condition each year. Although larvae have been detected in low numbers in the Green River for many years, their captures have increased greatly since 2003.

“From our work on the Green River we knew that the stocked fish were behaving similarly to wild razorback sucker that we studied during the 1980s and 1990s,” Webber said. “Typical for a migratory species like the razorback sucker, these fish have now moved from the Green River into the White River to find suitable spawning habitat.”

Researchers welcomed the news that razorback sucker are spawning in the White River, the second largest tributary to the Green River, which headwaters in the Flat Top Wilderness Area in northwest Colorado. Other tributaries are the Duchesne, Price, San Rafael and Yampa rivers. These tributaries help maintain important Green River habitat that endangered fish need to complete their life cycle.

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“The White River has long been recognized as a stronghold for Colorado pikeminnow and other native species and, just as important, as a place where nonnative fish seem to struggle,” said Recovery Program Director Tom Chart. “With this recent report of razorback sucker now spawning there, the importance of the White River to endangered fish recovery has increased even more.”

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The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program is a cooperative partnership of local, state and federal agencies, water organizations, power customers and environmental groups established in 1988 to recover the endangered fishes while water development proceeds in accordance with federal and state laws and interstate compacts. For more information, 303-969-7322, or ColoradoRiverRecovery.org.

NOTE TO EDITORS: Photos are available from Debbie Felker, 303-969-7322, ext. 227, debbie_felker@fws.gov.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Researcher Amadeus Guy sets a light trap to attract larval fish in Utah’s White River. (Photo courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)



A top and side view of an endangered razorback sucker larvae taken from the White River in Utah on June 21, 2011, as seen through a microscope at Colorado State University’s Larval Fish Laboratory in Fort Collins, Colo. The larvae is approximately half an inch in length. (Photo courtesy CSU Larval Fish Lab)