

**From the United States Fish and  
Wildlife Service**

**Recovery Program for the Endangered  
Fishes of the Upper Colorado**

In the early 1900s landing Colorado squawfish estimated at 20 to 80 pounds gave some anglers the thrill of a lifetime, according to a research document released this week by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

"I pitched that green frog out there and this [Colorado squawfish] hit it, just about straight across, and he ran down that fast water, riffles, and took out about 200 feet of line before I turned him around," the report quotes Maybell, Colorado, resident Gene Bittler as saying. "It was one of the most thrilling fish I ever caught if you want to know the truth."

The report, "Historical accounts of the upper Colorado River Basin endangered fish," is based on more than 100 interviews conducted last year with senior citizens in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming. Written by Fred Quartarone, who worked for the Recovery Program for Endangered Fish of the Upper Colorado River, the document includes historic photos of the fish as well as residents' first-hand accounts of catching and eating the now-endangered Colorado squawfish, humpback chub, bonytail chub and razorback sucker.

Anglers reported catching voracious Colorado squawfish on everything from swallows and mice to earthworms and chunks of chicken or rabbit.

Tim Merchant of Green River, Wyoming, said his grandfather caught squawfish using chicken parts to bait multiple hooks on a clothesline. His grandfather tied the line to the bumper of his truck and waited.

"When [the line] went tight, they'd just back the truck up and drag those fish out on the bank," Merchant said. "They wee as big as a junior high school kid, 90 pounds. That's a big fish."

Anglers told of Colorado squawfish that were up to 5 feet long and 80 or more pounds; most recalled squawfish in the range of 20 to 40 pounds.

Many of the seniors said they used Colorado squawfish for food, especially during The Depression. Humpback chubs, bonytail chubs and razorback suckers also were consumed, but reportedly were bonier.



Photo courtesy of Colorado Division of Wildlife.

Three boys pose with a 17-pound Colorado squawfish they caught in the Green River in the early 1920s. Colorado squawfish once grew to nearly 6 feet long in the Colorado River Basin and were called "white salmon" by early settlers. Now endangered, these fish are found nowhere else in the world.

"I know those bonetails [referring to all chubs] aren't edible because I tried to eat one when I was a kid, and they're absolutely sickening," Merchant said. "There's about 2 million bones in each of them."

But Tom Hastings of Green River, Utah, recalled a trapper who regularly ate razorback suckers.

"He'd catch those suckers and eat them. I don't know how they fixed them, but they thought they were better than catfish," Hastings said.

Several seniors compared the taste of Colorado squawfish to salmon. "Gut them and chunk them and put them in quart jars, pressure cook them. Damn, they made salmon taste bad," said Lyndon Granat of Palisade, Colorado.

Seniors recounted both positive and negative attitudes toward the fish. As Don Hatch of Vernal, Utah, explained, "When you grow up and all your life you've been told they are just trash fish, it's hard to get over that feeling. Of course they're valuable, of course they're endangered so that's the reason you should take care of them. We know now."

Anglers used several different names for each fish, sometimes making identification difficult. For example, Colorado squawfish commonly were called "whitefish," as well as "white salmon," "Colorado River salmon" and "landlocked salmon."

Looking at a razorback sucker photo, Bill Allen of Vernal, Utah, showed how confusing the identification process was back then.

"Now that was the humpback," he said. "We'd still call them roundtail, but we called them humpback roundtails ... squawfish ... kind of a humpback squawfish sucker."

Quartarone used photos and detailed descriptions about the fishes' decline. Dams changed the river habitat, they

The fish swam into irrigation ditches and became trapped or were flushed into the fields. Some squawfish were found dead with catfish lodged in their mouths, reportedly because the barbs on the catfish punctured the squawfish's insides and killed them. And the chemical

rotenone was used to reduce native fish populations and make way for non-native sport-fish in and upstream of Flaming Gorge and Navajo reservoirs.

The Recovery Program is a three-state, multi-participant program aimed at recovering endangered fish while providing future water development.

Do you have questions or comments for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on their endangered fish recovery program?

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