

Creatures of the Upper Verde: What's at Stake

Contributed by Candace McNulty, Contributing Editor

(Online Editor's Note: This is a companion piece to Candace McNulty's River of Contention)

Of Arizona's 35 fish species, 19 are federally listed as threatened or endangered, and the state has the highest number of native fish at risk in the US. The Arizona Game & Fish Department (AZG&F) puts three Upper Verde fish species in their Wildlife of Special Concern (WSC) category, the first two also appearing on federal "endangered" lists – the razorback sucker and the spikedace. The third, the Verde trout, rates as "threatened."

That trout (aka roundtail chub) is a critter of great interest to Read It Here Editor Art Merrill (see <http://www.readitnews.com/content/view/64/32/>). Merrill notes, "Early settlers here named it the Verde trout because: 1. they found it in the Verde River, and 2. it acts like a trout as far as angling is concerned." AZG&F Fisheries Project Manager Andy Clark shared studies with Merrill indicating that "the fish is literally one dry winter away from the endangered species list."

At the river's margins, the Goodding's and other willow types, the various cottonwoods, Arizona ash, Arizona walnut and boxelder and netleaf hackberry provide room, board and nursery space for more Wildlife of Special Concern: Southwestern willow flycatcher, red bat and spotted bat, belted kingfisher. Dan Campbell likes to point out how everything is linked. Beaver dams create hospitable surroundings for WSC Southwestern river otter, which feast on the (non-native) crayfish, keeping them from crowding out other life-forms. Fellow WSC member the Northern leopard frog also enjoys the beaver ponds; non-WSC blue herons enjoy eating him there. Cruising at the top of the food chain, and also in the WSC club, are raptors: the common black hawk, the peregrine falcon, and – symbol of America's freedom and joy of the lucky Verde River Canyon Railroaders who glimpse one – the bald eagle.

These 7-to-14-pound crowd-pleasers grow their distinctive white head and tail feathers only after reaching age 4 or 5. Females, larger than males, may have wingspans up to 8 feet. A nesting pair builds a stick home, adding to it year after year until it's up to 10 feet across, weighing almost a ton. Eagles will range very far for hunting but prefer to raise young near their birthplace; if that native habitat degrades, they can give up. With the unbridled spraying of DDT after World War II, eagle eggshells thinned and broke, and their population plummeted. From a scary low of 450 nesting pairs nationwide in 1967, when they were put on the endangered list, they've rebounded to 4,500 pairs and moved to "threatened" status. But they suffer from loss of habitat and healthful food sources everywhere. According to **Michelle Harrington, rivers program director for the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD)**, "the Verde River is home to about half the Arizona bald eagle nests." Moreover, **she adds**, if the Upper Verde dries up, "six of 43 active bald eagle nesting areas in the state could be lost." (You can find more on the local bald eagle population at <http://www.readitnews.com/content/view/161/10025/>)

Dan Campbell, of the Nature Conservancy, says the question is, "What are the minimum and maximum flows you need to keep the cottonwoods, willows, otter, beaver, eagle, etc., in place?" He is involved with an upcoming study to try to forecast what might come of groundwater reduction. "This study will invite some 30 experts on these particular native fish, these beaver and otter species, on all the native animal, bird, and plant species. We would like to be able to predict what would happen with no change; with a 50% reduction of groundwater flow; with a 100% reduction. Not talking about who takes that water, but just – what if the baseflow is gone?"