

# Bluehead Sucker

Bluehead suckers are long-lived, up to 20 years or more. They are considered a “benthic” (bottom-dwelling) omnivore that primarily feeds on algae, detritus and aquatic insects.

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** The bluehead sucker, *Catostomus discobolus*, is a member of the fish family Catostomidae, the sucker family. The name “sucker” does not mean these fish are easily deceived, but rather comes from the location of their mouth, which is positioned downward, allowing them to feed by sucking or scraping food items such as algae from rocks and other surfaces.

**DESCRIPTION:** Bluehead suckers range in body color between dark gray-black and light brown-olive. Underbelly, fins and mouth parts are lighter in color than the rest of the body. Their color depends on water clarity, with darker coloration in clear water and lighter coloration in turbid

(murky) water. Young fish tend to be lighter in color. Breeding males generally have a distinct blue head, from which the species gets its name, and yellow or orange lower fins during the spawning period.

The torpedo-shaped head and slender, streamlined body of bluehead suckers allows flowing water to pass over them, and thus reduces energetic demands. They have small-sized scales. They generally reach lengths between 10–16 inches, but size depends on the stream or river, with larger fish generally occurring in large rivers.

At juvenile stages, identification can be difficult between this fish and other species of the same genus (for example, flannelmouth sucker, *Catostomus latipinnis*, distinguished by a crescent-shaped, rigid mouth part called a “scraping disc”).

**DISTRIBUTION:** Bluehead suckers are distributed in portions of Arizona, Idaho, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, in waters ranging from small tributary streams to large rivers. In Arizona, bluehead suckers are found in the Colorado River mainstem and its Grand Canyon tributaries (for example, the Little Colorado River). They also are found in the San Juan drainage and on the Navajo Reservation.

**HABITAT:** Water clarity can affect habitat use. During periods of clear water, adults tend to occupy deep pools and eddies during the day, then move to areas of flowing water with gravel, cobble or rock substrates at night and during turbid water conditions. Juveniles tend to occupy shallow areas in riffles, backwaters and eddies.

**BIOLOGY:** Bluehead suckers are long-lived, up to 20 years or more. They are considered a “benthic” (bottom-dwelling) omnivore that primarily feeds on algae, detritus and aquatic insects. Their scraping disc and strong jaws allow them to clasp onto and scrape food items from hard surfaces. Spawning occurs in the spring and summer. After spawning, the presence of crescent-shaped markings may be visible on the backs of females, as the males tend to clasp onto females during spawning.

**STATUS:** The bluehead sucker in Arizona is considered “wildlife of greatest conservation need,” based on the Arizona Game and Fish Department’s comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy. In Utah and Wyoming, the species is considered a “species of concern” or species of “special concern.” A subspecies called the Zuni bluehead sucker, *Catostomus discobolus yarrowi*, is considered a candidate for endangered species designation. Threats to the bluehead sucker include habitat degradation and introduction of non-native fish species.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** There are many facets to bluehead sucker biology, and population dynamics are not well-studied. Habitat enhancement, population augmentation (stocking) and nonnative fish-control programs could have a positive impact on bluehead sucker populations. Long-term monitoring programs to assess populations also are important. 🦈

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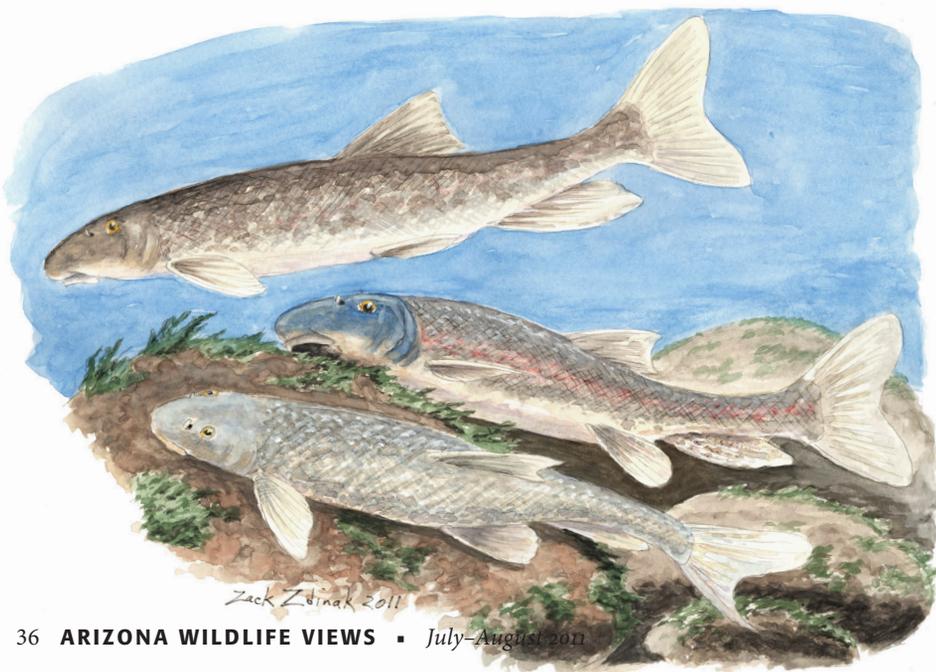


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