

Flannelmouth Sucker

SCIENTIFIC NAME: The flannelmouth sucker, *Catostomus latipinnis*, is a member of the sucker family (Catostomidae). The family name comes from the Latin word *kata*, meaning “downward,” and the Greek word *stoma*, meaning “mouth.” This family of fishes is characterized by mouths located on the underside of the head and fleshy lips specialized for feeding on the bottom. *Pinna* means “feather” and *latitudo* means “breadth” in Latin, most likely referring to the fish’s large, blunt pectoral fins, which help it to maintain position in swift water.

DESCRIPTION: The flannelmouth sucker is a streamlined fish with small eyes and scales, typical of fish that evolved to withstand the muddy and turbulent flows of the Colorado River. The down-turned mouth has large, fleshy lower lips covered with many rows of fine papillae, so delicate and numerous the lips resemble flannel fabric. These specialized mouth structures enable this fish to suck aquatic invertebrates and other bottom-dwelling organisms out from under gravel and rocks. Adult flannelmouth suckers’ backs and upper sides are grayish-green and their lower sides and abdomens are yellow to cream-colored. Adults can reach more than 27 inches in length and weigh 7 pounds.

DISTRIBUTION: The flannelmouth sucker occurs only in the Colorado River and its tributaries. It is one of the four big-river fishes of the Colorado, along with the Colorado pikeminnow, razorback sucker and bonytail chub, all of which are on the federal list of endangered species. Historically widespread throughout the Colorado River basin below elevations of about 5,500 feet, this fish was found in the Little Colorado, Virgin, Bill Williams and Gila rivers. It no longer exists in the Lower Colorado River or its tributaries below the Grand Canyon, except for one population that was stocked below Davis Dam in 1976. In Arizona, the flannelmouth sucker currently is found

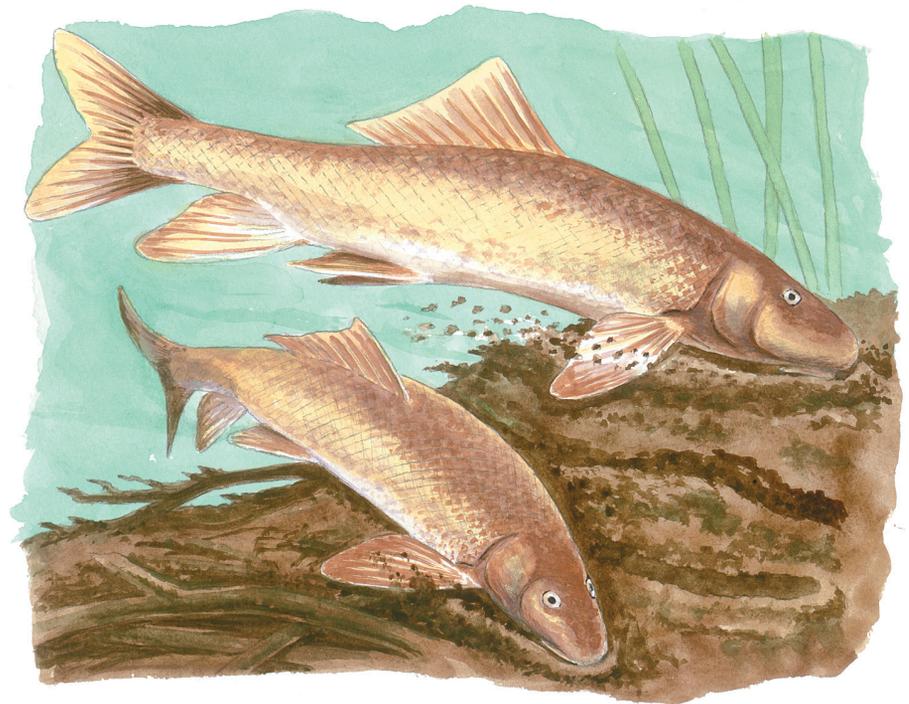


ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

only in the mainstem of the Colorado River and its tributaries within the Grand Canyon and in the Virgin River. It is still widespread in the upper Colorado River basin above Lake Powell in Utah, Wyoming and Colorado.

HABITAT: The flannelmouth sucker typically inhabits pools, runs, riffles and backwaters in the Colorado River and its tributaries, but does not persist in reservoirs. This warmwater fish prefers water temperatures from 60–80 degrees Fahrenheit.

BIOLOGY: Known for its long-distance movements, the flannelmouth sucker can migrate 100 miles or more to reach tributaries to spawn. Fish spawn from March through May. Males develop “tubercles,” or lumps, on their anal fin during the spawning season. The flannelmouth sucker can live for more than 20 years.

STATUS: The flannelmouth sucker currently is listed as a species of special concern by the state of Arizona because of predation by introduced fishes and alteration of natural stream flow. Although the distribution of

flannelmouth sucker has experienced dramatic declines during the last several decades, recent increases in its abundance and distribution in the Colorado River in Grand Canyon are encouraging. Discharges from Glen Canyon Dam have been very cold since the late 1980s, but drought conditions in the last few years have lowered water levels in Lake Powell, allowing warm surface water to move downstream. The recent increase in flannelmouth sucker numbers in Grand Canyon is believed to be caused by this warm water released from Glen Canyon Dam.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Protection of natural flow regimes in tributaries of the Colorado River is essential for the survival of flannelmouth suckers. The successful reintroduction of this native fish into the Colorado River below Davis Dam demonstrates that it may be able to re-establish itself in some areas where it had been extirpated. 🦿

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