

Razorback Sucker

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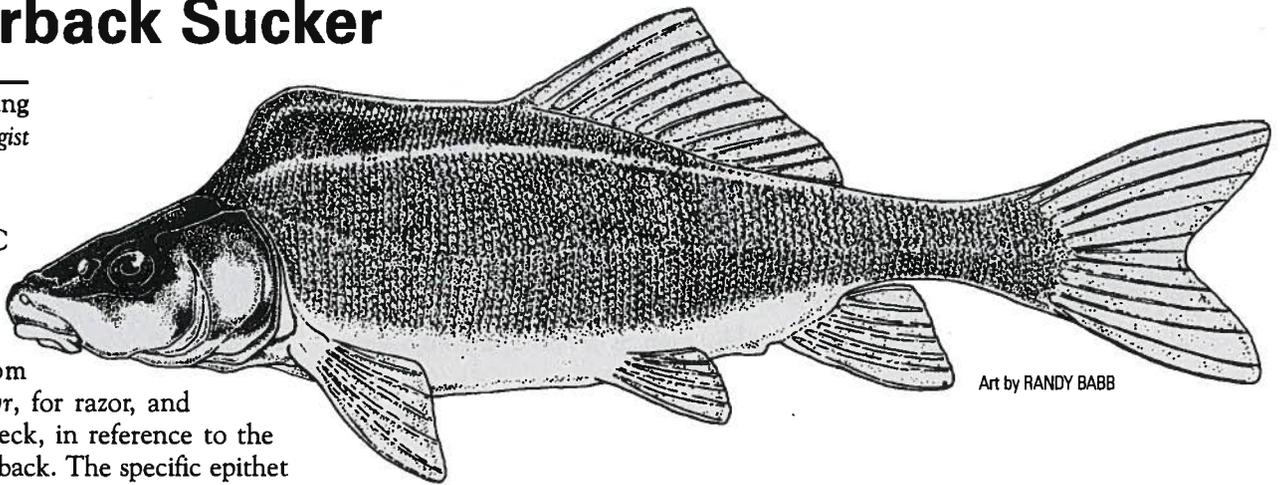
SCIENTIFIC
NAME:

Xyrauchen texanus. From the Greek *xyr*, for razor, and *auchen*, for neck, in reference to the large, keeled back. The specific epithet is a reference to Texas, the erroneous collection location of the first specimen described.

DESCRIPTION: Elongated, robust body that is thick and short towards tail. Adults distinguished from other suckers by pronounced bony keel on back. Coloration usually dark green to brownish-black above, lighter below. Adults up to three feet long, and may exceed 12 pounds. Females generally longer and heavier than males, with shorter pelvic and anal fins. During breeding season, males orange and bright yellow on lower sides and belly, with tubercles (bumps) on anal and caudal fins.

HABITAT: During nonreproductive periods, adult razorbacks occupy eddies, backwaters, and slow run and sandy riffle habitats, in impounded and riverine areas. Deeper habitats are sought out in summer. Razorbacks appear to prefer shallow areas as larvae, but move to deeper water a few weeks after hatching.

DISTRIBUTION: Razorbacks were once abundant throughout the Colorado River Basin, in the mainstem and major tributaries in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming, and in Baja California Norte and Sonora, Mexico. Now only remnant wild populations exist in the large Colorado River reservoirs bordering Arizona, and in the San Juan, Green, Yampa, and Colorado rivers.



BIOLOGY: Like other native big river fish in the Southwest, some segments of razorback sucker populations are sedentary, but others move long distances in spawning migrations and general movements. Razorbacks spawn in slow moving currents over coarse sand or gravel beds, in late winter and spring. A female may dispense several thousand adhesive eggs onto the substrate; the eggs hatch five to six days later.

Larval razorbacks feed on plankton, and are highly attracted to light. Adults consume bottom-dwelling algae and invertebrates, plankton, and inorganic material. Razorbacks are long-lived, reaching ages in excess of 40 years of age, and are among the most genetically diverse vertebrates known.

The razorback and several other native fishes from the Gila and Colorado river basins were widely used by Native Americans and early settlers for food. They were also commercially harvested in the Salt River reservoirs. As recently as 1949, six tons of razorbacks were taken from Saguaro Lake during the spawning season.

STATUS: The razorback is listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as endangered, and is also on the Department's 1988 list of *Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona* as endangered. The largest remaining wild population of razorbacks is in Lake Mohave. Like other populations, it has little if any recruitment of young, thus it has experienced dramatic de-

clines, from an estimated 60,000 in 1984 to about 24,000 in 1991. Loss and alteration of habitat, and predation on larval and juvenile razorbacks by nonnative sportfish (flathead catfish, black bass, striped bass, and others), are primarily responsible for the decline of this once abundant native over the past several decades.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: In Arizona, full recovery, in the form of re-establishing self-replacing wild populations, may not be attainable in the near term. The Southwest's big river systems have probably changed too much, and conflicts with introduced fish may not be reversible. Thus, to prevent extinction in the wild, recovery efforts must continue to focus on replacing aged natural populations, and establishing new populations within historic range.

Current locations for these activities include Lake Mohave and the upper Salt and Verde rivers, where razorbacks are stocked at sizes large enough to reduce predation pressure. In Lake Havasu and Lake Mohave, biologists are trying to rejuvenate the aged resident population by removing naturally spawned larvae from the reservoir, growing them to seven to ten inches in predator-free backwaters, and returning them to the lake. For recovery efforts to be fully effective, resource managers must resolve the problem of nonnative predator populations in specific management areas set aside for native fish recovery. ♣