

THE LOST RIVER SUCKER



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Targeting the Lost River Sucker (*Deltistes luxatus*) can get you in trouble. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) added it to the list of federally endangered species in 1988. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) prohibits trafficking and any act of knowingly “taking” (which includes harming, wounding, or killing) an endangered species. Violating the ESA can result in civil penalties up to \$50,000 and/or one year of imprisonment (Wikipedia 2019a).

I love these fish, and I do catch them incidentally on occasion while angling for Redband Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss newberryi*), but I’m always careful to release them quickly and keep them in the water. If they must be removed from the water to remove a hook or wrapped line, I place them on wet vegetation as shown below (Figure 1).

Every post on my blog (<http://caughtovgard.com>) has included a location, but this one will remain secret to protect this incredible species. Suffice it to say the Lost River Sucker is an endemic species to upper Klamath basin, which straddles northern California and southern Oregon (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Lost River Sucker: male (top) and female (bottom).

Photos by the author.

Luke Ovgard (@lukeovgard on Instagram) is an avid angler and writer. His syndicated column, “CaughtOvgard,” runs weekly in newspapers across the Pacific Northwest. He contributes regularly to *Game and Fish* magazine and the Fishbrain app, and writes a blog (caughtovgard.com) aimed at educating and entertaining anglers worldwide. When not fishing or writing about fishing, he teaches high school Business Education and serves as an officer in the Oregon Air National Guard.

The Lost River Sucker is the only living species in the genus *Deltistes*. The Klamath tribes called the fish C’waam, which was their most common food staple. Later, local settlers consumed Lost River Suckers and fed them to their livestock. The species was also used commercially in canneries to produce food and oil.

The Lost River Sucker’s decline is attributed to many factors; however, habitat loss and degradation are considered the primary causes (USFWS, Wikipedia 2019b). Streams and rivers have been altered from channelization and dams. Vegetation has been eliminated from banks by grazing in the riparian zones, which allows high levels of nutrients and sediment to enter stream systems and promote the growth of algae and bacteria. Eggs and larvae of fish are dependent on aquatic vegetation as nurseries for development and cover from piscivorous species. Stream temperatures increase when shade is eliminated from overgrazing, logging, agricultural practices, and road construction.

I will say again that *I do not advocate fishing for endangered species, nor do I actively target them*. That said, as an avid trout angler who has averaged 100–220 days on the water annually for a decade, I do inadvertently catch endangered fishes from time to time.

When that happens, I take care to handle the fish properly, release them as quickly as possible, and ensure these scarce and vulnerable fish are treated with the utmost respect.

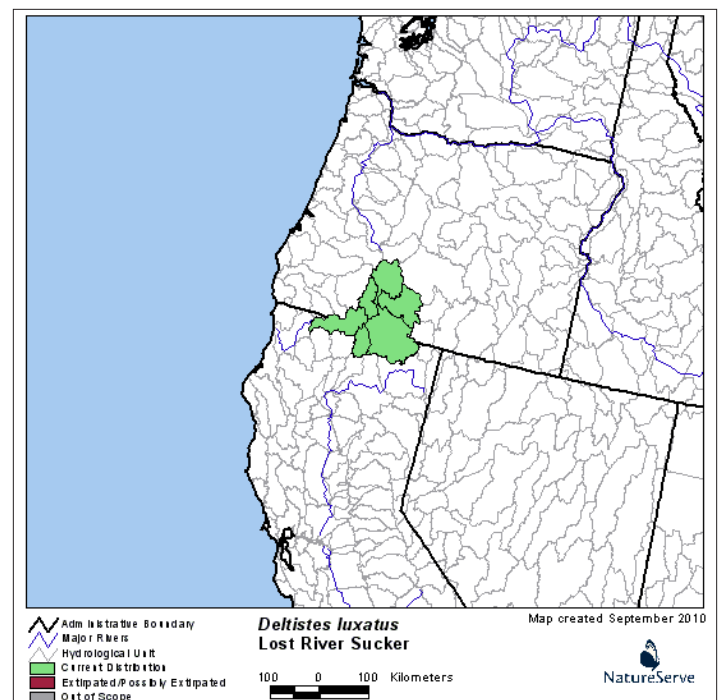


Figure 2. Lost River Sucker distribution (NatureServe 2018).



Figure 3. Lost River Sucker in the Williamson River.

As a friend and dedicated biologist once told me, “It’s a shame we live in a world where we’re supposed to feel bad for accidentally catching these amazing fish.” So, I don’t feel bad; I feel honored. I view every incidental hookup as a chance to set a positive example, a chance to, in my own way, offer condolences and make amends to a species for what my own did to it.

I also view it as a promise, a promise that I will do everything in my power to help and support the future of these fish so that one day we can target what have the potential to be truly world-class freshwater gamefish.

When I caught my first Lost River Sucker, I wasn’t really expecting it. A friend had told me he’d landed several trout and a surprise sucker in that general area earlier that month, but since it was so cold and snowy, I had pretty well tempered my expectations. Then I got a bump.

When fishing steelhead jigs in Upper Klamath Lake, I usually throw out, wait a second or two, then twitch up. I repeat this sink-jerk motion on most retrieves. Trout usually hit on the initial drop or during a subsequent jerk. When fishing with marabou jigs for trout, expect to snag a lot, though.

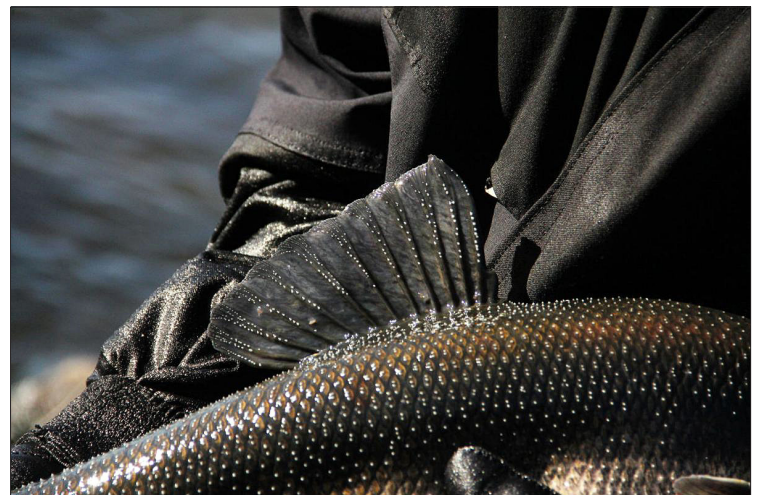


Figure 4. Tubercles on spawning males.



Figure 5. Lost River Suckers can get huge, making trophy shots tempting, but it is not a good idea. This photo, taken before releasing the fish (completely unharmed), led to a conversation with a biologist about optics and interpretations of the law, especially about removing fish from the water for photos. It was an honest mistake the author will not make again.

I hooked and lost another good trout before a wind knot distracted me long enough to allow the jig to sink to the bottom. I expected to be snagged, so when I pulled up and felt weight, I wasn't surprised. Until it moved. A trout had grabbed my jig off the bottom and I was thrilled. It started sucking line off my reel so viciously that I imagined I'd hooked into something big. I wasn't wrong.

When the fish jumped and did a frontflip out of the water, I noted how unusual it was for a trout to jump like that in cold weather. Our Redband Trout jump, but if you fight them with skill, you can usually avoid this. Not always, but usually. When it jumped a second time, I noticed how dark it was. When it jumped a third, fourth, and fifth time, I realized it wasn't a trout.

I'm a sucker for pretty fish. Lost River Suckers can be photographed during the late spring and summer in the Williamson River where they spawn. Be careful not to touch them, but if you move slowly, you can often get close enough for a good picture (Figure 3).

I landed that fish, and it was, in fact, a Lost River Sucker. It wasn't huge, but I've since caught quite a few of them, and many have been over 10 pounds. These fish live upwards of 30 years, and the average fish I've caught has been about 26–28 inches long and weighed in between six and nine pounds depending on whether it was male or female, pre-spawn or post-spawn. Male Lost River Suckers develop white tubercles on their skin, which help them maintain contact with the female during mating (Figure 4). They are absolutely gorgeous!

The suckers, often erroneously called “sucker fish,” are a treasure that should be appreciated. These fish grow to 40 inches and 20 pounds, and I've never caught one that didn't jump. The potential for a sport fishery if and when this species recovers should be enough incentive to treat them with respect, but if it's not, know this: if the

suckers die out, the greatest wild native Rainbow Trout fishery in the lower 48 states—the Klamath Basin—will likely suffer.

One of the largest fish I've ever landed from Klamath Lake was this 32-inch, 12-pound Lost River Sucker that took a jig. Anglers should pull for this species' recovery, so we can pursue this fish as a top-notch sport species someday (Figure 5).

Last summer, I snagged a massive sucker while trolling at Rocky Point that was every bit of 15 pounds. I fought it almost 10 minutes, and it tail-walked half a dozen times. It pulled my kayak almost half a mile before the hook came out. Since that day, I've stopped trolling spoons to avoid incidental snags.

As great as these fish are, and as fun as it is to catch one incidentally, the stress of being snagged could kill a fish, and that means one less spawner. Don't risk it.

Tragically, almost all spawning fish are 15 years old or more, with many of the spawners in their 20s and 30s. The chronic low recruitment is blamed on poor water quality, which causes the loss of entire age classes of young suckers. As a result, very few survive to sexual maturity (USFWS). If this does not improve soon, these gorgeous fish will be extinct within my lifetime, likely before I go gray.

There are half a dozen sites in the Basin where they spawn in some numbers, and you don't have to look far to find dead fish in the spring. Some die of old age, some of disease, some of predation or the pressures of the spawn, but an unacceptable number are caught and killed intentionally by anglers. Either snagged with treble hooks or hooked legitimately with worms, many ignorant anglers throw them on the bank even now, some 30 years after it became clear the species was at risk of extinction.

I've snagged my share of suckers over the years while trout fishing, and for that reason, I now only use single hook lures (typically either swimbaits or jigs) in places frequented by Lost River Suckers. I've seen people intentionally snagging them in the back, and anyone throwing a treble hook out there knows what they're doing. Not only is it disgusting and irreverent — it's illegal..

Again, use jigs and single-hook swimbaits only when fishing around spawning sites. You might snag one even still, but it's unlikely. If you do, it will cause less damage. The trout still readily take these jigs, too, so don't fret. Although the trout fishing in that spot where I caught my first blued-up male Lost River Sucker is phenomenal (the trout come to eat sucker eggs), I hesitate to fish there for fear of snagging a sucker on traditional trout gear. When I do try for trout there now, I'm careful to only use jigs and swimbaits with single hooks. No spinners, spoons, or Rapalas until *Deltistes* is delisted.

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