

RECOVERY OF OREGON CHUB HELPS MARK THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT



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An inconspicuous minnow that inhabits the backwaters of the Willamette Valley will soon gain national prominence when it becomes the first fish in the United States to be taken off the federal Endangered Species list due to conservation efforts. The collective effort by a very strong public-private partnership in the Willamette Valley clearly demonstrates that listed species can be recovered and delisted in a highly populated, working landscape, a testament to the resilience of the species and the innovation of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) biologists. This is one of the rare success stories for the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which turned 40 years old just last month. The law made it the official policy of the United States not to let any species go extinct. It sets a high standard in that it not only prevents extinction, but also mandates recovery to a more sustainable state.

The Oregon Chub (*Oregonichthys crameri*) is a small minnow that lives in sloughs, swamps, beaver ponds, and low-gradient tributaries. These off-channel habitats were dramatically reduced by the construction of Willamette River flood-control dams, channelization of the river for navigation, and the draining of wetlands for agriculture and development, and are prime habitats for nonnative game fish, such as bass and Bluegill, which prey on the species. Due to these threats, this fish



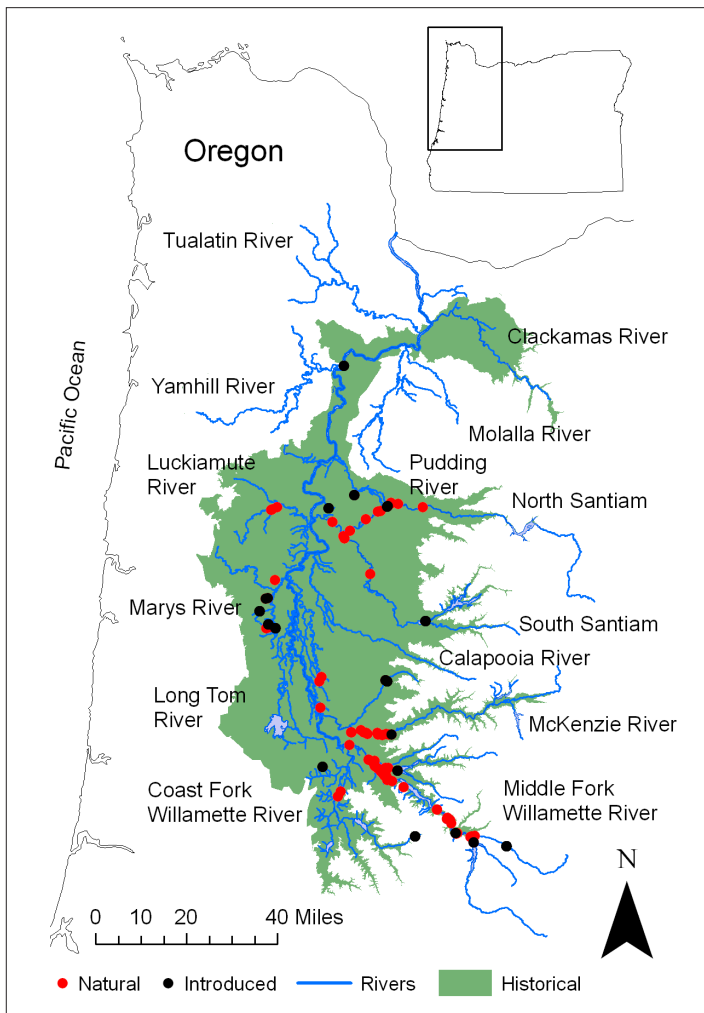
A pair of Oregon Chub from a McKenzie River slough.
(Photo by Dave Herasimtschuk, Freshwaters Illustrated)

was listed as endangered in 1993, when only eight populations totaling fewer than 1000 fish were known to exist. Now, 21 years later, there are over 80 populations and more than 150,000 fish.

This success is a remarkable story of cooperation between landowners, non-profit organizations, and state and federal agencies that got behind the effort decades ago to ensure the species would not become

extinct. This partnership includes ODFW, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Forest Service, Oregon State Parks, Oregon Department of Transportation, local municipalities, numerous private landowners, watershed councils, the McKenzie River trust, and others. In contrast to high-profile species, such as the Pacific salmon or the Grey Wolf, most of the recovery activities have occurred under the radar with little impact on local communities.

ODFW biologist Paul Scheerer has devoted 22 years of his professional life to recovering Oregon Chub populations in the Willamette Valley. He was joined in 2005 by Brian Bangs, who has enthusiastically led on-the-ground efforts for the past six years. This team of biologists has led the charge by conducting research and monitoring, promoting habitat protection and improvements, and conducting reintroductions of the fish into unoccupied habitats. Specific examples included



Historical distribution of the Oregon Chub

working closely with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to manage flows and temperatures to benefit native fish including the Oregon Chub, coordinating with the McKenzie River trust to identify high quality habi-

tats for land acquisition, working with the Middle Fork Willamette, Santiam, and Long Tom Watershed councils to identify private landowners who were willing to enhance and protect chub habitats, and coordinating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Parks and Recreation and Oregon Department of Transportation to protect, enhance, and create habitat on lands that they manage.

Through extensive surveys at over 1,000 locations in the basin, this team has discovered many previously undocumented populations. Historical records of the species' occurrence were rare, as no targeted surveys occurred until the 1980s. This effort was, at times, like finding a needle in a haystack, but persistence has its rewards. In addition, recovery has benefitted from the introduction of the Oregon Chub into suitable, unoccupied habitats. There have been 21 introductions to date. These help reduce the threat of extinction by expanding the species range and providing backup populations that can be used in the event of loss of local populations. Many of the introductions have occurred on private lands. Coordinated efforts with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's and ODFW's private lands biologists have helped to identify properties and willing landowners and to acquire funding under various Farm Bill programs, like the Wetland Reserve Program, to re-create high quality habitat that has been lost over the years.

Recovery is the goal of the ESA. Success has been rare, but progress is being made. The Oregon Chub has benefitted from the protections afforded by the Act, as have countless other species of fish, birds, amphibians, and mammals that also depend on these off-channel habitats. However, the status of this species and others like it depends on a concerted community effort to understand, protect, and restore the natural river processes that these species require for continued survival. This community effort is what made recovery of the Oregon Chub possible.



Oregon Chub from the Ankeny National Wildlife refuge near Salem. (Photo by Rick Brown)