

Bull Trout

Salvelinus confluentus

extinct



PHOTO: U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Bull trout are olive green in color with tiny yellowish spots on the back, and small red and black spots on the sides. The head is broad and flat, and the eyes are close to the top of the head. The mouth is large with conspicuous sharp teeth and the upper jaw extends beyond the eye. Bull trout were once thought to be Dolly Varden char, but the two are now regarded as separate species. Museum specimens of California bull trout are distinct in body form from other populations, but not sufficiently enough to designate them a subspecies. Bull trout were not studied in California before they became extinct and therefore the information here is drawn from other regions. In the McCloud River, adults lived in pools in the lower reaches of the river and migrated upstream to spawn. Juveniles fed on aquatic insects, but gradually switched to a diet of fish as they grew larger. Adults fed on fish, including juvenile trout and salmon, sculpins and their own young, as well as frogs and mice. Bull trout from the McCloud River were reported to exceed 15 pounds in weight and the California angling record fish is about 11 pounds.

DISTRIBUTION: In California, bull trout were known to occupy only about 60 miles of the McCloud River, from its mouth to the Lower Falls. They are currently widely distributed throughout the western United States and Canada.

ABUNDANCE: Bull trout are now extinct in California. The last known bull trout caught in California was captured by U.C. Davis graduate student Jamie Sturgess in 1975 by hook and line. It was tagged and released. Bull trout were in decline throughout most of the 20th century, although in the 1930s they still supported a small fishery on the McCloud River. After the construction of Shasta Dam in the 1940s bull trout were scarce. They became increasingly rare in the 1960s and were extinct by the late 1970s.

FACTORS AFFECTING STATUS: The biggest single factor affecting the bull trout population in California was the construction of Shasta Dam which blocked access of salmon to the McCloud, eliminating a primary source of food for the trout. The decline of salmon runs prior to dam construction started the bull trout decline. In addition, the construction of McCloud Reservoir blocked spawning migrations from the lower to upper river and contributed to higher water temperatures in the reaches of the lower river. An additional factor impacting the bull trout was introduction of brown and brook trout, both successful competitors with bull trout, into the watershed.

STATUS 0 (EXTINCT): Bull trout are extinct in California and are listed as federally threatened under the Endangered Species Act throughout the remainder of their range in the U.S.A.

CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS: The California Department of Fish and Game has a plan for restoring bull trout by establishing resident populations in some tributaries upstream of the McCloud Reservoir and in the lower river. However, because Shasta Dam blocks access to spawning salmon, the abundance of prey is much lower than it was historically, so the river is unlikely able to support a self-sustaining population of bull trout.



McCloud River. PHOTO: PETER MOYLE



Bull Trout Historical Distribution

