

Moapa dace numbers are trending upward

By Dan Balduini

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The most recent count of Moapa dace showed some good signs for the endangered fish. The snorkel-based survey of the Muddy River system conducted in August 2022 returned a total population of 2,221 dace in the system. The small minnow occurs in the Muddy River headwaters that emerge from several springs on the Moapa Valley National Wildlife Refuge and the Warm Springs Natural Area. Biologists count the population of Moapa dace twice per year; once in the winter, and once in the summer.

“There is a good distribution of Moapa dace in the areas where stream habitat has been restored,” said Service biologist Michael Schwemm, referring to several tributary springs. “Fish occurrence in the mainstream habitats also continues to improve.”



Amos Rehm, a fisheries biologist with the Nevada Department of Wildlife, counts Moapa dace in a reach of the Muddy River. Credit: Dan Balduini-USFWS

Schwemm said the last five counts, conducted in years 2020–2022, continued a trend of relatively high numbers of fish, with an average population size of 2,199 dace. Aquatic habitat restoration projects and increased efforts in invasive species control are directly benefitting the dace. Higher numbers over time indicate population stability and improvement compared to the lower population counts that occurred from 2016–2020, which averaged 1,397 fish.

In the recent past, the larger mainstream habitats were characterized by turbid conditions; meaning the water was murky due to suspended material. The water appears to be clearing, which may account for dace moving into those areas.



Wildlife refuge specialist Becky Lausch conducts a snorkel survey to count Moapa dace in the Muddy River system. Credit: Dan Balduini-USFWS

The recent success of the species is the result of a team effort by the Service, public partnerships, and biologists with the Nevada Department of Wildlife and the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

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