



# With cui-ui thriving, the whole river teems



Written by

**Jeff DeLong**

11:20 PM, May. 30, 2011|

An endangered sucker fish found only in Pyramid Lake is spawning in large numbers - yet another sign of a good water year.

Close to 800,000 cui-ui had passed through Pyramid Lake's Marble Bluff Fish Passage Facility on their journey up the lower Truckee River by the end of last week. This year's run is expected to reach about 1 million before it's over, said Lisa Heki, complex manager of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Lahontan National Fish Hatchery.

That could make it the strongest run since the record 1.3 million that spawned in 2005. Then, like now, spawning of the rare fish was aided by a rushing Truckee River fed by a huge mountain snowpack.

"It's an excellent spawning run we're getting," Heki said. "We're getting a really good response from the cui-ui, and they're really big, healthy fish."

It's something not only important to the

environment but to the culture of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, whose past is closely linked to cui-ui.

"I think this is very exciting," said Wayne Burke, tribal chairman. "(Cui-ui) have been a part of our culture and our history since the beginning of time.

"As the caretakers of the lake, we have the responsibility to ensure these cui-ui are flourishing."

The large sucker fish, which can live up to 50 years, got into big trouble in the early 1900s after agricultural diversions dropped water levels of Pyramid Lake by up to 80 feet, cutting off access to the river for spawning.

The fish, declared an endangered species in 1967, was saved from extinction by the construction of the Marble Bluff facility and by guaranteed supplies of water stored in Stampede Reservoir.

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Bureau of Reclamation and the tribe, Marble Bluff aids spawning fish with a fish lock that essentially gives them a 40-foot elevator ride for easy access to spawning grounds upriver.

Cui-ui only spend a few weeks in the river. After spawning, adults swim back downstream and over the Marble Bluff Dam, returning to the saline-rich waters of Pyramid Lake. After hatching, juvenile cui-ui are swept downstream to the lake where they mature.

Spawning runs are smaller during drought years. In 2004, only 169 adult cui-ui made the journey upstream. This year's run is one of the largest on record.

Big spawning runs for cui-ui are also good news for American white pelicans, which congregate at Marble Bluff to feast on the clusters of fish. A strong spawning run translates to a good nesting season for pelicans on Pyramid Lake's Anaho Island, while drought years "are hard on pelicans," Heki said.

Plentiful water is, of course, good news in general for a desert terminal lake like Pyramid. A terminal lake is one that doesn't flow out to another body of water.

"These big water years are so important for terminal lake systems. It really gives them a big flush of fresh water," Heki said. "It's a one-of-a-kind place. It's uniquely Nevada."



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American white pelicans gather at the base of Marble Bluff Dam to fish for cui-ui on Thursday, May 26, 2011. Photo by David B. Parker. / David B. Parker/RGJ

### Cui-ui spawning runs

- 2002: 38,000
  - 2003: 159,000
  - 2004: 169
  - 2005: 1.3 million
  - 2006: 952,000
  - 2007: 62,000
  - 2008: 105,000
  - 2009: 8,000
  - 2010: 403,000
- Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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