

wildlife

PLEASINGLY PLUMP | A McKenzie River backwater is thick with Oregon chub

By [Winston Ross](#)

The Register-Guard

Appeared in print: **Wednesday, Nov 18, 2009**

News: Local: Story

SPRINGFIELD — The McKenzie River Oxbow is a tiny piece of land just outside the city limits that could be an island, if not for the indecisiveness of the river snaking its way around the cottonwood trees that line its banks.

The river changed its course here in 2002, flooding a channel on the south side of the oxbow and creating a new backwater to the west, potentially a prime habitat for fish, birds, turtles and other wildlife.

But it wasn't until 2007, when the 21-acre parcel was acquired by the Eugene nonprofit McKenzie River Trust, that biologists could access the now-protected site and begin tracking its inhabitants.

Scientists have now happened upon a remarkable find here: the largest known population of endangered Oregon chub on the McKenzie River.

Chub may not have the sex appeal or iconic image of, say, a Chinook salmon, but they're a critical link in the ecosystem, and an indicator of environmental health in a river system that has been steadily encroached upon for decades, says Jodi Lemmer, land steward with the McKenzie River Trust.

Chub control macroinvertebrate populations, such as mosquitos, and they're a food source for herons, kingfishers and other wildlife. They're endangered partly because of habitat loss but also because they lack the defenses of other native minnowfish, such as the spines on a stickleback minnow; or the fish that can root in mud or swim quickly, said Brian Bangs, a fish biologist with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife's Oregon Chub Project.

It was Bangs who happened upon this batch of chub at the oxbow. He had fin-clipped several of the fish snared in traps, then came back to count them, using a mathematical formula to estimate how many might be swimming about in the wetlands.

The numbers came back big: an estimated 2,422 fish on this one parcel of property. That's more than double the highest numbers of chub the state has sampled at its man-made ponds, and it's way higher than the 100 to 500 sample sizes on other trust-owned properties. To find this many in the wild — especially at a site that's not isolated from the main stem of the McKenzie — is, as Bangs puts it, “really, really, really exciting.”

It signifies a rebound of the endangered species, despite the continuing threats from development.

“This means it's possible that there are perhaps not so many non-native predators here now, such as bass and bullfrogs,” Lemmer said. Plus, “the chub can move out of this area, go downstream and colonize other areas. That's how they used to function in the floodplain when they had a lot of side channels.”

For Lemmer, it's also an affirmation that her organization puts its resources in the right place: the trust bought a piece of property that is rife with a hugely important species that might have gone undetected and certainly would have gone unprotected.

“It's very gratifying,” Lemmer said, “to find this high a number of an endangered species on the property. It helps me believe our selection methods are fairly good.”

Whether the numbers put the chub on the road to dropping off the Endangered Species List remains to be seen, however. Bangs' group defines the criteria for a “stable population” of chub at more than 500 for a five-year-period. Chub numbers tend to fluctuate wildly, Lemmer said. “It does bode well for de-listing of the species,” she said.