



Southwest Region

Fish and Aquatic Conservation

Living the Dream

Dances with Gila Trout

By Nate Wiese

Many times in my U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service career I've pinched myself to make sure I was not dreaming. My first trip to Frye Mesa Reservoir in the Coronado National Forest in southeastern Arizona was one of those times.

Shortly after starting my job at Mora National Fish Hatchery in New Mexico, I was tasked to deliver Gila trout over the arduous trip to the Arizona lake. My hatchery raises Gila trout with the aim to get them removed from the federal endangered species list. In the early morning hours, I thought about hauling a heavy load just shy of 500 retired Gila trout broodstock and felt the weight of this trip on my shoulders. It's a nine-hour trip to reach the Frye Mesa Reservoir



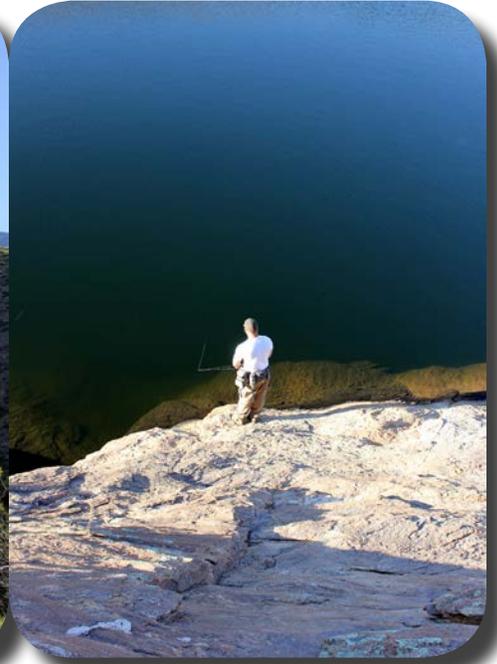
Hatchery truck with tanks for transporting Gila trout at Frye Mesa Reservoir. Credit: USFWS.



View of Frye Mesa Reservoir and an angler testing his luck with the newly stocked Gila trout. Credit: USFWS

from Mora in northeast New Mexico.

During their time at the hatchery these fish contributed 600 eggs each to future Gila trout recovery efforts and it was time for them to go free. In just three short years at the hatchery they had far surpassed a size supportable by their native streams in the Gila



Wilderness. Many of these fish had grown more than 18 inches in length and topped three pounds. In the wild, a similar aged fish would have reached seven inches and a few ounces.

To prevent cannibalism with their wild cousins, we look for alternative stocking locations and even allow limited angling and harvest opportunities. This promotes support for Gila trout recovery while providing opportunity in Arizona to catch a rare trout.

Before loading the fish into the stocking truck, I meticulously complete all pre-checks for the care of the livestock, condition of the vehicle, required paper work and emergency information. Getting the fish loaded is a team effort. Together, we net the fish from two fiberglass raceways and strong-arm them onto the tank. This is a special day seeing the trout on their way to a new home – their tenure at the hatchery, complete.

However it's a long trip, and all the fish life-support systems and the truck will have to perform flawlessly. I stop every two hours or so to check the dissolved oxygen levels, temperatures, and adjust the oxygen flows and add ice as needed. I had no desire to be "that guy" who lost 500 of the rarest trout in the world!

The first eight hours quickly pass and I reach Safford, Arizona, without an incident. Frye Mesa Reservoir remains only eight miles away—eight miles of backcountry roads—and I'm concerned about making it with my F-550 fish truck. I breathe a sigh of relief to reach the water's edge.

The temperature at Frye Mesa was a sweltering 95 degrees in contrast to the cool 40-degree morning I had left in Mora. Barely a cloud was visible, save a few cumuli drifting lazily over Mt. Graham. I set about to release the fish. After nine hours of traveling, the tank water had clouded from fish slime and oxygen gas. Until I pulled the first net, I wasn't sure how well the fish had weathered the trip. By now a group of anglers were watching my every move. We were all delighted when my first net brought up a seething, splashing fit of Gila trout. I pulled net after net of golden bodies and released them into the depths of the lake. With my cargo safely in the lake and my new best angler-friends happily Facebooking, I take a moment to breathe and celebrate success. These are the days that make the Gila trout conservation worthwhile.



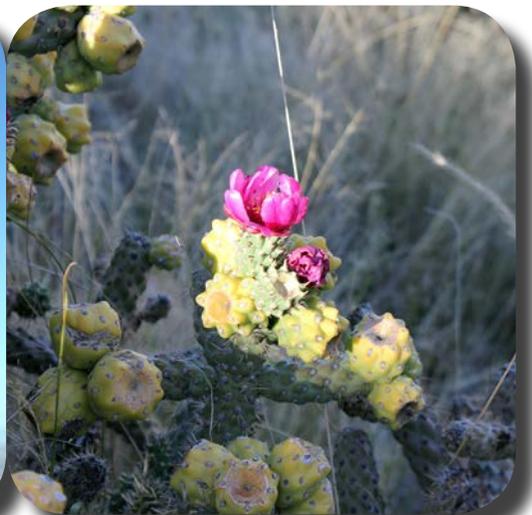
Wiese releasing Gila trout from the stocking truck into Frye Mesa Reservoir. Credit: USFWS

Knowing I wasn't going to be able to make a return trip in one day, I had brought along my camping gear, a change of clothes, a fly rod, and my freshly printed Arizona fishing license. No exceptions for anyone. This was not my first trip into Gila trout country, but it was the first chance I would have time to wet a line. It seems sacrilegious to work with Gila trout and never dance with one while fly fishing.

While exploring the area I catch up to one of my new angler friends. He tells me he's already hooked and released five Gila trout. That's a banner day in most anyone's book. His enthusiasm reminds me why I became a fishery biologist.

Now it's time to wet my line. The water is calm and across the small reservoir fish break for insects and chase crawfish in the shallows. We use innovative techniques in the hatchery with live diets, tanks that force swimming, and natural rearing to induce this behavior – and today I'd say the techniques are working.

I find a nice spot and ease down to the water. I'm not sure how these fish will react in their new environs and I don't want to send them to the depths. I cast. I count down five seconds, and begin a cadence of line strips to swim the fly back. My pace is stopped short. There's an eruption and the fish is on.



Desert fauna Wiese encountered on his explorations around the Frye Mesa Reservoir. Credit: USFWS



Male Gila trout that danced with Wiese from the end of his line. Credit: USFWS

First cast, now that is serendipitous. The fish takes several runs, straining my light tackle before I guide him towards the bank. His spawning colors are starting to fade some, but it is still a beautiful fish and I stand in awe looking at how different he

looks in this natural environment. This is what it's all about. After a quick picture, I slid him back into the water and he glides back to the depths.

I dance with several more fish before retiring to my tent. As I

lay back on my sleeping bag and look up at the stars, I wonder if this is how it was before massive forest fires, non-native trout introductions, and drought pushed the Gila trout to the brink of extinction fifty or sixty years ago. In any case, I'm here in Gila country now and this species is on a rebound trajectory. I think about my earlier dance with the Gila trout and realize I really am living the dream.

Nate Wiese is a fishery biologist and manager of the Mora National Fish Hatchery, Mora, New Mexico. Visit www.fws.gov/southwest/fisheries/mora/index.html.



Sunset at Frye Mesa Reservoir. Credit: USFWS

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