



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Leopard Darter

Oklahoma Ecological Service Field Office

Leopard darter

Percina pantherina

Description

Leopard darters rarely exceed three inches in length. They have 11-14 large, dark spots on their sides. These spots contrast against a light background that ranges from pale olive on the back to yellowish-olive on the underside. The back of the fish has numerous saddles and bars (Miller and Robison 1973; Robison and Buchanan 1988).

Distribution

Historically, leopard darters occurred in upland, large stream habitats of the Little River drainage in Oklahoma and Arkansas. Currently, scattered populations are found within its historic range (Miller 1972; Cloutman and Olmstead 1974; Robison *et al.* 1974; Hubbs and Pigg 1976). In Oklahoma, it has been located within the Mountain Fork, Glover, Little Rivers and their larger tributaries, in LeFlore, McCurtain, and Pushmataha counties. In Arkansas, the leopard darter has been found in the Cossatot, Robinson Fork, and Mountain Fork Rivers in Howard, Polk, and Sevier Counties (USFWS unpublished data).

Life History

Leopard darters typically live less than two years, but individuals older than three years have been found (Robinson 1978; Jones *et al.* 1983; James *et al.* 1991). Most of the population lives to spawn only once in their lifespan. Spawning occurs in riffles during March and April, but may occur as early as February. Fertilized eggs are buried in gravel and average clutch size is about 65 eggs (James 1988; James and Maughan 1989; James *et al.* 1991). Young leopard darters begin to appear in May of each year. Food items include aquatic insects and microcrustaceans (Page 1983; James *et al.* 1991; Williams *et al.* 2006).



Leopard darter. Daniel Fenner / USFWS

Leopard darters are found in intermediate to larger streams. Typically, they are not found in smaller, headwater streams, however may occupy the downstream portion of those streams during spawning. From May to February, leopard darters prefer large, quiet pools with a rubble and boulder substrate. Schaefer *et al.* (2003) observed leopard darters moving to deeper cooler water when preferred habitat exceeded 29 degrees Celsius.

Spawning occurs on gravel substrates; however, the dominant riffle substrate may be gravel, rubble, boulder, and bedrock (Jones 1984, Lechner *et al.* 1987, James 1988, James and Maughan 1989).

Conservation

The leopard darter was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act on January 27, 1978 (43 FR 3715). Critical habitat has also been designated.

Leopard darters have never been common. The greatest threat to the survival of the species is the loss of habitat due to the construction of reservoirs. Logging activity, agricultural and industrial runoff, and gravel removal all pose threats as well (43 FR 3715; January 27, 1978).

What You Can Do To Help

Recovery of the leopard darter primarily involves managing and protecting its habitat and individual populations from known threats. Maintain natural riparian barriers to minimize the chances of pollutants from entering the river. Also, a revised draft recovery plan for the species is available, which outlines specific tasks necessary to recover the species. The recovery plan is available at: www.fws.gov/southwest/es/oklahoma/ldarter.htm.

References

A full list of references is available at: www.fws.gov/southwest/es/oklahoma/ldarter.htm.

For Further Information

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August 2011