



WILDLIFE NOTES

Gila trout

PHOTO: Martin Frenzel



The Gila trout (*Oncorhynchus gilae*) is common in the mountainous headwaters of the Gila River drainage in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona. This fish is one of only two native trout in New Mexico and is presently limited to several small streams in the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness areas.

With this restricted range and existence in small numbers, the frequent extreme droughts of the area, a natural or man-caused forest fire, or any number of other cultural disturbances could reduce this once common trout to a footnote in a naturalist's writings or a textbook example of a species that became extinct.

Outstanding characteristics used in recognition of the Gila trout are the extremely fine and profuse spotting on the dorsal (back) and caudal (tail) fin and spotting that is almost limited to

larger specimens in the range of 12 to 13 inches long. The average length of six-year-old fish is close to eight inches, and Gila trout older or longer than this are relatively rare, primarily because of the unproductive nature of the small headwater streams they occupy.

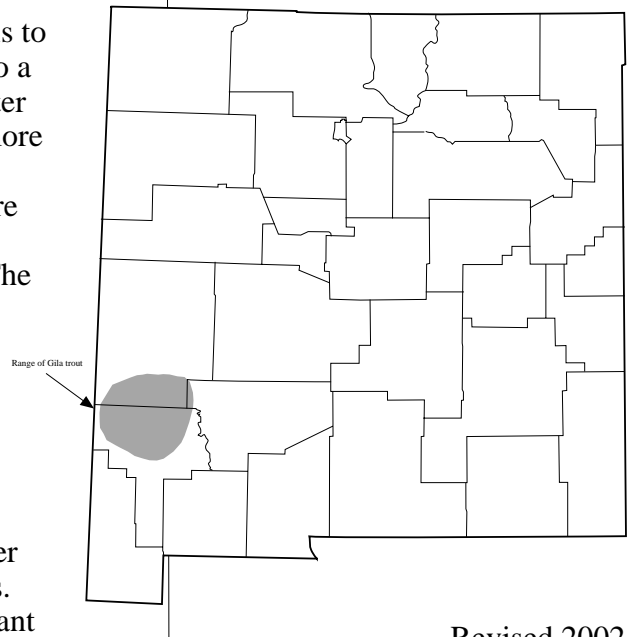
The ultimate goal is to restore the Gila trout to a quality fishery in greater numbers throughout more of its historic range. Esthetic values of a rare and interesting species must be considered. The moral issue of preservation of a species from extinction is of vital concern.

Gila trout inhabit small, cool, clear mountain streams under shady bushes and trees. Deep pools are important

the upper third of the body. The adipose (fleshy) fin is rather large and heavily spotted. This fish remains rather small in the streams where it is found, with

for their survival during droughts. Their food consists of aquatic insects, in particular caddis flies, mayflies, true flies and beetles. This fish also preys on its own young and on other fish species, including on the longfin dace (*Agosia chrysogaster*). Spawning occurs in May and June and does not begin until daily water temperatures reach 8 degrees C or greater. Females produce an average of 75 to 100 eggs.

Restoration of this species involves establishing this species into other suitable streams within its native areas; enhancing the quality of its habitat, including improved watershed management, and periodically monitoring populations to prevent or correct any problems that could threaten this unique endemic salmonid of the Gila basin.



Revised 2002