

# Basin home to diverse population of lampreys

By LEE JUILLERAT  
H&N Regional Editor  
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Markle

Coho salmon and two species of endangered suckers get most of the attention.

But also lurking in waters along the Klamath River Basin is the world's most diverse population of a lesser-known aquatic species — lampreys.

Lampreys are parasitic, aquatic animals that technically aren't fish, and sometimes are mistakenly classified as eels.

Douglas Markle, a professor of fisheries at Oregon State University, said six of the world's 42 known species of lampreys — which are jawless, boneless, long-bodied and mostly unchanged over the past 360 million years — are found in the Klamath River Basin.

"We do have a really diverse lamprey population," Markle said.

The Klamath River population includes the Miller Lake lamprey, which Markle said is the world's smallest predatory lamprey. About 4 to 5 inches long, it is unique to the Klamath Basin.

In 1996 there were concerns that its small population might cause it to be listed under the Endangered Species Act. Relatively plentiful populations were later found in Miller Creek, which drains from Miller Lake in the Cascades west of Chemult, along with the Upper Williamson River and Upper Sycan River drainages.

Other Upper Klamath River Basin lampreys include the Klamath and Pit-Klamath brook lamprey.

Another species, the Pacific lamprey, is the largest of the Klamath River lampreys. It is found throughout the river basin, especially where the Klamath empties into the Pacific Ocean.

## **Food source**

Along with being a food source for downstream Indians, the Pacific lampreys were a high-fat food source for seals and sea lions, fish and gulls that otherwise ate salmon.

Lampreys also are significant, Markle said, because their historic presence from fossils indicates the Klamath is an ancient river.

Studies indicate the upper Klamath River was connected with the Snake River in Idaho and, until about three million years ago, flowed into the Pit River in far northern California. At that time, it was not connected with the Lower Klamath River.

Those changes, Markle said, created opportunities for lampreys to become isolated and evolve into different species.

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