

COLORADO RIVER RECOVERY PROGRAM
FY 2019 ANNUAL PROJECT REPORT

RECOVERY PROGRAM
PROJECT NUMBER: 128

I. Project Title: Abundance Estimates for Colorado pikeminnow in the Green River Basin, Utah and Colorado

II. Bureau of Reclamation Agreement Number: R19AP00058

Project/Grant Period: Start date: 1 October 2018
End date: 30 Sept. 2023
Reporting period end date: 30 Sept. 2019
Is this the final report? Yes _____ No X

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IV. Abstract: Sampling conducted during this project is designed to obtain capture-recapture data needed to estimate abundance and vital rates of Colorado pikeminnow *Ptychocheilus lucius* in the lower Yampa (exclusive of Yampa

Canyon) and lower White rivers and the Green River downstream of Whirlpool Canyon (Whirlpool and Split Mountain canyons excluded). Abundance estimates of endangered Colorado pikeminnow are needed to better monitor population status and provide benchmarks against which progress toward recovery can be measured. This project was designed to have three years (2016-2018) of sampling followed by two years of data analysis and report writing. The design is essentially the same as that employed for sampling conducted from 2000-2003, 2006-2008, and 2011-2013 in the same area (Bestgen et al. 2005; Bestgen et al. 2010; Bestgen et al. 2018). Sampling during the most recent three-year period began in spring 2016, and continued through 2018, with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Larval Fish Laboratory responsible for sampling the Yampa River, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Vernal, Utah, responsible for the reach of the Green River from the White River downstream to Tusher Diversion and the White River downstream of Kenney Reservoir, and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources responsible for the Green River reaches from lower Whirlpool Canyon to the White River confluence and from Tusher Diversion downstream to the Colorado River. The Larval Fish Laboratory also provides coordination, data checking, and data analysis. Our primary goal was to capture, mark, and recapture as many Colorado pikeminnow as possible on at least three different sampling occasions in each river reach. Sampling occurred during spring runoff and mostly ended before Colorado pikeminnow spawning migration. Electrofishing was the primary sampling gear. Captured pikeminnow were scanned for the presence of a PIT tag, unmarked fish were marked, and all were released near the point of capture. These data were used to obtain abundance estimates for each river reach. A report detailing results of sampling and parameter estimation for 2011-2013 data was submitted to the Recovery Program and was approved in 2018 (Bestgen et al. 2018); a summary of data collected was provided in previous reports and comprehensive estimates of pikeminnow abundance, survival, and movement will be completed in 2019 or early 2020. Data analysis is nearly completed.

V. Study Schedule: Initial Year 2014
Final year 2020

VI. Relationship to RIPRAP:

Monitor populations and habitat and conduct research to support recovery actions (research, monitoring, and data management)

V.B. Conduct research to acquire needed life history information

V.B.2. Conduct appropriate studies to provide needed life history information.

VII. Accomplishment of FY 2019 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:

A main objective in FY 2019 was to finalize reporting of results from the 2011-2013 estimation period and finalize sampling for the next round of estimates. We have developed estimates which were provided to the Recovery Program office in earlier years, we received reviews, and the report was finalized. We retain the material below so the reader has an understanding of the other tasks involved in this sampling and analysis program.

We developed and used a Standard Operating Procedure for field personnel for use during the sampling season to ensure a consistent sampling approach and timely completion of tasks. This reduced project and sampling complexity due to the short duration of the sampling design each year, and increased consistency among the five relatively autonomous units used to complete this work. We also developed spreadsheets for data entry that should streamline that process somewhat, and some crews have implemented use of electronic data recording during field sampling.

We also coordinated a conference call with team members and field crews prior to 2018 field sampling to discuss issues and problems, as well as several other calls to individual investigators through the field season. This also provided an opportunity for each group to report on progress in completing preparations for field sampling. The Larval Fish Laboratory will be responsible for routine coordination of the study.

We completed a minimum of three sampling passes through the five Green River Basin reaches listed below to capture sub-adult and adult Colorado pikeminnow:

- a) Green River between the confluence of the White River upstream to the lower end of Whirlpool Canyon (i.e., upper Rainbow Park, but not Split Mtn. Canyon).
- b) White River between the confluence with the Green River upstream to Taylor Draw Dam,
- c) Yampa River between Deerlodge Park and Craig, excluding Cross Mountain Canyon,
- d) Green River from the White River confluence downstream to near Green River, Utah, and,
- e) Green River from downstream of Green River, Utah, to the confluence with the Colorado River.

The LFL and CPW attempted up to eight sampling passes in portions of the Yampa River, in part associated with bass and northern pike removal projects, in order to obtain a more precise and accurate Colorado pikeminnow abundance estimate. All other reaches were sampled three times. Data were grouped under three passes for all reaches to accommodate the need for symmetrical capture histories among reaches.

We finished assembly of data collected during 2018 and incorporated into abundance estimates and estimates of other vital rates. We spent considerable time determining what ancillary data (captures available from other relevant basin projects) may be useful to incorporate, given the low numbers of captures and recaptures obtained throughout 2016-

2018.

2016-2018 results.--Specific results to report based on 2016-2018 sampling are below. The basic data for estimating abundance of various life stages of Colorado pikeminnow are the numbers of unique individuals captured in various sampling passes and reaches among years. Based on the recapture rates of those same individuals, estimates of abundance can be developed. If recapture rates remain approximately the same, the number of unique pikeminnow captured in each age class can be used as a metric of abundance of Colorado pikeminnow over time.

Number of unique captures for data through 2018 (Figure 1, Table 1), and abundance estimates for Colorado pikeminnow through 2018 (Bestgen et al. 2018 final report; Figure 1 here), have declined over time. For example, in 2001 when all reaches of the Green River basin were sampled, nearly 1,000 adult (≥ 450 mm TL) Colorado pikeminnow were captured. Those numbers have declined steadily since that time. The lowest abundance of adults captured prior to beginning the 2016-2018 sampling was in 2013; 2016 and 2017 numbers are just slightly higher and lower, respectively, than the 2013 number of unique adult Colorado pikeminnow captured, and 2018 numbers (141) are lower yet.

Number of recruit-sized (400-449 mm TL) Colorado pikeminnow captured in 2016, 2017, and 2018 was very low (Appendix I), which means few fish are available to replace adult life stages as they die. Juvenile (< 400 mm TL) numbers are slightly higher, particularly in 2017 and 2018 in the lower Green River. Those fish range in size from < 100 mm to 399 mm TL.

Length frequency histograms show the sizes of fish and their abundance in each reach of the Green River basin. Yampa River Colorado pikeminnow are very few and those are exclusively large individuals. White River pikeminnow were only slightly more abundant and were all large in 2016. The doubling in abundance of White River fish captured in 2017 was due mainly to the addition of recruit and juvenile life stages.

Approximately equal numbers of Colorado pikeminnow were captured in 2016 and 2017 in the middle Green River. However, in 2016 mostly large fish were captured, whereas in 2017 many more 100-199 mm TL fish were captured; numbers were very low in 2018. A similar pattern was evident in the Desolation-Gray Canyon and lower Green River reaches of the Green River, where the mostly larger fish in 2016 were supplemented with smaller fish in 2017, especially in the lower Green River. Increased abundance of Colorado pikeminnow 150-299 mm TL in the lower Green River is a source of optimism for adding to adult fish abundance in future years. If they survive, the smallest of those fish may be adults in 3-4 years, while the largest may be adults in 2-3 years. Relatively large numbers of those smaller fish were also present in the lower Green and Desolation-Gray Canyon reaches in 2011 as well, but by 2012-2013 they were largely absent, presumably because of predation by walleye. Thus, caution is merited when forecasting these patterns into the future. The more recent abundant juvenile year-classes observed

in 2017 likely derived from recruitment of pikeminnow hatched in 2012-2015, based on growth rates of those fish.

Preliminary abundance estimates show adult populations of Colorado pikeminnow declined again in the 2016-2018 period (Figure 1), consistent with capture of fewer unique individual fish. The 2016 estimate was highest at nearly 1250 fish, but 2017-2018 estimates declined to an average of about 850 fish.

New task (Task 6 in scope of work, for FY 2016-2017). Razorback sucker abundance and survival estimation, Green River Basin.

The Recovery Program requested an analysis of razorback sucker data collected during Colorado pikeminnow abundance estimation from 2011-2013 to estimate their abundance and survival in the Green River Basin (Table 2). A main goal was to determine if data collected during that study was adequate to monitor razorback sucker abundance and vital rates. We provide razorback sucker abundance estimates for the three Green River segments; White River and Yampa River data were too sparse to develop abundance estimates. Analyses were completed essentially as for Colorado pikeminnow data described above and showed increasing abundance of razorback suckers but estimate precision was poor. We also conducted survival rate analysis, updating older analyses that were complete through 2008 and portions through 2011 (Zelasko et al. 2011, Bestgen et al. 2012). Those estimates were less than satisfactory in terms of precision and varied in ways that were difficult to explain. Thus, estimates derived just from data collected during pikeminnow sampling are deemed not as useful as we thought it might be for monitoring razorback sucker vital rates.

If there is sufficient funding available after project completion, we will look into use of razorback sucker tag antenna array data, including those for the White River and Tusher Wash (which may fit well into the Deso-Grey survival question), to enhance analyses of survival rates. We continue to work on this aspect as time and funds permit, with most of that funding already used up. We will present portions of this work at the upcoming Desert Fishes Council meeting and the 2020 Researchers Meeting.

While the White River records were not useful for abundance estimation, additional use of the PIT tag detector array data there may enhance estimates in the future. Minimally, razorback sucker may be moving into the White River during later sampling passes, as evidenced by higher abundance during pass 3 sampling in 2011 and 2013. Because lower White River sampling has been suspended in some years due to permitting issues, we will use that information to assess utility of those records. All capture records should be useful for survival estimation. A draft report for abundance and survival rate estimation efforts was submitted to the Recovery Program Director's office in October 2017 and the report was approved by the Biology Committee in January 2018 (Zelasko et al. 2018). We are presently developing those results into a paper that we intend to submit to a journal.

VIII. Additional noteworthy observations:

- IX. Recommendations: Complete Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker abundance estimation reports as soon as possible so that further management can be implemented to attempt to bolster populations. Report preparation developing the new estimates for the 2016-2018 period has begun and should be prepared in early 2020.
- X. Project Status: On track and ongoing.
- XI. FY 2019 Budget Status
- A. Funds Provided: \$ 57,522
 - B. Funds Expended: \$ 57,522
 - C. Difference: \$ 0
 - D. Work completed: 60% of analysis and reporting work remains.
 - E. Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: None
- XII. Status of Data Submission: Each agency submits data independently and to the Larval Fish Laboratory, for analysis. Submission to the Recovery Program database will likely occur in early 2020.
- XIII. Signed: Kevin Bestgen 12 November 2019
Principal Investigator Date

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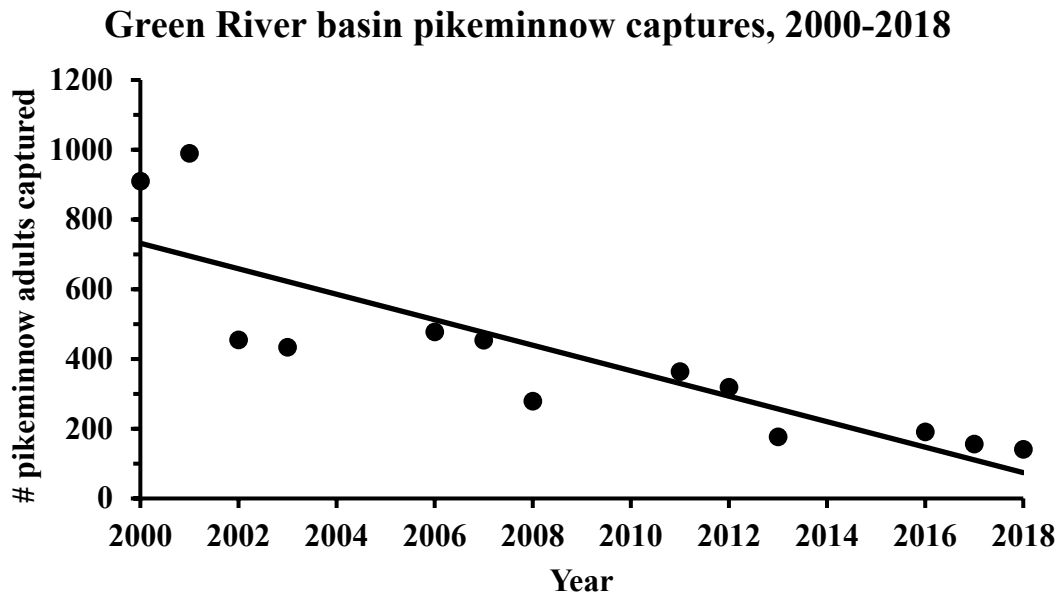
Table 1. Captures of unique individual Colorado pikeminnow in sampling conducted in each of fish reaches of the Green River basin, in 2016-2018. Adult Colorado pikeminnow are ≥ 450 mm TL, recruits are 400-449 mm TL, and juveniles are < 400 mm TL.

Reach	Adult	Recruits	Juveniles	Total
<u>2016</u>				
Yampa	9			9
White	22			22
Middle Green	35		3	38
Deso-Gray	64	8	5	77
Lower Green	61	20	16	97
totals	191	28	24	243
<u>2017</u>				
Yampa	2			2
White	33	4	16	53
Middle Green	28	2	19	49
Deso-Gray	44	1	27	72
Lower Green	49	1	229	279
totals	156	8	291	455
<u>2018</u>				
Yampa	9			9
White	42	1	7	50
Middle Green	20		2	22
Deso-Gray	37	5	40	82
Lower Green	33	8	124	165
totals	141	14	173	328

Table 2 Capture records for razorback sucker obtained during Colorado pikeminnow abundance estimation sampling, 2011-2013, in four river reaches of the Green River basin. MGR = Middle Green River, WH = White River, DGR = Desolation-Gray Canyon reach of the Green River, and LGR = lower Green River. No razorback suckers were captured in the Yampa River reach sampled for Colorado pikeminnow estimation (e.g., upstream of Yampa Canyon). Sampling passes are indicated by numerals 1, 2 or 3, and nnf refers to razorback suckers captured during non-native fish removal sampling.

	2011						2012						2013					Grand Total	
	pass						pass						pass						
reach	1	2	3	nnf	total		1	2	3	nnf	total		1	2	3	nnf	total		
MGR	33	125	80	4	242		77	42	41	85	245		32	141	209	126	508		995
WH	1	1	45	0	47		0	1	1	0	2		0	9	102	0	111		160
DGR	129	152	167	81	529		153	462	148	127	890		129	208	150	37	524		1943
LGR	341	318	323	0	982		256	267	192	0	715		48	86	158	0	292		1989
total	504	596	615	85	1800		486	772	382	212	1852		209	444	619	163	1435		5087

A



B

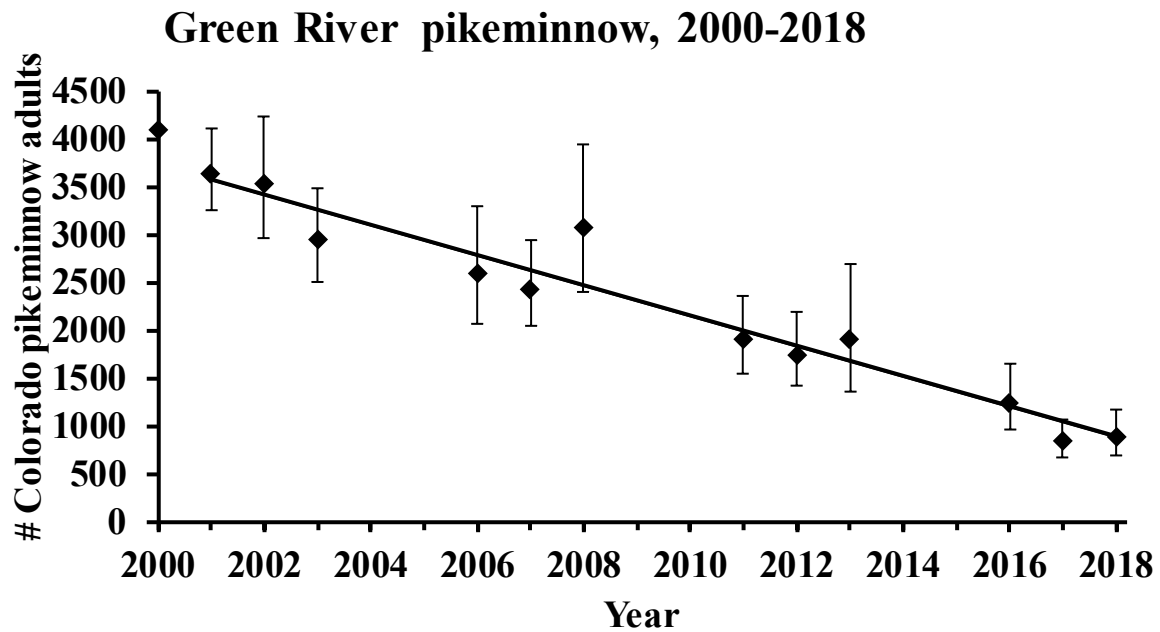
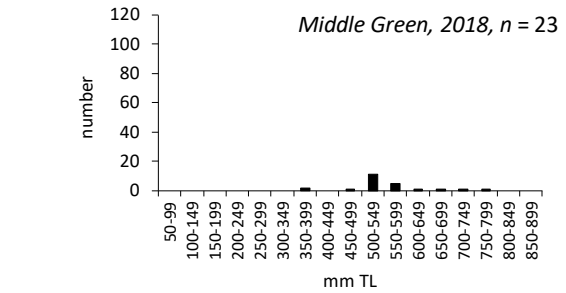
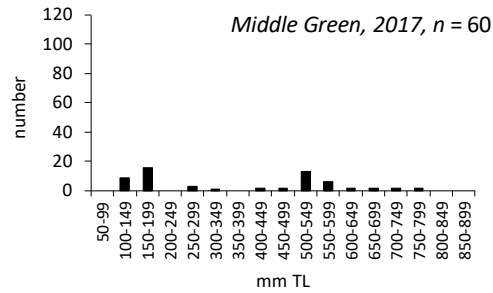
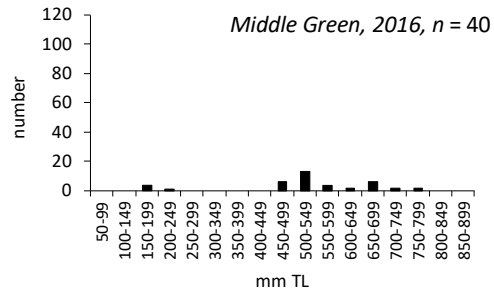
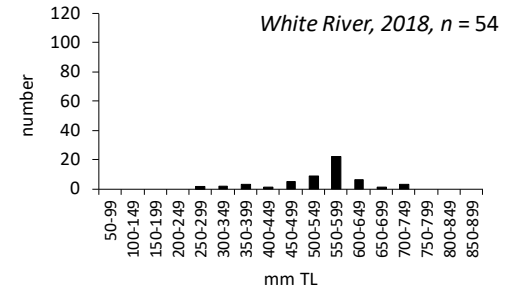
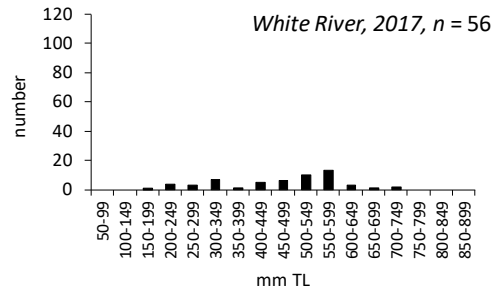
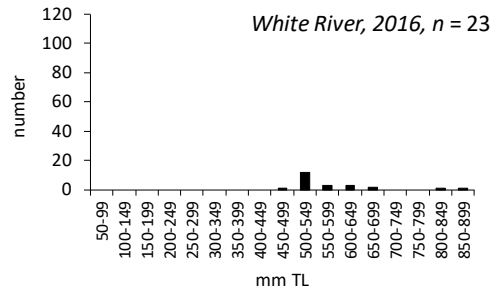
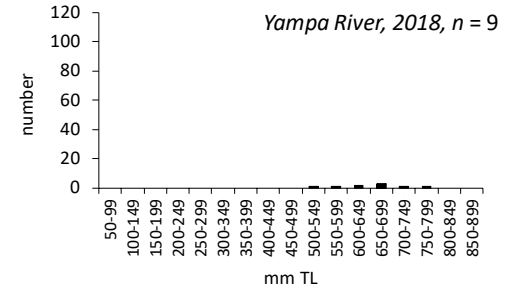
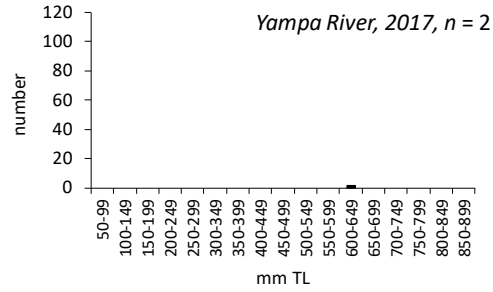
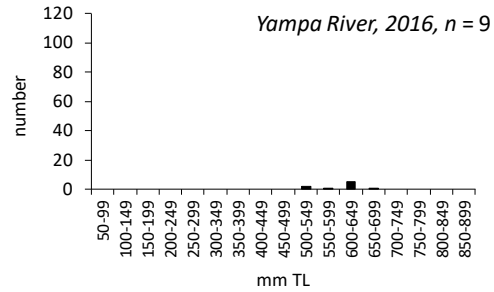
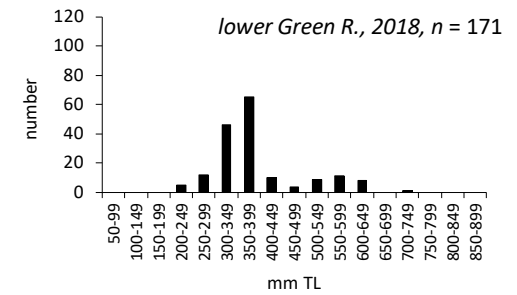
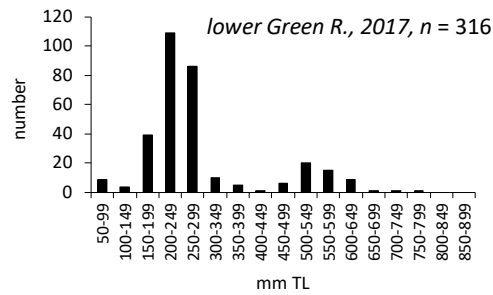
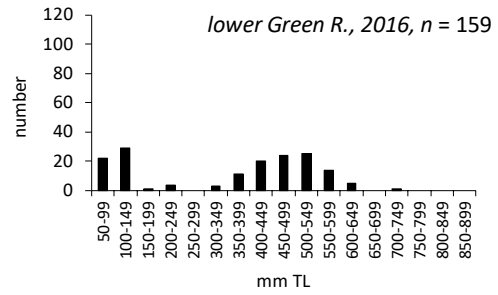
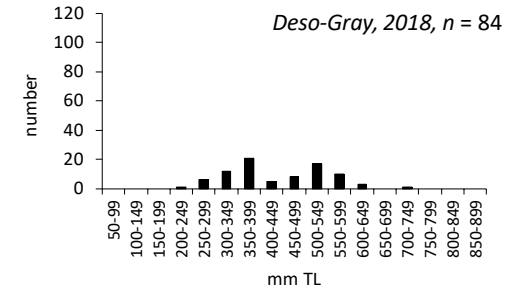
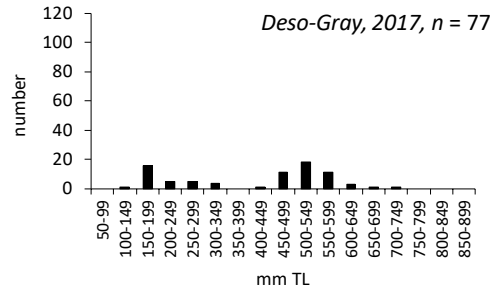
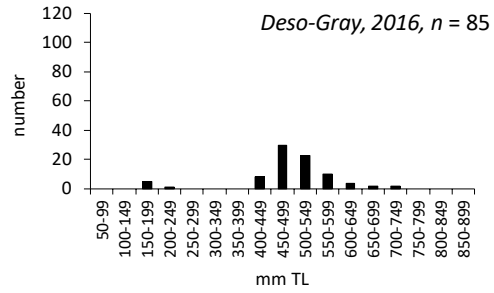


Figure 1. Number of unique Colorado pikeminnow adults (≥ 450 mm TL) captured (panel A), 2000-2018, Green River basin and their estimated abundance (panel B).

Appendix I. Length-frequency histograms for Colorado pikeminnow captured in five reaches of the Green River basin, 2016-2018.



Appendix I continued.



ANNUAL PERFORMANCE PROGRESS REPORT (PPR)

BUREAU OF RECLAMATION AGREEMENT NUMBER: R19AP00058

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Project Title: Abundance Estimates for Colorado pikeminnow in the Green River Basin, Utah and Colorado

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Project/Grant Period: Start date (Mo/Day/Yr): 1 October 2014
End date: (Mo/Day/Yr): 30 Sept. 2019
Reporting period end date: 30 Sept. 2019
Is this the final report? Yes _____ No X

Performance: Data analysis is ongoing in preparation of the final report for this segment of sampling. All other agencies will be involved in report review when the draft final report is available. Abundance of adult Colorado pikeminnow continues to decline in the Green River basin.