About 2,000 paddlefish released into Caddo Lake

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Photos: Daylina Miller.

Mike Montagne, a freshwater ecologist for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, lowers a net into Caddo Lake Tuesday afternoon to release paddlefish brought in from an Oklahoma hatchery.

Caddo Lake camper Ronda Martindale sat with her legs crossed on the edge of the stone-walled embankment and watched the 7-inch-long paddlefish struggle through some muck out into Caddo Lake.

"You can do it! You can do it, little fishy!" She gave words of encouragement to the small fish with the long, flat appendage protruding from its face, the namesake for a creature older than the dinosaurs. A living fossil.

She cheered when it mustered its way into a deeper part of the lake.

The juvenile paddlefish was one of 2,000 released into Caddo Lake during Phase 2 of an experiment by a coalition of state and federal wildlife agencies and conservation organizations to reintroduce the 350-million-year-old species back into Texas waters.

In May, Caddo Lake Institute and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, along with several other organizations, surgically implanted radio transmitters in nearly 50 2-foot-long paddlefish that were raised at the Tishomingo National Fish Hatchery in Oklahoma.

The transmitters allowed scientists and students from 20 local schools to track the fish's movements.

"That's how we know phase one was successful," said Rick Lowerre, president of the Caddo Lake Institute. "The fish are all still there and we

actually recovered a few and they're healthy and they're growing so that's why we're in phase two now. Let's put more in here and let's see how they do."

On Tuesday afternoon, a small crowd of scientists, conservationists, media and a few wandering campers watched as state and federal wildlife officials readied two large tanks full of paddlefish for release.

The round tanks, built specially for the paddlefish, were strapped to the back of two trucks. Normally fish are transported in square tanks but paddlefish, filter feeders that swim in circles to circulate water through their mouths, have a tendency to get caught in corners and stop swimming.

Once the trucks backed up to the boat ramp at Caddo Lake State Park, officials brought out tubes to suck in water from the lake and add it to the water in the tanks. Water from the tanks was slowly drained out.

This allowed the fish to gradually get used to the temperature and "flavor" of the lake, Lowerre said, to avoid shocking their systems.

Once the fish had acclimated to the lake water in the tank, officials scooped a small net through the tank, entrapping dozens of fish, and handed it off to another official in the water.

Mike Montagne, freshwater ecologist with USFWS, was one of the officials knee-deep in lake water to safely release the paddlefish.

"The data we've collected shows that the paddlefish (released in May) are healthy and growing bigger," Montagne said in a press release. "It also indicates that none of paddlefish have gone over the Caddo Lake spillway and out of the watershed, which is a very promising sign."

This is good news for conservationists who want to grow the lake's paddlefish population.

"It's a fish that we once had here and in lots of other parts of Texas but no one ever sees them anymore, or very rarely," Lowerre said. "So the question was, 'what happened? Why did they leave and can we bring them back?'"

The science shows, Lowerre said, that paddlefish in Caddo Lake and its tributaries, as in other rivers in Texas, decreased in population after upstream dams were built in the 1950s.

“Because (the Lake O’ the Pines Dam) changed the flow in the river to more of a constant flow, it’s not a natural system so the paddlefish probably said ‘we’re out of here,’” Lowerre said.

Since 2004, the Caddo Lake Institute, the Nature Conservancy, USFWS, Texas Parks and Wildlife and several other partners have worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the dam, and the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, which owns much of the water in Lake O’ the Pines, to revise flow releases from the dam to improve ecological health for downstream wetlands, fish and other wildlife.

“It’s an experiment to see if we can bring them back and it’s a bigger experiment to see if this change in the operations of Lake O’ the Pines brings back a more natural, healthy system,” Lowerre said. “The paddlefish is a bit of a symbol. We want the healthy system and paddlefish is one of those species that were part of that system so if we can bring it back, it’s a good indication that we are getting things right.”

While paddlefish populations are faring better in some states, the fish remains listed as a species of concern under the federal Endangered Species Act and is listed as threatened in Texas, where it is rarely found.

Paddlefish can grow up to 7-feet long and weigh 200 pounds, and live for 30 years. They are “prehistoric looking,” Lowerre said, and their filter feeding helps keep the lake and rivers clean.

“It’s a learning process,” Lowerre said. “If they survive, we might think about what other kind of fish and mussels that used to be in the system that we might be able to return to the system.”