

# PADDLEFISH THREATENED IN TEXAS



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The American paddlefish (*Polyodon spathula*) is a threatened species in the State of Texas, but was once common in Caddo Lake and the Cypress River Basin. Since 1977, the State has taken steps to protect paddlefish by making it unlawful to catch, kill, or harm them. Paddlefish stocking was also conducted through the Texas Paddlefish Recovery Plan starting in 1992. With the placement of gravel for a spawning area upstream in Big Cypress in 2009, there is now a renewed interest in restoration efforts.

## OLDEST NORTH AMERICAN SPECIES

The paddlefish is the oldest surviving animal species in North America. Fossil records indicate that the species is older than dinosaurs (300 million years). Its name comes from the Greek and Latin words for "many teeth" and "spatula" which refer to the paddlefish's gill rakers and the flat, bladelike snout that is about one-fourth to one-third the length of its body. Their skeletons are primarily composed of cartilage and they have deeply forked tail fins.

Males reach sexual maturity at the age of 4 to 9 years, females at the age of 6 to 12 years. Females can release up to 600,000 eggs every 2 to 5 years after migrating to spawning grounds in early spring. Females gather in schools and release their eggs in fast flowing waters over gravel or sandbars. The paddlefish can live for about 20 to 30 years. They can grow up to 7 feet long and can weigh as much as 200 pounds.



BRENT BRISTOW-USFWS

Paddlefish angler with his catch.



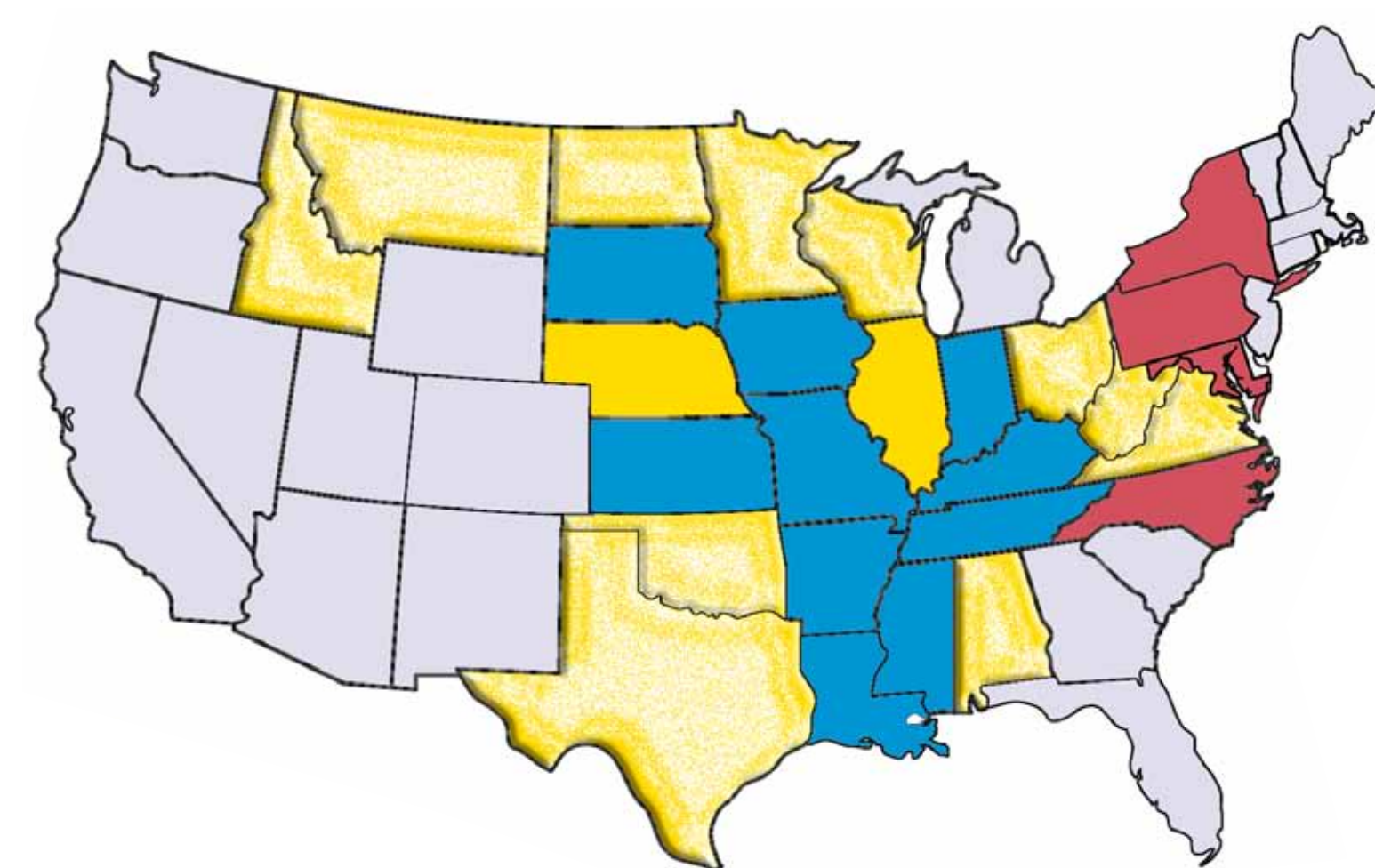
M.C. DAVIS, THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO MEDICAL CENTER

Underside and side views of a juvenile specimen of the American paddlefish, stained to show developing cartilage.

Despite its size and rather ominous appearance, the American paddlefish feeds mostly on plankton. It has no teeth and eats by swimming through the water with its mouth held wide open to filter out food with its gill rakers.

Paddlefish can live in the slow moving waters of large reservoirs, usually deeper than four feet. The native range of paddlefish includes the Mississippi River basin from New York to Montana and south to the Gulf of Mexico. Historically in Texas, paddlefish lived in the Cypress River Basin, all of the rest of the Red River's river system, as well as the Sabine, Neches, Angelina, Trinity and San Jacinto river basins.

## PADDLEFISH RANGE



- Declining
- Endangered/Threatened/Species of Special Concern
- Extirpated
- Stable
- No Data

REFERENCES: Texas Parks and Wildlife, [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/species/pad/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/species/pad/) and Texas State University - San Marcos, Department of Biology, Freshwater Fishes, [www.bio.txstate.edu/~tbonner/txfishes/index.htm](http://www.bio.txstate.edu/~tbonner/txfishes/index.htm).

A mounted paddlefish caught in the 1970s is displayed at the Caddo Lake State Park Interpretative Center.