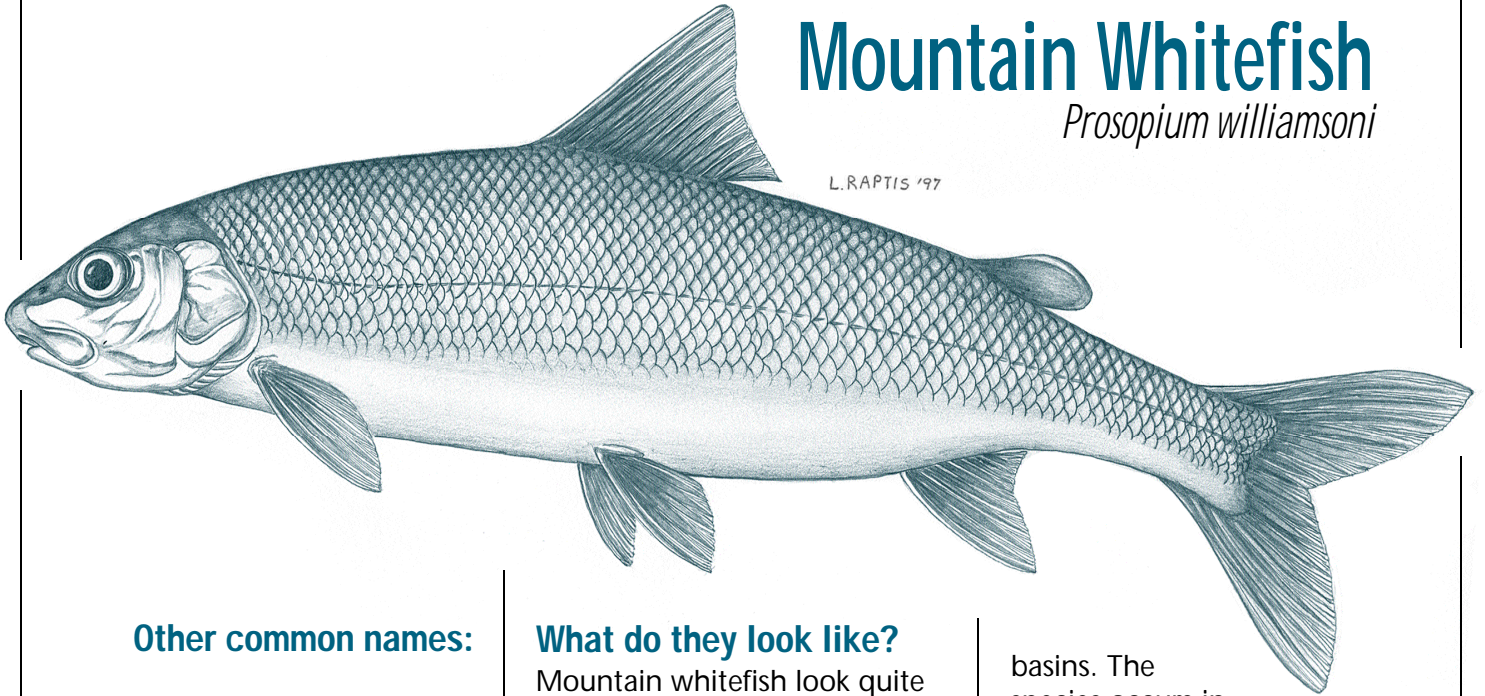


# B.C. Fish facts

## Mountain Whitefish

*Prosopium williamsoni*

L. RAPTIS '97



### Other common names:

*Rocky Mountain whitefish.*  
*It is sometimes incorrectly called grayling.*

Typical range in length for adults: 15 - 45 cm  
Maximum length: 58.5 cm

Typical range in weight for adults: 0.5 - 1.3 kg  
Maximum weight 2.3 kg

### What do they look like?

Mountain whitefish look quite trout-like but have a much smaller head, a larger adipose fin, larger scales and no teeth. The snout is pointy and sticks out past the mouth. It is greyish to light brown on the back, silvery on the sides and white on the belly. The scales are relatively large, round and may be outlined with black.

### Where do they live?

The mountain whitefish is only found in western North America, from Nevada to the Yukon/British Columbia border. It is not found along the coast or further east than the Saskatchewan River in Alberta. It is widespread in British Columbia and can be found in the Columbia, Fraser, Skeena, Nass, Stikine, Dean, Peace, Liard and Yukon drainage

basins. The species occurs in both lakes and streams. It may live in fast water, in small, turbid pools, or cold, deep lakes where it is seldom caught deeper than 20 metres. After hatching, fry are found in shallow water along the shoreline, at stream edges or in protected backwaters. Young fish move into deeper water as they grow.

### What do they eat?

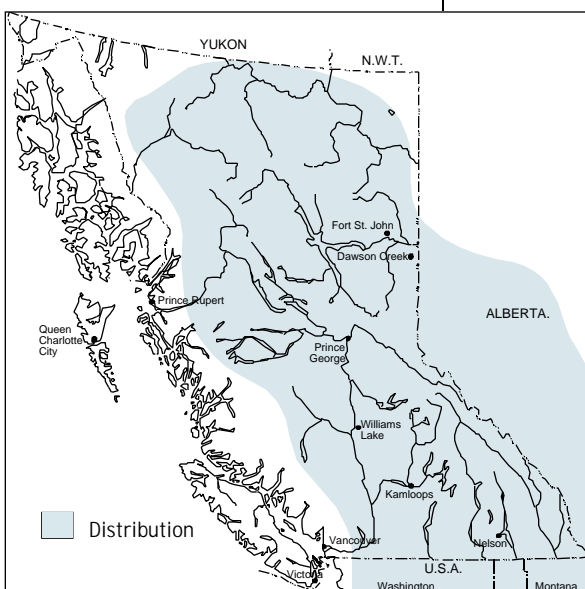
Mountain whitefish are usually bottom feeders, eating food such as aquatic insect larvae, small molluscs, eggs and sometimes fish. In streams, drifting invertebrates and terrestrial insects are also eaten.

## What is their life cycle like?

Usually, the mountain whitefish becomes sexually mature at the age of three or four years. Spawning occurs between October and February over gravel or rocks in streams or in the shallows along the lakeshore. They gather in small groups during daylight. Courting begins in the evening but spawning does not occur until after dark. No nest is built for their eggs which simply sink to the bottom and fall between the spaces among the stones. The eggs hatch in the early spring and young fish form schools. Extensive spawning, feeding and overwintering migrations do occur. Mountain whitefish can live up to 17 or 18 years.

## How are they doing?

Mountain whitefish is yellow-listed, which means that this species is not at risk in British Columbia. Some populations have likely declined due to habitat degradation.



## How you can help.

- It is important to obey angling regulations and habitat protection bylaws, guidelines and regulations since they were designed to protect the fish and their habitat. You should also Observe, Record and Report violations of the regulations by phoning 1-800-663-9453.
- Never transport live fish or other organisms from one body of water to another. You could transfer diseases and parasites from one ecosystem to another or upset the natural balance in the ecosystem where they are released.
- Be aware that what you dump into your septic tank or roadside storm drain may find its way into streams or lakes. Help keep water quality high by using detergents and soaps minimally and do not dump harsh chemicals, such as bleach, paint thinner or antifreeze, into drains.
- Form a group of water stewards and volunteer to monitor local water quality.

• Cultivate an interest in the variety of fish found in the province. They all play an important role in our aquatic ecosystems.

## No kidding!

- There is one report of a fish caught in Alberta that was 29 years old.
- Occasionally mountain whitefish living in rivers have long, slightly upturned snouts and thinner bodies. This form is often called a trumpet or bugnose, sometimes a 'Pinocchio' after the well-known, long-nosed storybook character. This distinct shape may develop in individual fish that specialize in sucking invertebrates from between the stones on the river bottom.
- Due to their ability to store toxins, such as mercury, mountain whitefish are used to locate waters containing fish that are unsafe to eat; they are also used in fish health surveys (as a bioindicator of ecosystem health).

