

## Fewer trout hurt YNP raptors

By MARK HEINZ | Posted: Monday, May 13, 2013 11:31 am

In an ecological chain reaction, an overabundance of non-native mackinaw in Yellowstone Lake is hurting the cutthroat trout population, which in turn makes slim pickings for osprey.

“There are currently five known pairs of osprey around Yellowstone Lake, down from a peak number of 62 pairs,” said Lisa Baril, a Yellowstone biologist specializing in raptors.

Baril talked about some of her research findings during a Draper Museum Lunchtime Expedition presentation at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

Mackinaw (lake trout) were years ago illegally introduced into Yellowstone Lake, and have since thrived, Baril said.

The lake trout feast on the native population of cutthroats. Cutthroats are a food source for about 50 species in Yellowstone, including numerous raptors.

Most notably are osprey and bald eagles that nest along the lake’s 150 miles of shoreline, Baril said.

Lake trout don’t adequately replace cutthroats as a food source for predators, she said.

That’s because lake trout tend to occupy deeper water, where raptors, bears and other predators can’t reach them.

The invading lake trout are thought to have originated from Lewis Lake, Baril said.

Apparently, people took some mackinaw from Lewis Lake, and illegally turned them loose in Yellowstone Lake, she said.

The Park Service has taken aggressive measures, such as netting and killing hundreds of thousands of lake trout every summer.

“Their air bladders are punctured, and their carcasses are thrown back into the lake,” Baril said.

Cutthroats have faced other problems, such as drought and whirling disease, but those tend to be isolated to specific areas, she said.

“The major factor in cutthroat population decline is lake trout,” she said.

Research indicates osprey have felt the worst effects, as evidenced by the sharp decline in nesting pairs along the lake shore, she said.

Elsewhere in Yellowstone, osprey are doing well, she noted, because they can catch fish in streams and ponds.

“Osprey are specialized fish-eaters,” she said.

Bald eagles, on the other hand, haven't suffered as much from the decline in cutthroats at Yellowstone Lake, she said. They are more opportunistic than osprey.

Eagles will hit a variety of food sources, including carrion, she said.

"They also prey on ducks that land on the lake," Baril said.

There's no end in sight for efforts to curb the lake trout, she added.

"They will never be completely eliminated," because Yellowstone Lake is vast, and only so many lake trout can be tracked down and netted, she said.