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Endangered sockeye beat projections in Columbia

AP State

BOISE, Idaho -- Sockeye salmon swimming up the Columbia River in Washington and Oregon in higher-than-expected numbers are spawning hope the fish will also make a mass return to Idaho.

More than 157,000 fish had been counted at Bonneville Dam on the Lower Columbia River by last week. It's a number that is about double the 75,600 projection made before the spawning season, according to the Idaho Statesman.

Joe Hymer, with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, said he's never seen a sockeye count of 100,000 this early in the year. But he and other scientists are at a loss when it comes to explaining the robust run, which is about six times the total for all of last year.

"It's a mystery. This is nothing like what was predicted," said Brian Gorman, a spokesman for the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service.

Increases in this year's sockeye run were expected, though, because of improved river migration and ocean conditions, plus more young fish migrating from Idaho.

Most of the Columbia River sockeye swim to lakes in north-central Washington. Biologists aren't sure whether the Snake River component of the run to Idaho will also be larger than expected.

"We honestly have no idea what's headed our way until they start crossing the Snake River dams," said Mike Peterson, a senior research biologist with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

To reach the Salmon River's spawning waters, Idaho sockeye have to swim upstream past eight dams and reservoirs in the Columbia and Snake river systems, a trip of about 900 miles.

The sockeye became the first Idaho salmon listed on the endangered species list in 1991.

Adult sockeye, which normally turn red when they approach their October spawning season, have been planted in Redfish Lake in Idaho since 1994 in hopes of producing offspring that will eventually swim back to the Pacific and possibly return the fish back to state waters.

But of the numerous sockeye planted at Redfish Lake, only a small number have returned. Only three of the fish from Redfish Lake made their way back into Idaho in 2006.

Information from: Idaho Statesman, <http://www.idahostatesman.com>