Monster goldfish found: Giant Lake Tahoe goldfish likely dumped from aquarium (+ video)

Written by Emerson Marcus
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Christine Ngai wasn't sure if it was an orange soda can or a plastic cup. It certainly wasn't a largemouth bass, the fish Ngai was researching at Lake Tahoe in 2006 as part of her master's thesis.

During her survey at the Tahoe Keys, Ngai first spotted a giant goldfish, and dozens more have been seen since, with some weighing in at 4 pounds.

"As it approaches you realize it is some sort of fish," said Ngai, who studies fish for the University of Nevada, Reno. "And you scoop it up, remove the vegetation and there it is — a goldfish that is the size of your head."

Research in the mid-2000s prompted funding for a warm-water fish control program to remove invasive, nonnative fish from locations along Lake Tahoe, mainly in the Tahoe Keys.

The project, which began in 2011, has removed thousands of fish, including about 90 giant goldfish.

It's not entirely known why the goldfish are populating near-shore regions in Tahoe, but some suspect it is most likely form aquarium dumping.

"It is a big deal because it is not just in Nevada — this is something that has gone on throughout the country," Nevada Department of Wildlife spokeswoman Teresa Moiola said.

The Nevada Legislature in 2011 passed a law to make it illegal to dump invasive fish, Moiola said.

What's the problem with the giant orange guppies?

They eat native minnows, one of the main sources of food for naturalized species such as Mackinaw and trout.

But the goldfish is not the only minnow predator.

Since 2011, about 35,000 warm-water fish have been removed from water near the shore in Lake Tahoe through the program, the vast majority of them large-mouth bass and bluegill.

The minnow population declined 58 percent from 1988 to 2009, according to a University of Nevada, Reno study.

Large-mouthed bass numbers spiked at Tahoe in the 1980s, Ngai said. Their numbers, and the numbers of several other warm-water fish in Lake Tahoe, have thrived in the region partly because of climate change, she said.

But the goldfish, even with its population well below that of its other warm-water brothers, might pose another threat.

"They end up excreting nutrients causing near shore algae to grow, which affects the clarity of the lake," UNR fisheries expert Sudeep Chandra said.

Ngai described goldfish as omnivores efficient at eating and excreting, which creates algae growth and green water.

Ngai, and members of the nonnative warm-water fish removal program, will move into the third year of the three-year pilot, which receives funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Tahoe River Protection Agency and Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act, she said.

The pilot program counts fish through electric shock, which stuns the fish in water and allows the pilot program to conduct the survey. The shock lasts two to four seconds depending on the type of fish, Ngai said, and the mortality

rate is low.

Invasive fish, such as the goldfish, are gathered and removed from the water. Ngai said the program will look to filet invasive fish and donate them to local food banks.

The five-month program restarts in April and ends in September.