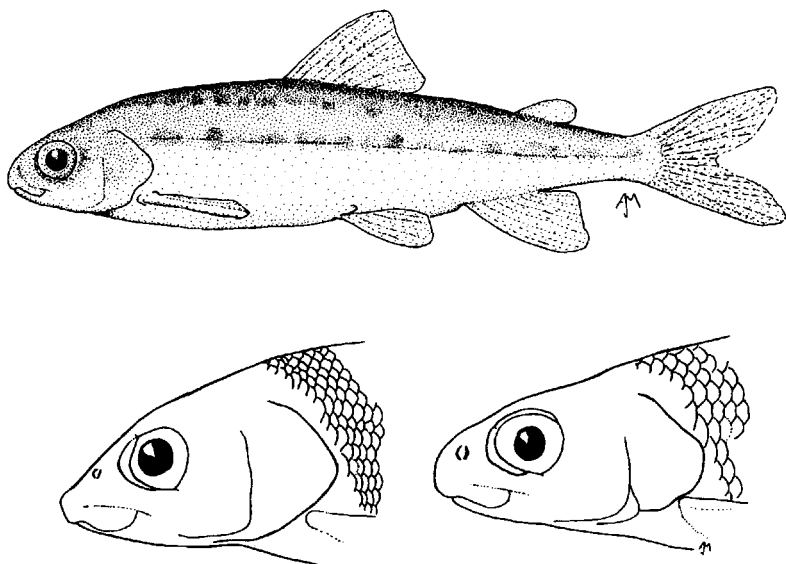


16.4 Pygmy Whitefish

Prosopium coulteri (Eigenmann and Eigenmann)

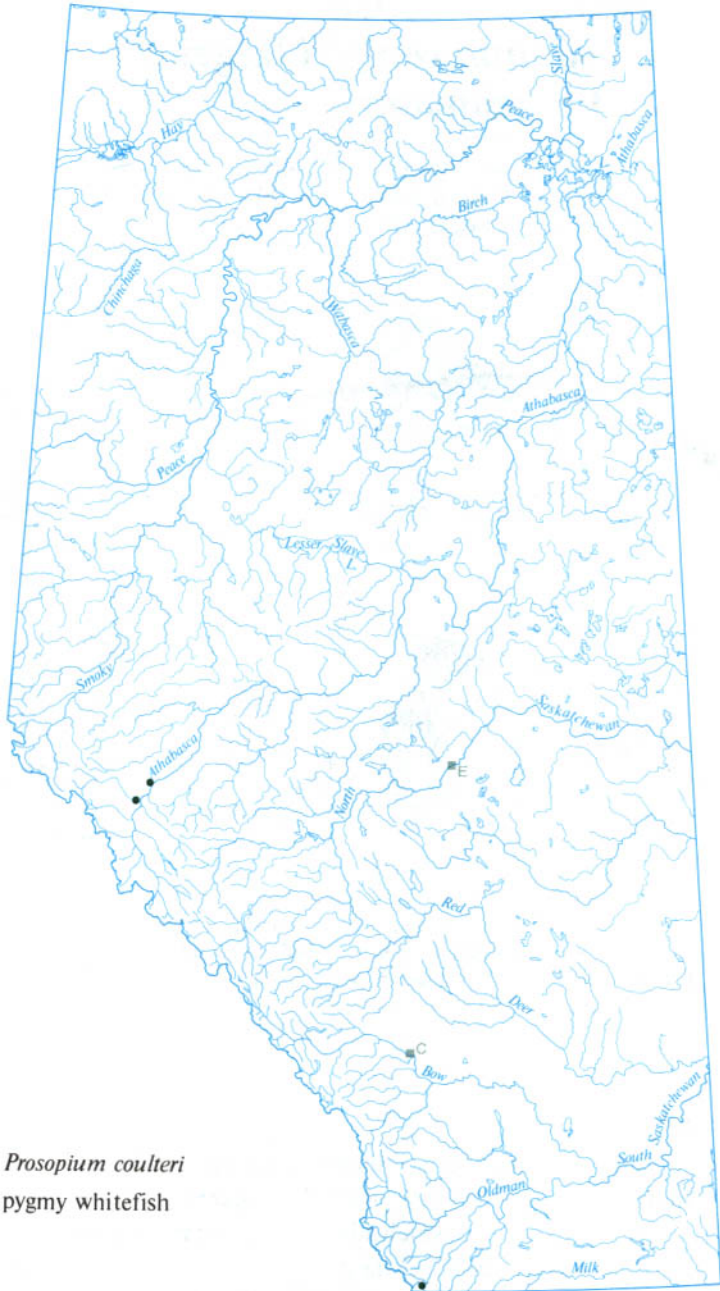
[*Prosopium*: a mask, from the large bones in front of the eyes; *coulteri*: after Rev. J.M. Coulter, author of the "Manual of the Botany of the Rocky Mountain Region"]



Pygmy whitefish from Solomon Creek, 11.1 cm standard length. Lower diagrams show head region of mountain whitefish (left) and pygmy whitefish (right), both specimens 11.1 cm standard length to show difference in relative size of the eye and scales and in snout shape.

Description

Generally similar to mountain whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*). Distinguished from other *Prosopium* by the following combination of characters: snout bluntly rounded; small adipose fin, its base usually smaller than eye diameter; scales relatively large; 50-70 pored scales along lateral line; scale rows around caudal peduncle 15-20; gillrakers on first arch 12-21; pyloric caecae 13-33; vertebrae 50-55; no spots on adipose fin or on top of head.



Map 16.4 Distribution of pygmy whitefish in Alberta.

Maximum length about 27 cm, but in most lakes and streams throughout the range of this species its maximum length is under 14 cm.

This species may be confused with small mountain whitefish. Every effort should be made to distinguish these two species in order to accurately document the Alberta distribution of pygmy whitefish.

Distribution

- Alaska to Montana, primarily in mountainous regions, and in Lake Superior.

- Known in Alberta from Waterton Lakes (Lindsey and Franzin 1972) and Solomon Creek (west of Hinton near the Athabasca River—UAMZ 5277) (see Map 16.4). There are additional reports of pygmy whitefish collected in October 1980 from the lower reaches of Snake Indian River in the Athabasca River drainage within Jasper National Park; this is just east of the divide from Yellowhead Lake in the upper Fraser River drainage where the species also occurs (D.W. Mayhood, personal communication) and from the Saskatchewan portion of Lake Athabasca (P.J. McCart, D.W. Mayhood, and D. Tripp, personal communication).

Representing an apparent range extension, two pygmy whitefish were identified by W.E. Roberts at the University of Alberta Museum of Zoology from a collection made by C.D. Tebby in 1974 from Echo Bay, Great Bear Lake (UAMZ 3537).

Biology

Virtually nothing is known of the biology of this species in Alberta. In British Columbia, where it has most commonly been found in lakes in relatively deep water, it is thought to spawn from October to December. Feeding occurs primarily on bottom organisms such as insect larvae and crustaceans.

Historical Note

Carl H. Eigenmann and his wife Rosa S. Eigenmann first described the pygmy whitefish in 1892 as *Coregonus coulterii* from the Kickinghorse River at Field, British Columbia (collections made by C.H. Eigenmann from Indiana along the Canadian Pacific Railroad route). It was first noted in Alberta by Lindsey and Franzin (1972) from Upper Waterton Lake on the basis of two specimens gillnetted from about 50 m depth on 10 August 1971. The Solomon Creek specimen referred to above was collected in 1966 but not identified until 1984.