

# Willow Creek Gila Trout Restoration Project

## The Return of a New Mexico Native

Before European settlers ventured into the Gila River Basin, Willow Creek was likely home to Gila trout. Unfortunately, nonnative species, including brown trout and rainbow trout, were introduced in the early 1900s—species that compete with, prey upon and sometimes interbreed with Gila trout.

Gila trout conservation efforts began in the early 1920s with the closure of streams to angling and establishment of a Gila trout hatchery near White Creek. Despite early successes, Gila trout was listed as endangered in 1973 under the federal Endangered Species Act.

In response, conservation efforts increased and resulted in the downlisting of Gila trout in 2006 from endangered to threatened status. Downlisting allowed the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to offer—after a 50-year hiatus—regulated angling for this native trout.

## Back from the Ashes

Wildfires often are destructive to the landscape and its inhabitants, but there can also be benefits. In 2012, the Whitewater-Baldy Fire burned across many Gila trout streams (see inset map) eliminating many of those populations. However, in Willow Creek post-fire debris and ash flows killed nonnative trout. This provided a unique opportunity to establish a Gila trout fishery.

About a year after the fire, Gila trout were stocked in Willow Creek and began to reproduce. In 2016, a fish barrier was built above the confluence with Gilita Creek that prevents nonnative trout from swimming into Willow Creek. The success in Willow Creek has helped improve the conservation status of Gila trout and also provides anglers a special opportunity to fish for this rare trout.



Gila trout



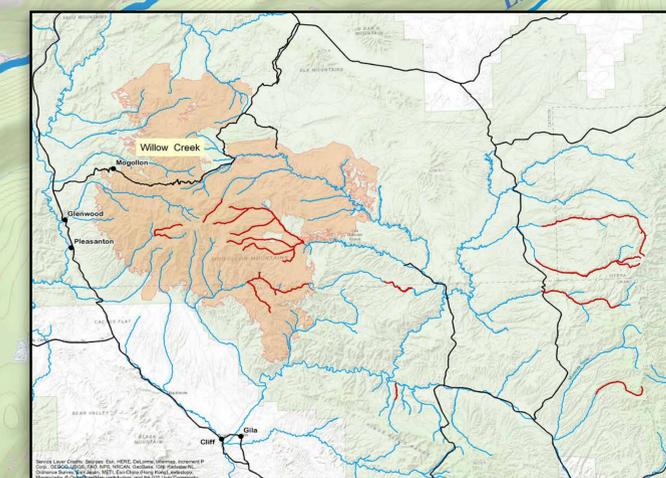
Volunteers assist biologists with annual fish surveys



Willow Creek fish barrier



Restoration and continuing improvements to the Gila trout fishery at Willow Creek are made possible by the cooperative efforts of these organizations and with the invaluable support and commitment of volunteers.



The 2012 Whitewater Baldy Fire affected many Gila trout streams.

- Gila trout population 2012 (prefire)
- Highways
- Whitewater Baldy Fire perimeter