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## Inland Fishes of the Pilbara

"One, two, three four five, once I caught a fish alive . . ." —and if it happened while you were at Millstream, it may have been one of the species featured below.

While many people are familiar with the plants and terrestrial animals of the Pilbara, few know what lurks beneath the surface of the large fresh-water pools of the Fortescue and Ashburton Rivers.

There are two species of catfish found at Millstream. The **fork-tail catfish**, *Arius graeffei*, sometimes referred to as the salmon catfish, grows up to 50 cm in length. It is found in a diverse array of habitats, including estuaries as well as fresh water (hundreds of kilometres upstream). The male of the species takes care of the eggs, holding a brood of three hundred in his mouth for up to two weeks until they hatch.

The common **eel-tail catfish** *Neosilurus hyrtlilii* is more widespread throughout the region. The Ashburton River forms the southern limit of distribution and the species occupies a variety of habitats, including stagnant pools and clear-flowing streams. Its colour is variable, ranging from light grey to dark brown. There is a chocolate-brown variety from the upper Fortescue system that has brown pelvic fins. With their venomous fin spines, even small specimens can deliver a painful sting and must be handled with care.

Most other fish, though considered good to eat, are too small to arouse the interest of anglers. They include the western rainbowfish, spangled perch, fresh-water herring, flathead goby and two species of grunter.

The **western rainbowfish** *Melanotaenia splendida australis* is probably one of the most abundant inland species in our northern waters, and grows to 9 cm long. These small, colourful fish are often kept in aquariums, and are voracious predators of mosquito larvae and other small invertebrates. They provide a food source for larger predators such as the barred grunter.

There are two species of grunter found at Millstream. The **barred grunter** *Amniataba percoides* (also known as the tiger perch) is the larger, growing to 18 cm. The smaller **Fortescue grunter** *Leiopotherapon aheneus* grows to 10 cm and is found only in the Fortescue, Robe and Ashburton Rivers of Western Australia. Both species can sometimes be seen in large shoals over sand and rock or amongst shoreline vegetation.

One species extremely well adapted to desert conditions is the **spangled perch** *Leiopotherapon unicolor*, which grows to approximately 20 cm long. The sides of its body are covered with small reddish-brown spots. It can tolerate brackish water and relatively high temperatures, and may also be capable of surviving in mud during droughts.

The **freshwater herring** *Nematalosa erebi*, also known as the bony bream, frequently occurs in large shoals which graze on benthic algae, and is usually found in slow-flowing waters or large rock pools. These fish are generally the first to perish during drought conditions, when streams cease to flow and isolated pools begin to stagnate. It is found throughout the Kimberley and Pilbara regions. The Ashburton River forms the southern limit of its distribution in Western Australia.

The **freshwater eel** *Anguilla bicolor* can grow to more than 1.2 metres long. These eels are sometimes seen in Chinderwarriner Pool, but spend much of their time down on the bottom. They return to the ocean to spawn.

These eight species of fresh-water fish can be seen in the pools of the Fortescue river or schooling in the crystal-clear waters of Chinderwarriner Pool. You may like to take the time to see how many you can identify.

