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SCIENCE

Saving the 'snot otter'

Researchers want to know why the eastern hellbender, Ohio's largest amphibian, is disappearing

Tuesday, October 16, 2007 3:48 AM

BY KEVIN MAYHOOD THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

ARMSTRONGS MILLS, Ohio -- Ages ago, Captina Creek carved out a bank and filled itself with a tumble of flat limestone rocks in what is now Belmont County.

And over time, wildlife moved into that area of eastern Ohio, including a shy salamander that can stretch to 2 feet and weigh in at a pound.

The eastern hellbender, found only in the United States, was once plentiful, a dietary mainstay of ancient Indian cultures. Only a few decades ago, the slimy amphibian was fairly easy to find for those who knew where to look.

But the hellbender, also called "devil dog" and "snot otter," isn't around much anymore. It was labeled an endangered species in Ohio 25 years ago, and things seem to be getting worse. Researchers want to know why.

Ralph Phingston and Greg Lipps have been surveying the waterways in southeastern Ohio, the only region where hellbenders have been found since the 1950s. They slip into streams and overturn rocks, hopeful that pollution, erosion, virus and loss of habitat have not further harmed the species.

But the numbers don't look good. They have found 35 in seven streams during the past two years. The last survey, performed from 1986 to 1988, found 138 hellbenders in 16 streams.

"It's very disturbing," said Phingston, a retired high-school science teacher recognized as Ohio's amphibian expert.

Pennsylvania, West Virginia and others states are in the same boat. The hellbender was listed as a "special concern" species in New York in 1983. Maryland, Illinois and Indiana list it as endangered, and it is threatened in Alabama.

Back in Ohio, when researchers spot a hellbender, they record information about water temperature, water flow, clarity and more. They also inject a rice-size transmitter into the tail of each animal in an effort to track it.

Another threat, they say, is silt, the fine-grained soil that runs into waterways from erosion, said Lipps, a conservation biologist.



KEVIN MAYHOOD | DISPATCH

Researchers and volunteers look for the eastern hellbender beneath rocks in Captina Creek in eastern Ohio.



JIM MCCORMACOHIO DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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But there are poachers, too.

"I just got an e-mail from a colleague who saw a hellbender selling for \$1,700 in a pet store in Japan," Lipps said.

The animals are docile and harmless to humans, but secrete white, toxic mucus when handled.

"Don't put your hands near your eyes," Phingston said. "It'll feel like you were Maced."

Joe Greathouse, curator of animals at the Good Zoo at Oglebay Resort in Wheeling, W.Va., is studying seven creeks in the northern part of that state. He said he's found nearly 130 hellbenders in five streams in the past three years.

Still, he said, only two streams have what he would call strong populations.

Veterinarians at The Wilds in Muskingum County have joined the survey this year, testing the animals in Ohio and West Virginia for a virus and fungus that kill amphibians, including the hellbender.

They take blood samples and analyze them for the presence of infection, liver and renal function, and general health. Pennsylvania vets are doing the same.

"We're trying to get a better understanding of what is normal," said Rachael Weiss, a veterinarian at The Wilds. "We're going to compare what is perceived to be a healthy population in West Virginia with the population in Ohio."

Lipps said the bad news goes beyond the low numbers.

"It scares me more than anything that in the other creeks, there are only large adults, and only few of them.

"The only small ones are here," he said of Captina Creek.

That means it's the only Ohio creek where hellbenders have successfully reproduced in the past decade.

Experts at The Wilds are designing an artificial stream in hopes of creating an ideal habitat for breeding. Hellbenders will be placed in it next year.


There are a lot of unknowns, said Dan Beetem, director of animal management.

"We don't know what cues them to breed," he said.

kmayhood@dispatch.com

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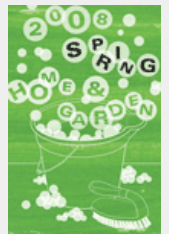
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