

Field Notes

News from the Alabama Ecological Services Field Office



Aquatic Partnership Growing in Alabama



Our partnership within the Alabama Rivers and Streams Network continues to grow. We had our first annual meeting in October at the Alabama 4-H Center in Columbiana. We had 45 attendees representing twenty organizations. New participants included the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT), the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF), the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), and the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps). The Network is very excited about their participation. For 2015, we will continue to work with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Alabama

Aquatic Diversity Center to locate new locations for mussel and snail reintroductions. We will be concentrating on stream crossing assessments in the Choccolocco Creek watershed; we'll also be conducting fish community surveys in the Buttahatchie and Luxapalila watersheds. Other projects include shoreline stabilization projects in the Bear Creek, Paint Rock, and Big Canoe Creek watersheds. We're working with the Southeast Aquatic Resource Partnership on a barrier (dam) assessment tool.



Geneva County crayfish

Beach Mouse Population Steady, But Vulnerable

Entrepreneur James Cash Penney once said "Growth is never by mere chance; it is the result of forces working together." This statement couldn't be truer when it comes to the status of the Alabama beach mouse (ABM). First listed as endangered in 1986, the ABM seemed to be fighting an uphill battle. The species



Alabama beach mouse, photo: Roger Reetz

needs vegetated sand dunes in order to survive. However, coastal development and tropical storms nearly wiped out its habitat. After protections were put in place, the ABM population was on the upswing. But Hurricane Ivan eradicated nearly all vegetated dunes in 2004. "When Hurricane Ivan ripped through the Gulf Coast, we knew the Alabama beach mouse was in trouble," says lead ABM biologist Bill Lynn with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Before Ivan, we knew we had the largest population and habitat occupation in coastal Alabama, but we lost 90 to 95% of the frontal dunes, which led to a significant population reduction," says Lynn.

Since then, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has worked with multiple partners to get the ABM population back on track. Both private and public restoration efforts have made significant improvements to the species' habitat. "Those efforts included dune planting, sand fencing, organized workshops to replant dunes at Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, Fort Morgan State Historical Park and using Christmas trees to create dunes at Gulf State Park," says Lynn. "The Service also received federal assistance to help restore the habitat."

In addition, the Service launched an ambitious plan to reintroduce the ABM to Gulf State Park in 2010. The effort has proven successful. But how do we measure the mouse's success? Lynn says the Service has been monitoring the ABM population through Habitat Conservation Plans, which has slowly documented the expansion of the mouse's range. "In 2010, we set up 40 long-term habitat monitoring sites across Fort Morgan peninsula, looking for signs of beach mouse activity, such as burrows and tracks," says Lynn. "By 2012, the Alabama beach mouse once again occupied the lands that were once wiped out by Hurricane Ivan."

The news is hopeful, but the ABM isn't out of the woods just yet. It still remains a very vulnerable species. Just

one intense tropical storm can set back recovery efforts and put them near extinction. “Populations aren’t as high as they once were, but they’re stable. The best way to manage for the ABM is by maintaining healthy dunes. We encourage landowners to continue working with us to plant native dune plants and keep them stable,” says Lynn.

If the beach mouse isn’t enough incentive to restore the sand dunes, Lynn reminds us that healthy dunes are also good for the economy. “According to a 2013 study prepared by Datu Research, eco-tourism brings in billions of dollars to Alabama. Sand dunes play a huge role in that. Not only do they provide natural barriers to protect beach homes from storms. But dunes also provide habitat and use for migratory birds, monarch butterflies, sea turtles and ghost crabs,” explains Lynn.

If you would like more information on keeping your sand dunes healthy, contact Bill Lynn at 251/441 5868, or William_lynn@fws.gov

Partnership Prevails for Red-cockaded Woodpecker

Decades ago, it wasn’t uncommon to find a beautiful red-cockaded woodpecker perched in the stately longleaf pine ranging across two-thirds of Alabama. But as southern pine belt was developed and converted to other uses, the woodpecker’s habitat declined. In 1973, the RCW was listed as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act. Today in Alabama, the RCW is relegated to a few National Forests, and only two private land holdings. Fortunately, a group of dedicated biologists and landowners are helping to boost the RCW population in southeast Alabama. Crews from the National Forests of Alabama, Conservation Southeast Inc., and the Alabama Field Office kicked off another “insert blitz” to create roosting and nesting habitat for the beautiful birds.

“The development of the artificial cavity, or insert, is one of the most important advances in red-cockaded woodpecker management. Without these cavities,



Wildlife Biologist Steve Johnson creates an artificial cavity in Conecuh National Forest, photo: Eric Spadgenske

most woodpecker populations across the southeast would be declining or disappearing,” said Eric Spadgenske, lead project biologist and State Coordinator of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program in Alabama.

With the financial support of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Alabama Forest Resources Center, the team has installed 59 artificial cavities at Enon and Sehoj Plantations which are located in Bullock County, Alabama. These new cavities will now serve as homes for RCW’s. The crew from the National Forests in Alabama has been assisting with the annual insert blitz since 2008 and has been a significant factor in the success of this growing RCW population.

Mark Bailey, with Conservation Southeast Inc., has been monitoring the RCW population at Enon and Sehoj since the early 2000’s and was afraid they would eventually disappear. Without the conservation ethic of landowner Campbell Lanier, III, that fear would likely have been reality by today. “Providing cavity inserts like this is a major part of what turned the Enon and Sehoj population around, from 3 groups in 2007 to 29 last year,” said Bailey. “Thanks to all involved, especially the landowners who support this project!”

The crew looks forward to another blitz later this year.

“Being part of a successful, multi-partner effort to recover a small population of endangered woodpeckers is not only exciting in biological terms, but it is gratifying to see so many agencies, non-profits, and private landowners coming together for conservation,” said Spadgenske.

Meet the Staff: Vanessa Scott

Meet Administrative Officer Vanessa Scott. With more than 30 years of administrative and customer service experience, she’s worked with a myriad of diverse people during her career. She is a proud mother of three, and has four grandchildren. Vanessa served in the U.S. Army for 20 years, stationed in Korea, Germany and Somalia as well as stateside tours. After leaving the Army,



she went back to school and received her Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration. Vanessa then accepted a position with the Department of Veterans Affairs in Human Resources with the Employee Labor Relations Department. While working with Veterans Affairs, she went back to school and received her Master’s degree. After two years with Veterans Affairs, she accepted a Program Assistant position with the Service’s Deepwater Horizon office in Fairhope. She joined the Alabama Field Office three years later. We are proud to have her onboard!

Hutton Program Launches Career for Fairhope Student

Working in the fisheries field can be one of the most satisfying jobs in the world, and a summer internship with the Alabama Field Office can be just the springboard to begin a career in conservation. Since 2009, the Alabama Field Office has been fortunate enough to host several future biologists through the American Fisheries Society's Hutton Program.....an eight week mentoring opportunity that allows high school students to intern with fisheries professionals, as well as receive a \$3,000 scholarship.

In 2009, Fairhope High School student Garrett Lloyd was selected by the American Fisheries Society from a pool of applicants to spend the summer at our office under the mentorship Fishery biologist Andy Ford. "I knew right away that Garrett would be an asset to our office. He was ready to hit the ground running and get his hands dirty," said Ford.

Lloyd says he's always been drawn to the outdoors, and he wanted to explore a possible career in conservation. With a jam-packed summer, Lloyd had plenty of opportunities to go out in the field and do the work of a professional biologist. Along with his mentor and various other biologists, Lloyd participated in mussel surveys, gopher tortoise relocations, sea turtle nest patrols, red-bellied turtle fencing, and stream fish sampling, just to name a few. "The project that I enjoyed most was mollusk sampling in the Alabama River tributary; searching for mussels and aquatic snail populations," explained Lloyd.

For mentor Andy Ford, the experience was just as rewarding. "Garrett was attentive, enthusiastic, and easy to work with. I wanted to make sure he could experience many different aspects of conservation," said Ford. "When you work in conservation, you need to network and develop partnerships to successfully do your job. During the summer that Garrett was here, we worked with multiple agencies and groups which exposed him to more experiences and opportunities."



Electrofishing at Cahaba Valley Creek, photo: USFWS

Lloyd said his mentor was an excellent example of someone who truly loves his work. "It was apparent from the beginning that Andy had dedicated many hours of work to plan so I could get a well-rounded learning experience," said Lloyd. "He made sure I was well prepared prior to each field assignment, and gave me generous exposure to other organizations involved with fisheries science."

It's been six years since Lloyd spent the summer as a Hutton scholar with the Alabama Field Office. So where is he now? Thanks to his connections through the Hutton Program and continued mentoring by Ford, doors of opportunity opened and Lloyd received a summer job with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources in 2012. During the previous summer, Garrett had an opportunity to work with and meet Dave Armstrong, District V Fisheries Supervisor, and that connection translated into a new job opportunity. A year later, and because of the previous opportunity, he got a job working for the Weeks Bay Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to conservation.

Most recently and likely because of the impressive resume that he was able to build prior to ever graduating from

college, Lloyd was hired by the Natural Resources Conservation Services as a Pathways Intern. The Pathways program is a federal program that selects college students and employs them within specific agencies. This opportunity will likely lead to full time employment after graduation.

For now, Lloyd is hitting the books. He graduates from Troy University in December with a degree in ecology and field biology. "After graduation, I plan to take some soils courses at Auburn University early next year," explained Lloyd.

Lloyd is forever grateful for the time he spent as a Hutton Scholar. He says the opportunity catapulted him into a career in conservation. "Just like every organism has a unique niche, we as people have a niche in how we contribute to our world," said Lloyd. "If you feel you have a calling in biology, the Hutton Program will help you find your passion and elevate you to new levels."

This summer, the AFO is welcoming a new Hutton Scholar, Dionna Walker. We will keep you posted on her progress!

Combating Cogongrass

Not all vegetation is good for our environment. In fact, some plants are invasive and harmful to our ecosystems. Cogongrass is a particularly worrisome non-native species. Cogongrass is considered one of the ten worst weeds in the world. Its leaf blades can grow up to four feet tall, and the plant causes plenty of headaches for conservationists and foresters alike. The weed is so hated, many state, federal, and local agencies have launched a lengthy battle against it. “Cogongrass is a fairly recent invasive to the Fort Morgan Peninsula and can hinder the beauty of our coastline. However, cogongrass can be controlled,” says Bill Lynn with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In November, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service joined forces with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT), and the Fort Morgan Volunteer Fire Department to control this invasive weed in parts of the Fort Morgan Peninsula. Using glyphosate, the same active ingredient used in Round-up, the team treated BLM lands within the Highway 180 ALDOT right-of-way. BLM provided the herbicide and surfactant and ALDOT provided the equipment and state-certified applicators. “We are pleased to be able to participate in this collaborative effort,” says Howard Peavey, ALDOT Agronomist Manager.

So, how does this weed wreak so much havoc? Much of Alabama’s wildlife depends on native plants for food and habitat, but cogongrass grows so densely, it out-competes most native plants. For instance, the Alabama beach mouse depends on sand dunes with sea oats and other native plants for food and habitat. But cogongrass can overtake the dune, and ruin the habitat. The invasive plant can also harm gopher tortoise burrows and indigo snake habitat. “Due to the high silica content in cogongrass, even deer will not eat it,” explains Lynn. “Dense stands can also affect wild turkey and the northern bob-white quail brood rearing habitat.”



Howard Peavey of ALDOT sprays herbicide at Fort Morgan Peninsula, photot: Bill Lynn

So what’s the next step for the war on cogongrass? Biologists say they will monitor the progress of the treatment, and plan to follow-up with another treatment next spring. But they say controlling the weed will be more like a marathon, not a sprint. “We’re excited about the partnership and the collective

skills and resources it brings to the fight against cogongrass and other non-native invasive plants on Fort Morgan,” says Faye Winters with BLM. “Early intervention is our best bet to sustain these native habitats and the species that depend on them.”



photo: USFWS



We are sad to say that our Deputy Field Supervisor Dan Everson has left the Alabama Field Office to become the Project Leader of the Ohio Field Office. Dan has been in Daphne since 2004, and he is sorely missed! We know he’ll do great things in Ohio!

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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Wildlife biologist Josh Rowell assists with a prescribed burn on property belonging to The Nature Conservancy, photo: Eric Spadgenske



Wildlife biologist Dianne Ingram assists in tagging a manatee in Dog River, photo: Dauphin Island Sea Lab