

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

American eels in the mountains of Virginia

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

All American eels hatch from eggs in the Sargasso Sea, an area of the Atlantic Ocean east of the Bahamas and south of Bermuda. From there, the young eels head west, swimming up streams from Canada to South America, where they spend most of their lives, returning to the ocean to reproduce and die.

When swimming up those east coast streams, some of them make it into the Appalachian Mountains. Since 1999 Forest Service researcher Andy Dolloff has been studying eels that enter Chesapeake Bay and continue upstream into the Virginia mountains.

Since 2000, Dolloff's team has tagged over 1,500 eels on the George Washington National Forest, using a small, unique chip like those used to tag pets. The team has re-captured over 40 percent of the tagged eels at least once. Most of the eels are collected within several hundred feet of where they were originally captured and tagged, and eels tagged as early as 2000 are still being collected today, suggesting that after their long trip from the Sargasso Sea eels can settle into their mountain homes for periods of 10 to 20 or more years.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.