

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Powell River Mussel Release

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

The Powell River flows southwest out of Virginia's coal country and into east Tennessee, before its waters eventually flow into the Tennessee River, draining some of the most rural land in the Southern Appalachians.

Biologists recently convened on the banks of the river, near Tazewell, Tennessee. The area was an idyllic setting of farms lining the long valleys of ridge and valley province of the western side of the Southern Appalachians.

The group had come to help with and bear witness to the release of thousands of young endangered mussels into the river in an effort to boost wild populations. More than 5,500 oyster mussels, 1,000 Cumberlandian combshell mussels, and 27 snuffbox mussels were released across three different sites on the Powell River. All three of the mussel species are endangered and all the individuals were raised at Virginia Tech, which has established itself as an expert in the field of freshwater mussel propagation.

Despite stories of the river once running black with coal dust, the Powell River is an incredible aquatic resource – home to at least 29 species of mussels, 13 of which are threatened or endangered. Simply standing in the river's shallows, one can see live mussels scattered across the stream bottom as well as remnant shells. Along with the neighboring Clinch River, it's considered one of the most biologically diverse and important streams in the Southeast.

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