

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Rearing Appalachian elktoes in captivity

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

A standard tool for biologists working to recover endangered species is either breeding rare plants or animals in captivity or raising them in captivity to increase their likelihood of survival. This can be quite complicated, as it involves plants or animals that are extremely rare, and for which we know little about their life cycles.

In the shadow of the Whittier, North Carolina post office, state and federal biologists searched the bottom of the Tuckasegee River for Appalachian elktoe mussels. The elktoe is an endangered species found only in Western North Carolina and a sliver of East Tennessee. The biologists were looking for ten individuals carrying young. The ten mussels from the Tuckasegee went to a state hatchery in Marion, where biologists with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission will grow their young within the safety of the hatchery's water tanks, eventually be released to boost diminished populations— a huge step in efforts to remove this animal from the endangered species list.

The collection of elktoes from the Tuckasegee was preceded by the collection of sculpins, tiny, bottom-dwelling fish, from a nearby creek. Part of the challenge of rearing native freshwater mussels in captivity is they spend part of their young lives attached to fish, so these sculpins also returned to the hatchery, and will help the elktoes complete their life cycle before being returned to the stream.

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