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# Conserving South Carolina's At-Risk Species:

## *Species facing threats to their survival*

### Carolina pygmy sunfish (*Elassoma boehlkei*)



Carolina pygmy sunfish / Photo credit: Conservation Fisheries Inc.

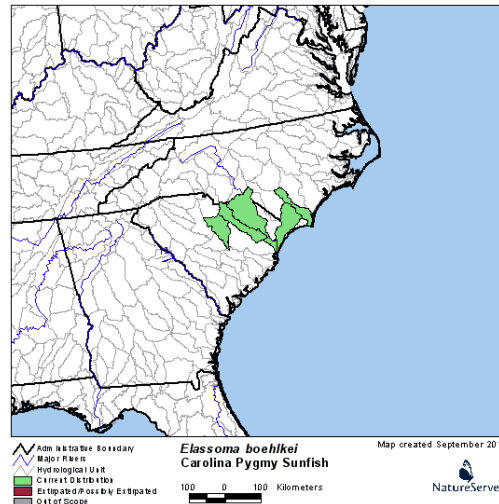
#### Description

The Carolina pygmy sunfish is a member of the family Elassomatidae, a family of small secretive fish containing six known species found only in the southeastern United States. Carolina pygmy sunfish range in length from 20 to 32 mm (0.8 to 1.3 in.). As with other members of the genus *Elassoma*, the Carolina pygmy sunfish lacks a lateral line, has a relatively large eye, an upturned mouth, and a rounded caudal fin. Males of the species display alternating blue and black bars along their sides. The bars on the females alternate between dark brown and light brown.

#### Range

The Carolina pygmy sunfish is limited to tributaries of the Waccamaw and Santee Rivers in North and South Carolina. The species occurs in two areas in the Waccamaw River drainage, and one in the middle Santee River drainage. In the upper Waccamaw of North Carolina, the species occurs in Juniper Creek, which joins the Waccamaw downstream of Lake Waccamaw in Brunswick and Columbus counties, and in a roadside ditch that drains into Big Creek, which is a tributary to Lake Waccamaw, Columbus County.

In the lower Waccamaw in South Carolina, the species occurs in old ricefield ditches off Jericho Creek in the Samworth Wildlife Management Area near Georgetown, Georgetown County. In the Santee River in South Carolina, the species occurs adjacent to Big Pine Tree Creek near Camden, Kershaw County. A small number of additional populations may occur in these general areas, including in the Lumber and Cape Fear Drainages in North Carolina and in additional tributary ditches to the Waccamaw in South Carolina.



#### Habitat

The Carolina pygmy sunfish inhabits slow-moving acidic waters of ponds, ditches and streams in the coastal plain. This species is generally associated with abundant aquatic vegetation and shallow water.

#### Status

NatureServe (2016) lists the species as imperiled in both North and South Carolina, the only two states where it occurs. It is listed as threatened at the State level in both states. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was petitioned to list the species in April 2010 and in September 2011, published a 90-day finding that listing may be warranted. Although the Carolina pygmy

sunfish is often locally abundant and believed to be currently stable, its limited distribution is cause for concern.

#### Threats

The isolation of this species makes it extremely vulnerable to development, pollution and habitat alterations. Urbanization has been associated with local extirpation events. Some populations may be at risk of over-harvesting by private aquarists. Recent droughts have severely affected the populations in North Carolina.

#### Management/Protection Needs

Conservation recommendations include: increased survey effort to better understand statewide distribution and population status; research to understand life history, habitat requirements, and genetics; identification and protection of critical habitats; encouragement of responsible land stewardship practices; responsible land-use planning; and education and outreach.

#### References

Center for Biological Diversity - Southeast Aquatic Species Petition, April 2010.

NatureServe. 2015. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.1. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://explorer.natureserve.org>. (Accessed: June 9, 2016).

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources—State Wildlife Action Plan: 2010-2015.

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