

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Reviewing the Status of Our Rarest Plants and Animals

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

The Appalachian elktoe is an endangered freshwater mussel found in a handful of Western North Carolina Rivers, and in a sliver of the Nolichucky River in East Tennessee. For years the plight of the elktoe looked to be improving. The Cheoah River population was expanding thanks to the return of water previously piped overland to a power generating station. It was expanding upstream in the South Toe River, and down the Little River to the French Broad in Transylvania County.

Unfortunately, as these successes played out, the mussel suffered elsewhere. Mussels in Yancey County's Cane River died off around the time a wastewater treatment plant on the river failed. Scientists still don't know why elktoes in the Little Tennessee River have experienced a dramatic die-off in recent years.

When a plant or animal is on the Federal endangered species list, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists routinely review the latest information on it to pick up on population trends, changes in habitat, and the waxing or waning of threats. Ultimately, this information guides future conservation efforts, and tells biologists if a plant or animal is ready to come off the endangered species list.

This year, biologists will do these status reviews of 33 endangered and threatened plants and animals across the Southeast, including the Appalachian elktoe. Hopefully information compiled this year can help scientists chart a course for the recovery of the elktoe, helping it move past recent setbacks and eventually off the endangered species list.

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