

Rediscovering SNAILS

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Alabama's snails rank among the most unique and diverse in the world.

A total of 175 species of freshwater snails are found in the inland waters of Alabama. However, they have not responded well to modern habitat changes, especially to impoundment of our major rivers. Recently three species thought to be extinct in Alabama were found in the Cahaba and Coosa Rivers.



cobble elimia
(*Elimia vanuxemiana*)



teardrop elimia
(*Elimia lachryma*)

Snail Status

In a 2004 status summary of Alabama's wildlife, 42 snail species were reported extinct. In addition, 28 snail species were deemed to be of high or highest conservation concern. All 28 species are imperiled to the point of requiring protection, or they could become extinct.

With the exception of one species, all of the snails listed as extinct are endemic to Alabama, which means they are found nowhere else in the world, and most are confined to the Mobile Basin. Placing a species on a list of extinctions is not a matter taken lightly, but is of necessity an inexact science. Substantiating the continued existence of a species is straightforward, though often difficult, requiring only documentation of one or more live snails. However, proving that something is extinct is usually quite impossible, especially for species that live in riverine habitats that place limitations on their study. The majority of snail species that were deemed extinct were done so because no live individuals had been observed since the rivers were impounded. A few of the species were confined to small, isolated habitats, such as springs, that had been made unfit for snails by human alterations.

Though many snail species are obviously critically imperiled, the status rank assigned to some result from conclusions made by biologists based on habitat changes. Unlike some other groups of animals such as birds, mammals and fish, snails are often overlooked by the conservation and scientific communities. This lack of concern and effort on their behalf is the result of several factors. Some snails live in problematic or dangerous habitats that make their study difficult. Other species are very small, so they are often overlooked in general faunal surveys or ignored because there is a perception that they are difficult to study. Occasionally, these conclusions prove to be wrong and species once deemed extinct are found alive.

Rediscovery


Three species formerly believed to be extinct were rediscovered in Alabama during the summer of 2004. One of these, the Cahaba pebblesnail (*Clappia cahabensis*), was found by Dr. Stephanie Clark, who is carrying out postdoctoral work on snails at the University of Alabama. She is visiting this country from Australia.

The Cahaba pebblesnail is a small species, seldom exceeding four millimeters in length, and is believed to be found only in the Cahaba River System. It has been mostly overlooked since Alabama snails have been studied, dating back to the first half of the 1800s. The Cahaba pebblesnail was not even formally named by scientists until 1965.

The two other rediscovered species were found in the Coosa River below Logan Martin Dam by personnel of the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division and the Geological Survey of Alabama. These are the teardrop elimia (*Elimia lachryma*) and cobble elimia (*Elimia vanuxemiana*), which historically occurred in shoals of the Coosa River. However, when dams were built on the river the shoals were destroyed. This, along with the fact that the snails had not been collected for at least 50 years, resulted in their inclusion on the list of extinct species.

The area where teardrop elimia and cobble elimia were found is about 20 feet deep with very swift water. It is difficult to collect snails from such habitat because visibility is usually two feet or less. Therefore, the habitat had not been sufficiently surveyed since the dams were built during the first half of the 1900s.

Conclusion

Other snail species may await rediscovery. The listing of certain snails as endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has brought attention to the plight of snails in general. As study and conservation actions for those species get underway, many other species benefit. One benefit may be the rediscovery of additional species once thought extinct. 

For More Information

To learn more about snails and mussels in Alabama, visit the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Web site at www.outdooralabama.com.