



About the only thing that stands out about the watercress darter is its color, but the tiny fish is rare and endangered. Because of that a pond where it swims near Bessemer has become a National Wildlife Refuge.

James Kennedy/2A

Rare cress darter's Bessemer pond declared a national wildlife refuge

By James H. Kennedy
News staff writer

Nothing really stands out about the watercress darter, except perhaps its color — shades of bright reds, blues, blue-greens and yellows.

You can't eat the fish, because it seldom gets more than 1½ inches long. Mainly, it's, well... just there, perched on the roots and limbs of watercress plants, surviving on bugs and snails.

Survival is what makes the tiny fish different.

The watercress darter is one of Alabama's rarest fish and was the first one to be declared a rare and endangered species by the U.S. Department of Interior.

It has been found only in three small, spring-fed ponds — two near Bessemer and another on the Alabama Youth Services Roebuck Campus. A recent check of one of the Bessemer ponds, however, revealed no signs of the darter, meaning it now could exist in only two ponds.

ESTIMATES PLACE the total number of watercress darter left at about 1,000.

In an effort to make sure the fish

doesn't become extinct, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has declared one of the ponds near Bessemer, and seven acres surrounding it, the Watercress Darter National Wildlife Refuge, a satellite of the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in North Alabama.

Heavy machinery has gouged out a bigger and better pond adjacent to the old one to give the darter more room to expand and flourish.

"Some people ask me why we try to save something so insignificant," said Dr. Mike Howell, a Samford University biology professor who, as a graduate student at University of Alabama, helped discover the watercress darter in the mid-1960s.

"But they aren't insignificant. God made them and put them on earth, and mankind should not be responsible for making them extinct. A good many fish have become extinct the last 100 years — 30 to 40 species — across the U.S., greatly due to urban sprawl and activity by man.

"We never know what value some plants or animals may be in the future," added Howell, an ichthyologist whose efforts are largely responsible

for the watercress darter's endangered-species status.

THE WILDLIFE REFUGE was established at a total cost of \$38,418, of which \$36,150 went for purchase of the land and \$2,268 for building the new pond, said Fred Bagley of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The watercress darter — named for its closeness to the watercress plant — is but one of several fish species in Alabama discovered for the first time in the past 10-15 years, said Howell.

Some of the others, he said, are the pygmy sculpin, the blind cave fish and the pygmy sunfish.

The sculpin, found in a cold-water spring near Anniston, is a chunky bottom fish that gets only about 2 inches long.

Found in a spring in the Tennessee Valley area, the pygmy sunfish gets only about a half inch long and resembles the sunfish.

The blind cave fish, also very small, was found in a cave in Northwest Alabama.

"There have been several more minnows and darters found in the state in recent years," Howell said.

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