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Professor reveals darter reserve

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Scientists say Roebuck Springs had the largest population of watercress darters before the endangered species' pond was mostly drained last week by Birmingham workers acting without a permit.

But across town in Pinson, a pond is teeming with darters placed there as a little-known reserve population more than two decades ago.

That pond is not normally listed in the darters' tally. The fish are known to live in four other locations, including Roebuck Springs.

"We do a lot of things that we don't advertise," said Mike Howell, a biology professor who led the watercress darter recovery team when the fish were planted in Pinson.

The fish were placed in the Pinson pond about 1986 in case of just the sort of event that took place a week ago, when Birmingham workers breached a dam and drained the pond at Roebuck-Hawkins Park that held the endangered fish.

An investigation of that event is incomplete. Thursday, Birmingham workers began the slow process of restoring the Roebuck Springs pond for the endangered watercress darters.

Howell, now retired, discovered the brightly colored fish in 1964, while he was still a graduate student.

By the time he became a professor at Samford University in 1966, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asked him to serve as the lead biologist on the recovery team for the darter.

During the rest of his career, Howell spent summers and extra project time studying the fish and discovering a total of four naturally occurring populations.

One of them became the nation's smallest National Wildlife Refuge, the 24-acre refuge that protects the Thomas Spring pond in Bessemer.

Howell said the Fish and Wildlife Service suggested placing the fish in a pond at Penny Springs in Pinson to create a reservoir of genetic material.

Those fish may now be the largest watercress darter population, Howell said. "They're doing quite well."

He said he does not believe they will be needed to restock the Roebuck Springs pond, though.

No one knows the genetic cellar for a fish species, the point at which there are so few that they will become inbred and genetically defective, Howell said. But the fish has survived past leaks in the pond and other problems, Howell said.

"I do think what we've got right now is a vestige, and if we don't take care of these, they will be gone forever," he said.

A team of volunteers, some college professors and others from nonprofit groups, is monitoring the water quality and the general well-being of the watercress darters at all their Jefferson County locations.

Dick Mills for two years has been collecting trash and working on other problems at the Watercress Darter National Wildlife Refuge. He volunteers for the National Audubon Society since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can't afford staff.

"It's a beautiful little fish, and it's interesting in that it has adapted quite specifically to this habitat," Mills said.

"So far as we know, it has been found only in cool spring situations and only here in Jefferson County," he said. "For that reason, we ought to be proud of it."

Historical descriptions of Jefferson County suggest that most of Birmingham's creeks would have been suitable for the brilliantly red, orange and blue darter, Howell said. But eventually roads were paved, shade trees were cut down and development polluted Village, Valley, Five Mile and other creeks.

Only a few populations are left, and Jefferson County would be the poorer if they were gone, Mills said.

"In Alabama we're blessed with a lot of wetland areas, more aquatic life forms than any other state," he said.

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