

Blackbanded Sunfish: Protecting One of Maryland's Rarest Fishes

Once known from swampy streams and millponds within the Delaware, Choptank, Nanticoke, Wicomico, and Pocomoke river basins on the Delmarva Peninsula, the Blackbanded Sunfish has declined over the past 50 years and is now exceedingly rare in Maryland and Delaware. The species can still be found in portions of the Delaware River drainage, but only six small populations remain in drainages to the Chesapeake Bay; all located in the Nanticoke river basin. The status of this species in Maryland was elevated to Endangered in 2007. It is proposed for state endangered listing in Delaware.

Causes for the decline...

- *Habitat Loss*

Acidic swamps and slow-water habitats favored by this species have declined through a combination of forest clearing, loss of beavers, stream channelization, and liming of farm fields.

- *Introduced Species*

The widespread introduction of non-native fishes such as largemouth bass, bluegill, and black crappie have increased predation and competition pressures on the remaining Blackbanded Sunfish populations.

- *Aquarium Pet Trade*

Blackbanded Sunfish is also a popular aquarium fish and is often collected from the wild for the aquarium pet trade. Illegal collecting has likely hastened the decline of this species over the past 50 years.

Working to reverse the trend...

In response to the regional decline of this species, biologists from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) Maryland Biological Stream Survey, MDNR Fisheries Service, Natural Heritage Program, Frostburg State University, and the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife initiated an interstate conservation action strategy in January 2008. The goal of the strategy is to protect Blackbanded Sunfish in Maryland and Delaware by developing and implementing specific conservation actions necessary to protect all populations. Although the strategy is still under development, conservation actions are underway. Biologists are working with local municipalities to minimize threats to the remaining populations and to protect their critical habitat.



Photo by: Luke Roberson

Blackbanded Sunfish rarely reaches a length beyond two and a half inches. Its appearance is so striking that it is one of only a few North American fishes that are sought by amateur aquarists and are actively cultured as part of the pet trade.



Blackbanded Sunfish was historically known from many swamps, streams, and millponds in Maryland and Delaware. This species has declined dramatically in the region over the past 50 years.



Many streams on Delmarva Peninsula are channelized to drain land for agriculture. Stream channelization, along with other forms of habitat loss have reduced Blackbanded Sunfish populations in the region.

