

## State Wildlife Grants: Where would states be without them?

by Gregg Elliott & Bill Reeves

State Wildlife Grants are arguably one of the most obscure, but also one of the most important programs aimed at “keeping common species common.” The State & Tribal Wildlife Grants Program, commonly referred to as SWG (pronounced swig), was established by Congress in 2000. To receive funds, each state and territory is required to develop a “Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy,” popularly known as a State Wildlife Action Plan or [SWAP](#).

“The purpose of the program is to keep species off the federal endangered species list, a direct mandate from Congress in 2000,” says Bill Reeves, former Chief of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency’s Biodiversity Division. “That’s what we have been trying to do, although funding has been insufficient to meet the need,” Reeves continues. “SWG work in Tennessee has focused primarily on collecting information about species and directly restoring populations.” (See the [Section 6 article](#) for how field surveys help target conservation on the species that need it most.) Examples of population restoration include the [reintroduction of alligator snapping turtles](#) into the rivers of west Tennessee and the mussel propagation program at the [TWRA-TVA Cumberland River Aquatic Center](#).

### SWG grants critical for nongame fish and aquatic species conservation

The Tennessee-Cumberland River Basin tops the list of [freshwater fish and mussel biodiversity hotspots](#) in the world, so aquatic species conservation is a big deal in Tennessee.

[Conservation Fisheries](#) is a nonprofit organization that has also made good use of SWG dollars by propagating rare species of nongame fish in the



southeastern U.S. “They help to prevent listings by restoring populations that have disappeared in certain streams, restocking little shiners and darters just like a sportfish program,” explains Reeves. Conservation Fisheries grows fish to juvenile size (about 1 to 2 inches) and releases them. The native fish species that are more difficult to propagate require further research.

These tiny species of fish only have a lifespan of about 3 years. That’s why they tend to disappear: 3 years of drought can wipe out a lot of species in a stream that runs dry. The program can also bring back a stream when negative water quality impacts are

eliminated, such as when industries move, taking their discharges with them, or when a significant number of farmers within a watershed adopt practices that greatly reduce erosion and runoff.

SWG funding has also been used in Tennessee to help identify streams to be rehabilitated and to document stream and species population recovery. For example, the [Elk River watershed](#) is a target for U.S. Dept. of Agriculture/Natural Resources Conservation Service incentives that

help landowners plant riparian buffers to filter runoff and increase in-stream water quality. In conjunction with SWG dollars for specific projects, TWRA's Wildlife program is supporting four staff who work with farmers to develop habitat plans and best management practices for their farms.

The State Wildlife Grant program has been key to dam removal projects in Tennessee, such as the [Brown's Mill dam removal](#). Currently, SWG funds also support fieldwork to identify and prioritize culverts that need lowering (a tiny culvert lip can be an insurmountable leap for a small fish).

### **Downward trends for dollars not species**

Overall, the peak year for Tennessee State Wildlife Grant funding was 2010. Since then, appropriations have been going down. The program, which had \$1.3 million in 2010 has now plateaued out at about \$860,000 annually in Tennessee.

Declining budgets for conservation across the country have led to the development of the new Alliance for America's Fish and Wildlife, which seeks to "secure funding for much needed conservation of our most precious natural resources, our fish and wildlife." As this initiative states so pointedly, "Fish and wildlife isn't an 'option.'" The goal of the Alliance is to create a "modern funding system to prevent thousands of fish and wildlife species from reaching the Endangered Species list."

"This is an incredibly important initiative," says Reeves. "When you look at the level of funding for all federal agencies working in land, water and species conservation, it constitutes less than 5% of the total federal budget. By comparison the Department of Defense accounts for 50% or more. We need to secure funding for fish and wildlife now to protect America's quality of life and the environment for future generations."



Bluemask Darter (p.1) and Blackside Dace (above), just two of the many small and colorful species of freshwater fish that are benefited by State Wildlife Grants. Photos courtesy of Conservation Fisheries.