U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Welaka

National Fish Hatchery

The Welaka National Fish Hatchery and Aquarium is one of more than 66 units in the National Fish Hatchery System administered by the U,S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Service also manages over 500 national wildlife refuges and major fish and wildlife research laboratories across the country. As the Nation's primary steward of fish and wildlife resources, the Service provides leadership in habitat and wetlands protection; fish and wildlife research and technical assistance; and in the conservation and protection of migratory birds, anadromous fishes, certain marine mammals, and threatened and endangered species.

Woodstork

Welaka National Fish Hatchery

Welcome and Enjoy Your Visit

Over a century ago, it was recognized that conservation measures were necessary to maintain good fishing in our public waters. Fishing has probably always been America's leading form of outdoor recreation. The Welaka National Fish Hatchery is endeavoring to preserve this tradition for present as well as future generations of Americans.

Largemouth bass

What we do

The Welaka National Fish Hatchery was built in 1926 and originally operated by the State of Florida. In 1938 the hatchery was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Ponds are operated at two locations. Those ponds at headquarters, near the aquarium, are called the Welaka Unit, and a second group of ponds about three miles south of headquarters is called the Beecher Unit. The Beecher Unit is named for the spring that serves as the water supply. Beecher Spring has a flow of 4,000 gallons per minute at a constant temperature of 72˚ Fahrenheit. Water for the Welaka Unit comes from a well 423 feet deep and from the St. Johns River.

Ibis, woodstocks and herons

Warmwater Hatchery

Welaka is a warmwater hatchery. That is, the species of fish raised here do best in summer water temperatures that reach 75˚ to 85˚. In its 41 ponds, the facility raises between 4 1/2 to 5 million fish annually. Species vital to the fishery resources of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and the coastal United States are raised here and stocked in cooperation with the various State game and fish agencies.

cover illustration: Duane Raver

Flocks of birds can be seen from Observation Tower.

What can you do?
Please visit our aquarium at the Welaka Unit.

Fish raised at the hatchery as well as other native species of fish, amphibians and reptiles are on display. Information and brochures pertaining to the hatchery and its operation are also available at this location.

Occasionally you may see personnel feeding the fish or possibly transferring or harvesting a production pond. You are welcome to walk around the pond areas, but please use caution as the ponds are deep, and we want only fish in the water, please.

Observation Tower
Located at the Beecher Unit for your use and convenience is an observation tower interpretive information and a 3/4 mile nature trail. Many species of birds can be observed in this area.

Abundant Wildlife
Squirrels, raccoons, opossums, rabbits, otter, deer, turkey and an abundant variety of birds can be seen throughout the year around the hatchery. The scenic St. Johns River offers the sportsman an opportunity to fish in the "Bass Capital of the World," and is a stop on the Great Florida Birding Trail.

Observation Tower

Aquarium

Group Tours
Special group tours of the hatchery can be arranged with the Hatchery Manager.

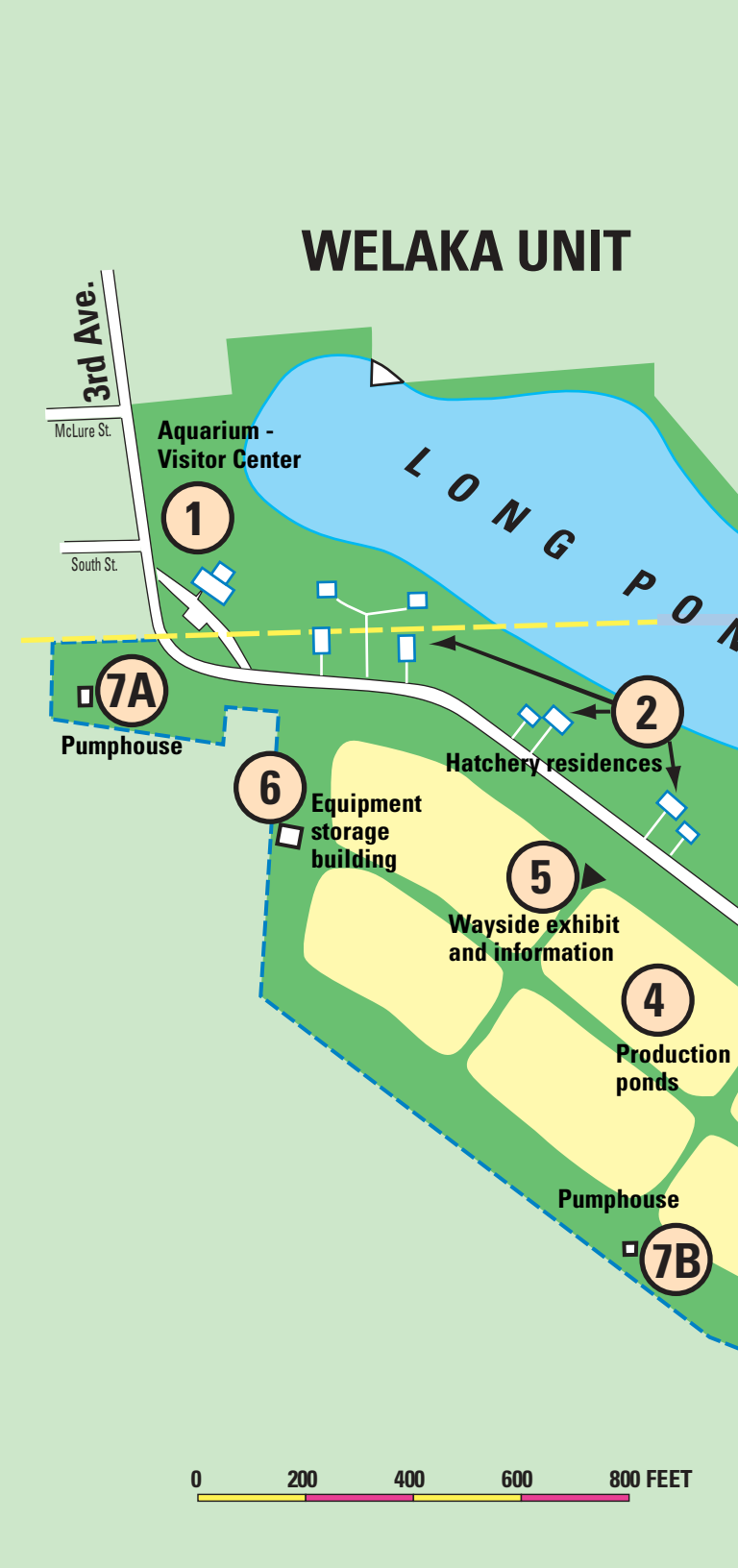
Welaka wildlife

1. Aquarium - Visitor Center
Native species of fish, amphibians and reptiles are presented for the public's viewing pleasure. We invite you to also see the bald eagle display and to read informational signs and brochures pertaining to the operation of the hatchery. Visiting hours are from 8:00 am - 3:00 pm daily. Restrooms are provided for your convenience.

2. Hatchery Residences
Authorized personnel only.

3. Office - Garage Complex
The headquarters for the hatchery are open from 7:00 am - 3.30 pm Monday through Friday. A staff member is usually available to answer any questions concerning

3/4 mile nature trail


WELAKA UNIT
3rd Ave.
McLure St.
South St.
Aquarium -
Visitor Center
1
LONG POND
7A
Pumphouse
2
Hatchery residences
6
Equipment
storage
building
5
Wayside exhibit
and information
4
Production
ponds
Pumphouse
7B
0
200
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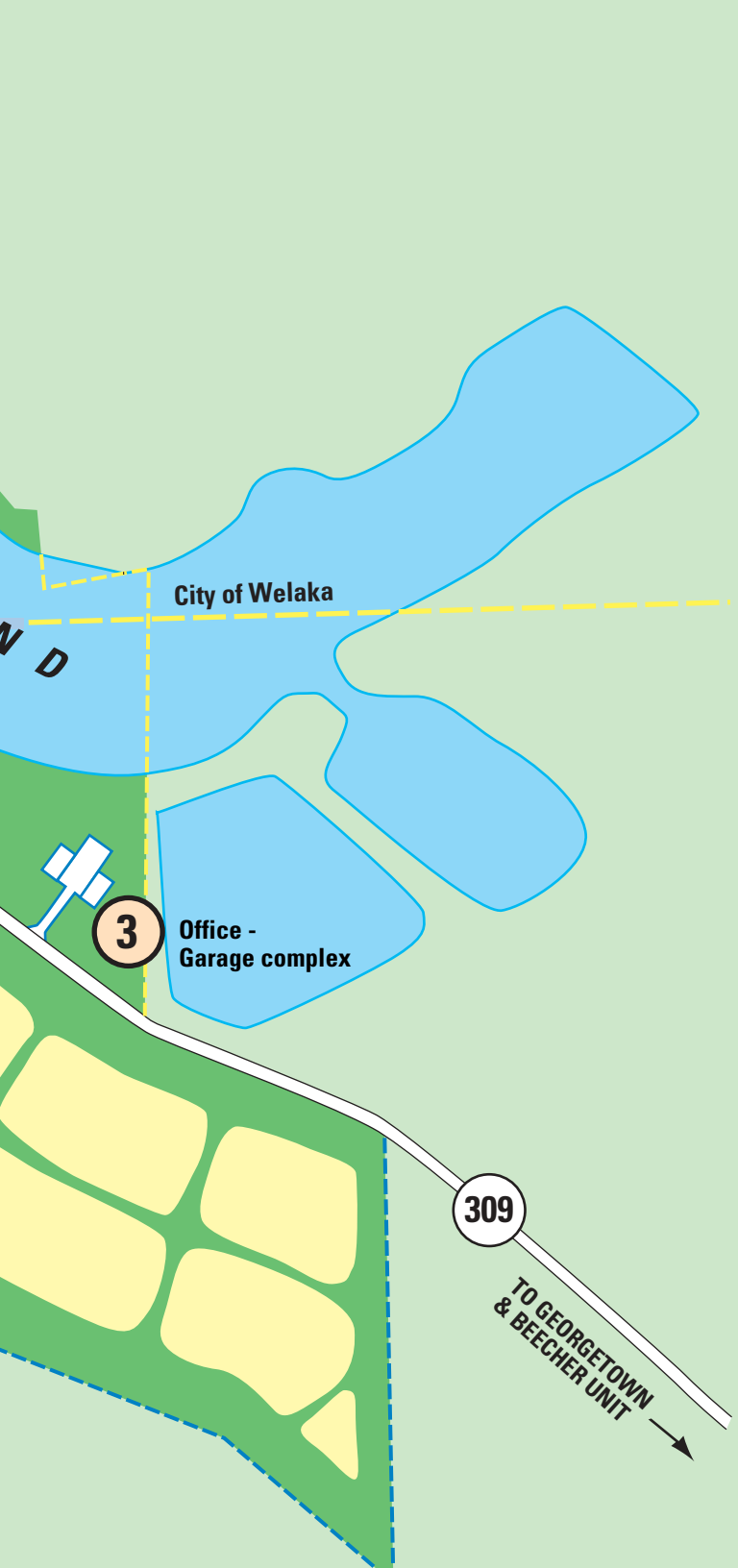
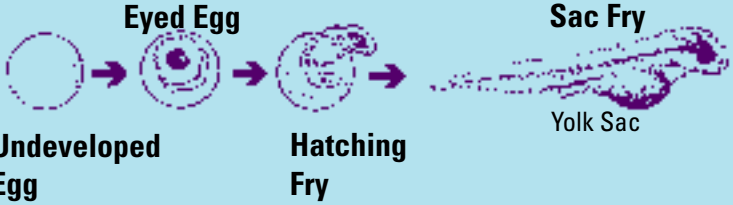

City of Welaka
N D
3
Office -
Garage complex
309
TO GEORGETOWN
& BEECHER UNIT

Egg Development



the hatchery. This complex provides sheltered parking for hatchery motor vehicles and equipment.

4. Production Ponds
Fish production takes place in these eastern ponds during the spring and summer months. Ponds are left empty between crops to allow for drying out. Following the production season, ponds are frequently filled to inhibit the growth of rooted vegetation.

5. Wayside Exhibit and Information

6. Equipment Storage Building
Hatchery maintenance supplies and equipment are stored in this structure.

7A. Pumphouse
This deep well is used to supply domestic water to the aquarium, office and hatchery residences at the Welaka Unit.

7B. Pumphouse
This deep well is used as an emergency backup to the primary pump at the river. The eight ponds at the Welaka Unit are filled with water pumped from the St. Johns River.

Populations Declining!!
Because of a variety of reasons, many species of fish have shown a marked decline in population over the past 20-30 years. Sport and commercial fishermen alike are

Striped Bass

Striped bass broodfish

experiencing dwindling catches of striped bass along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts. Annual catches in the 7,000 metric ton range (25-30 million dollars) dropped less than 2,000 metric tons (4-5 million dollars) signaling a major problem within the striped bass fishery. While all the reasons for this decline are not entirely known, it is agreed that a combination including loss of habitat, construction of dams, dredging of rivers, overfishing and various forms of pollution are contributing and interwoven factors.

Along with striped bass, other species such as shad, sturgeon, and red drum are also experiencing dwindling populations. These are anadromous or estuarine species, meaning they spend their lives along our coast in saltwater or in the case of anadromous fish, return once a year to fresh water to spawn.

Gulf sturgeon

Incubating striped bass eggs

Because their ranges transcend local, state, and in some cases, national boundaries, concern for their well-being is a major activity for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Conservation measures are necessary in order to maintain healthy populations of these fish in our public waters. National fish hatcheries such as Welaka are helping to achieve these objectives by enhancing and restoring native populations for all to enjoy.

Raising Striped Bass

To elaborate on one species, the Welaka National Fish Hatchery and Aquarium is part of a major national emphasis on restoring striped bass (also called rockfish.)

Adult stripers, captured from our rivers, provide the eggs for the hatchery program. Once the eggs and milt (sperm) are taken, the adults are returned to their native waters. There is an excellent possibility that, in the future, adult stripers can be reared to maturity in hatchery ponds and then maintained as domestic broodstock (parent fish.) This would provide a strong backup in tandem with obtaining eggs from captured wild adult stripers.

The fertilized eggs are incubated, and the larval fry that hatch from the eggs are cultured artificially. Newborn fish have their own food supply in an attached yolk sac. As this source is absorbed, they are fed a diet of brine shrimp.

Striped bass ready for stocking

Striped bass

At this stage, tiny young stripers are particularly vulnerable to pollution, starvation and predators. In the wild, untold numbers of young fish are lost during this period. However, on the hatchery, young stripers are protected and experience the best possible conditions for survival.

After a period of time the young fish grow, feeding on microscopic organisms, and reach desired stocking sizes. They are now past the point of greatest vulnerability and can be stocked into our rivers and steams.

After 25 to 40 days, these fish grow to an average length of two inches and some are stocked at this size. Others are held and feed scientifically formulated diets to attain maximum growth. By the fall, these fish have reached a size of four to six inches and are ready for stocking. These larger fish are stocked in special areas of selected river systems and tributaries from which they originated. Fishery managers expect that these supplemental stockings will help restore depleted striped bass populations. A number of fish are tagged, enabling biologists to evaluate the success of the stocking programs.

All photos USFWS

We enjoyed having you visit the hatchery and invite you to return often. Your awareness of our resource and its need is the basic foundation for support of healthy fish and wildlife populations.

Welaka
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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1 800/344 WILD

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For Additional Information Contact:
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386/467 2374
Hatchery Hours: 7:00 am - 3:30 pm daily
Aquarium Hours: 8:00 am - 3:00 pm daily