

by Tyler Sykes

Landowners are Recognized for Conservation Work



Jewell Murphy accepts a framed print of the Barrens topminnow in appreciation for conserving the fish on her property.

Photo by Tyler Sykes

At a dinner held in April 2002, 20 private landowners from the Morrison-Viola area of middle Tennessee were recognized by the Barrens Topminnow Working Group for their efforts to restore and protect habitat for this extremely rare fish.

The Barrens topminnow (*Fundulus julisia*), a small fish that we believe occurred historically in spring habitats throughout a

portion of south-central Tennessee, was until recently known to survive at only two locations in the wild, both on private land in Coffee County, Tennessee. The decline of this species in the wild may be reversing, however, thanks to the interest and efforts of private landowners in the area.

The Barrens topminnow lives in springs and spring runs that provide cool, clear waters for the fish to feed and reproduce. These areas were once probably widespread, but conversion to farm ponds, overuse by livestock, drought, and other factors have resulted in the loss of this habitat. As a result, numbers of Barrens topminnows have declined drastically.

In an effort to reverse this trend, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency; The Nature Conservancy; Tennessee Valley Authority; Tennessee Aquarium; Conservation Fisheries, Inc.; Tennessee Technological University; and Southeast Missouri State

University, formed the Barrens Topminnow Working Group. The group seeks to address the topminnow's decline through the protection of the two remaining wild populations, restoration of spring habitat, captive propagation, and restocking of Barrens topminnows throughout the species' historical range. Both of the current and all known historic locations for this fish are on private property. As a result, the willingness of local landowners to work with the group is the key to the success of this effort.

The group is working with willing private landowners to protect existing springs and restore suitable habitat through the use of improved management practices on their property. These practices have included the installation of livestock-exclusion fencing around the springs and associated spring runs; construction of hardened feeding areas, stream access, and crossings to reduce erosion in these areas; and installation of watering tanks for cattle. These practices not only improve water quality for aquatic species like the topminnow, but also for local citizens.

The dinner last April was organized to recognize those landowners who have allowed for the rehabilitation and/or protection of suitable habitat and who,

in some cases (six to be exact), have allowed the stocking of this rare fish on their property. These landowners were individually recognized by Brad Bingham, the Service's representative on the Barrens Topminnow Working Group. Other members of the group then presented the landowners with various tokens of appreciation, including passes to the Tennessee Aquarium and a framed print of the Barrens topminnow by Joe Tomellari, a renowned fish illustrator.

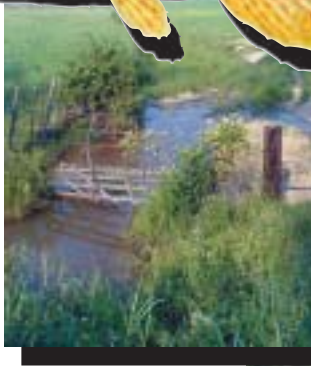


Barrens topminnow illustration © Joseph Tomelleri

Gary Moore of the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservationist District for Grundy and Coffee counties, was also recognized by the group for his tireless efforts to work with the landowners in these counties to protect and restore habitat for the topminnow. The entire project would not have been as successful without the trust and respect he has garnered from local landowners. In appreciation, the working group presented Mr. Moore a plaque for his continuing efforts.

In addition to the guests of honor and their families, the dinner was well attended by members of the working group, state agency personnel, and representatives from the offices of Congressmen Bart Gordon and Van Hilleary. All enjoyed a meal catered by Prater's Barbeque and musical entertainment provided by the bluegrass and gospel group, the Buck Mountain Boys.

We hope that more events such as this can be held in the future to recognize other landowners who participate in the project as efforts to conserve this rare fish and its habitat continue.



At left, Barrens topminnow habitat on private land.

Above top left photo by Pat Rakes/Conservation Fisheries, Inc. Above and left photos by Brad Bingham/USFWS

At right, scenes from the landowner appreciation dinner: landowners Tommy Murphy, Jewell Murphy, and Ida Ramsey; Brad Bingham addresses the group; and the Buck Mountain Boys provide musical entertainment.

Photos by Tyler Sykes

