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Researchers probe death of Shiawassee mussels

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SPAULDING TOWNSHIP, Mich.

Biologists scouring the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge for clues about the Saginaw Bay watershed's freshwater mussels recently found a startling sight -- thousands of dead mussels with no sign of what killed them.

The discovery was made during a weeklong survey last month of the mussel population in the watershed, which drains into Lake Huron. The research by federal fish and wildlife biologists sought to unlock some of the mysteries of the area's mussels.

"Right now what we know (about) the refuge's mussel population is pretty much a total blank slate," Refuge Manager Steve Kahl told The Flint Journal for a story Sunday.

The 9,501-acre refuge is in Saginaw County's Spaulding and James townships, just southwest of Saginaw and about 80 miles north-northwest of Detroit. It was set up mainly as a stopover place for migratory birds.

What killed the thousands of threeridge mussels discovered by the team may never be known, Kahl said.

The team made other discoveries as well, finding 21 live species of mussel, up from five known before the expedition.

North America was historically home to over 300 species of native clams, but today, 43 percent of those species are in danger of extinction.

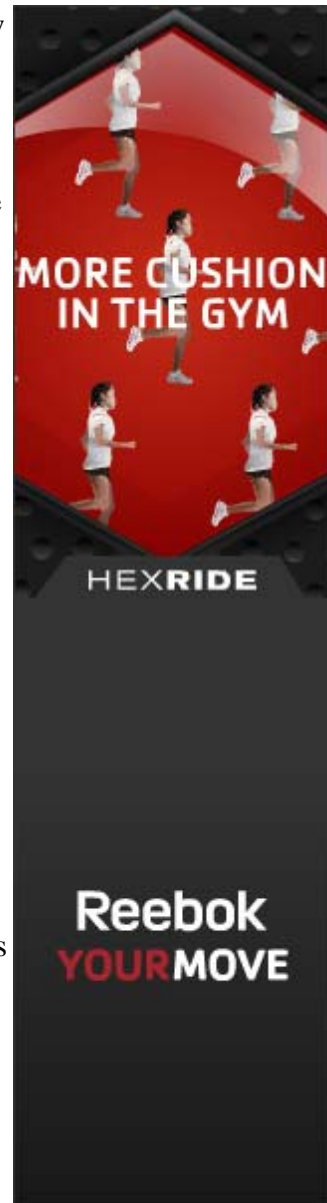
Freshwater mussels filter water and are a good way to measure changes in water quality.

"Mussels tend to be an unglamorous, unrecognized group. But who's to say which species are the most important to save? They all have their different roles in the ecosystem," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife fisheries biologist Jim Boase.

On the Net:

Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge: <http://www.fws.gov/Midwest/shiawassee>

Information from: The Flint Journal, <http://www.mlive.com/flintjournal>



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