

by Gary E. Peeples

# Dick Biggins, Recovery Hero



**Above and opposite page on top:**  
**Dick Biggins was always ready to**  
**plunge in when it came to restoring**  
**aquatic species of the southeast.**

Photo © Lynda Richardson

You wouldn't expect one of the Service's most accomplished biologists to readily share embarrassing stories about himself. Retired Fish and Mollusk Recovery Coordinator Dick Biggins is responsible for getting 29 rare species on the threatened and endangered list, and he enjoys talking about what's been accomplished for those species, but he'll just as easily and enthusiastically tell you about the time he had poison ivy on his posterior.

It's that kind of self-effacing humor that helped Dick form the partnerships and personal relationships that elevated him to "godfather" status with a hard-working cadre of aquatic biologists who work in the Tennessee and Cumberland River basins, the most aquatically diverse region in the United States.

In addition to getting 29 species listed, Dick has authored, coauthored, or served as project officer for 42 recovery plans. These plans are guiding the path to recovery for a total of 46 species, an impressive accomplishment. For his work, he was awarded the Department of the Interior's Meritorious Service Award, named a Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Champion, and presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Freshwater Mollusk Conservation Society. Not bad for a man who chose his graduate school partly because its curriculum didn't require a foreign language.

A "biocrat" is how Dick describes himself, having bridged the gap between biology and bureaucracy. He downplays his biological knowledge, deferring technical questions to others, saying that his talent lies in providing the vision—the big picture—and then bringing together teams of partners to pull it off.

"I saw that the real needs for aquatic species were habitat restoration, research into life history and threats, reintroductions, and outreach," he says, explaining his vision.

Throughout his 22-year career with the Service, Dick surrounded himself with qualified people working together to accomplish those goals. Thanks in part to his work, scientists at Virginia Tech University are propagating rare mussels in captivity; researchers with Conservation Fisheries, Inc., are rearing various species of rare fish for reintroduction; and the Tennessee Aquarium has a display on freshwater mussels.

About his success, Biggins says, "Once you get some funding and have some success, you can get more funding and have more success, and then you get seats at more tables and spread your message."

A quiet corner in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the site of his biggest accomplishment: the reintroduction of not one, but four, listed fishes into Abrams Creek.<sup>1</sup> After 17 years, three of the four species are

<sup>1</sup>The four listed fish are the spotfin chub (*Cyprinella monacha*), yellowfin madtom (*Noturus flavipinnis*), smoky madtom (*Noturus baileyi*), and duskytail darter (*Etheostoma percnurum*).



Photo by Richard J. Neves

reproducing on their own in the wild, and the project has been expanded to the nearby Tellico River. That project involved the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Forest Service, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, and the nonprofit Conservation Fisheries, Inc. As if the reintroduction of four fish species weren't enough, Biggins helped lay the groundwork for the reintroduction of 16 mussels and one snail into

the Muscle Shoals section of the Tennessee River.

"We can't do it all through regulation; we have to use education," says Biggins, and he has been heavily involved in education efforts. Over the years, he helped find financing a video and poster series about aquatic species, produced by Virginia Tech; photographed numerous aquatic species of the Southeast; put together slide shows about the Endangered Species Program; and developed a children's book entitled *Russell The Mussel*, just to name a few of his outreach projects. *(Editor's note: We're also very grateful for the many fine articles and photographs he has contributed over the years to the Endangered Species Bulletin.)*

Dick began his career as a sport fishery biologist with the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, but game fish weren't that interesting to him. He tried working for the State of Utah on Lake Powell, but being 150 miles from a grocery store was more than his family could bear. Then, a contact he met at a party led to his first Fish and Wildlife Service job, a biologist in the Northeast Regional Office working on interagency consultations for activities affecting listed species.

In the 1970s while the snail darter (*Percina tanasi*) was focusing national

attention on the Tellico Dam on the Little Tennessee River, another dam project was threatening two listed mussels slightly to the west on the Duck River. One of the alternatives to jeopardy was to reintroduce one of the mussels into a tributary and restore habitat over a broad geographic range, including part of southwestern Virginia, which meant that the Service's Northeast Region would be involved. Dick Biggins was assigned to the project. It was then that he became acquainted with the Service's Asheville, North Carolina, Field Office and some of the regional players involved with imperiled aquatic species.

Dick eventually joined the Asheville Office as a listing biologist and later became the Fish and Mollusk Recovery Coordinator for the Tennessee and Cumberland River basins, a position he held until retirement. He was tempted once to leave Asheville to become the Endangered Species Coordinator for the Service's Southwest Region, but his kids didn't want to move to Albuquerque. He doesn't regret staying in the Southeast.

"We need good people to stay in the field, but we don't need people to stagnate," he says, warning about losing initiative and creativity. "But if you have a good thing going, stay where you are."

After a career in the country's most aquatically diverse area, what is Dick's favorite river? The Clinch River at Kyle's Ford. With characteristic enthusiasm, he says, "It's like a freshwater coral reef with all the fishes and mussels and snails." Sounds like a recovery hero in his element.

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**Dick Biggins (left) and Steve Ahlstedt sort mussel samples.**

Photo by Paul Johnson