

Biologists say eel is back in upper Susquehanna

- By Erin Jerome Staff Writer

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Contributed A young American eel found by SUNY Oneonta researchers in the Susquehanna River is pictured in this July photo.

Student researchers at the SUNY Oneonta Biological Field Station in Cooperstown made a surprising discovery this summer when they found a young American eel in a habitat where the species has not been observed in decades.

Local high school graduate interns Alexa Platt and Lauren Saggese had been surveying species in the Susquehanna River near the base of Cooperstown Dam at Otsego Lake when they discovered the 12-inch eel with their supervisor, Oneonta biology professor Daniel Stich.

American eels were reduced below detection during the late 20th century, which is largely attributed to the construction of dams. The find represents the farthest-upstream record of the fish in the system in nearly 50 years, Stich said.

Summer research this year cataloged species in the river and streams, including the invasive rusty crayfish, and is part of a long-term project to reintroduce and monitor the eel population in the area. Pennsylvania has begun reintroducing eels to the upper Susquehanna, and Stich anticipates that thousands will be stocked locally as early as this fall or next spring.

“We’re sort of speeding along the recovery process,” he said of the efforts that include the state Department of Environmental Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, SUNY Cobleskill, Hartwick College and SUNY Oneonta.

Stich explained that the population of American eels can be challenging to study because of their long life spans and complicated mating patterns in the Sargasso Sea. Locally, the eels are important to the reproductive lifestyle of a native mussel, and they can moderate the population of the invasive rusty crayfish.

Another exciting research moment was locating a single native crayfish, which Saggese had been studying, Stich said.

The success of the eel re-introductions will require long-term study, but the health of the species will require some access to habitats in northern river systems, Stich said.

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