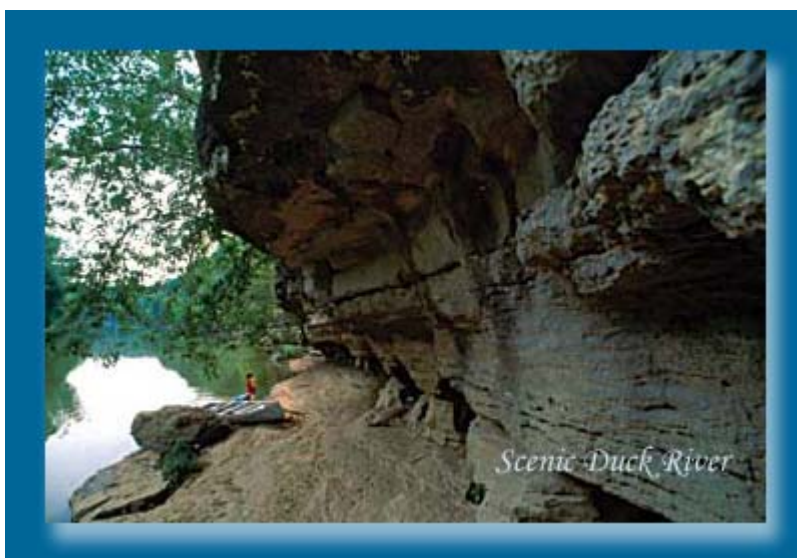
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The Duck River

Tennessee's Newest Designated State Scenic River

By Reggie Reeves

Only the second river named a State Scenic River since 1970, approximately 37 miles of the Duck River in Maury County received this designation, marking it as one of only 13 such rivers in Tennessee.

The Duck's scenic section, which begins at Iron Bridge Road near Columbia and extends upstream to the Maury and Marshall County line, features over 500 documented species including aquatic plants, fish and invertebrates. The river contains 39 mussel and 84 fish species; more species of fish than in all of Europe.

Steeped in a rich cultural and natural heritage, the Duck River is a deserving addition to the Tennessee State Scenic Rivers System. Legislation establishing this section of the Duck River as a Class II State Scenic River was signed into law by Governor Don Sundquist on May 15, 2001 (*The Tennessee Conservationist*, September/October, 2001).

Approximately 270 miles in length, the Duck is the longest river contained entirely within Tennessee's borders. Other than one impoundment not far from its headwaters -- Normandy Dam and Reservoir completed in the mid-1970s near Tullahoma -- this lazy, meandering river is primarily free flowing. However, the Duck River was very nearly impounded again near Columbia. In 1973, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) began construction on the Columbia Dam and Reservoir project, located in Maury County just upstream of Columbia.

In 1977, the TVA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that completing the dam would jeopardize two endangered mussel species found in the Duck River. After extensive studies, TVA announced in 1995 that the controversial dam and reservoir project would not be completed due to environmental and financial issues. The nearly completed dam structure was later demolished, and in August 2001, TVA returned to the people of Tennessee 12,800 acres of land that had been destined to become the Columbia Dam and Reservoir (The Tennessee Conservationist, November/December 2001).

Today, the lands that were originally acquired to be flooded to create a reservoir are managed by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) as the Duck River Wildlife Management Area. Included within this area are six natural areas covering over 2,000 acres of ecologically significant lands collectively known as the Duck River Complex State Natural Area. Through it all runs the Duck State Scenic River. The Duck River Wildlife Management Area, the natural areas, the majority of the Duck State Scenic River and numerous rare plant and animal species, were very nearly lost but are now provided long-term protection.

Scenic and Recreational Significance

As the Duck River meanders its way across Middle Tennessee to the Tennessee River, it passes through some of the state's least populated counties and some of its most scenic rural and agricultural landscapes.

As an important source of food, water and transportation, the Duck River has been a major influence on the history of this region from the earliest habitation by native Americans, through the early settlers and pioneers, to today's 21st century inhabitants. The river and its surrounding landscape is rich with evidence of habitation from as far back as the Archaic period approximately 8,000 years ago. Reminders of early settlements, vast plantations, and Civil War battles can be found throughout the area.

From its origin in the Eastern Highland Rim, the Duck crosses the Central Basin and continues west across the Western Highland Rim before flowing into the Tennessee River.

The designated scenic section of the Duck River lies entirely within the Central Basin. As the river passes through the Eastern and Western Highland Rims, its banks are primarily dominated by steep to gentle slopes and dense forests. These forests are generally comprised of oak, hickory, maple and Tulip Poplar trees.

In the Middle Tennessee counties of the Central Basin, the river passes through a relatively flat to gently rolling terrain, with areas of shallow soils where the forests are often dominated by Eastern Red-cedar and oak trees associated with outcroppings of limestone cedar glades and dense shrubby thickets.

In areas along the river where there are rich soils and diverse forests, many species of common showy wildflowers and shrubs may be seen, such as trilliums, phlox, Cardinal Flower, Buttonbush, lobelia, and Foamflower.

The Duck River has a very gentle gradient along its journey across Middle Tennessee, with only occasional small rapids and riffles; however, its current can at times be swift.

In seasons of adequate rainfall, generally the winter and spring months, numerous small waterfalls may be seen cascading into the river from surrounding limestone bluffs.

Water flow in the river is usually good during this time, making for an enjoyable float. During the drier summer and fall months, flow is typically lower resulting in slower moving water, occasional very shallow areas, and numerous exposed gravel bars.

Biological Significance

Although the Duck River is one of the most biologically rich and diverse rivers in North America, many of its species are in trouble and in need of help.

The Duck River has already lost at least 35 species of mussels. In the designated scenic section of the river alone are at least 27 state and federally listed plant and animal species, including 13 listed plants; two listed mammals; five listed mussels; one listed salamander; and seven listed fish.

According to a 1998 publication by The Nature Conservancy entitled "Rivers of Life: Critical Watersheds for Protecting Freshwater Biological Diversity," the Upper Duck River watershed, including the designated scenic section, contains the second highest number (33) of at-risk fish and mussel species, as well as the second highest number (13) of federally endangered fish and mussel species in the nation.

Many of these are imperiled because of impact from past land uses. Today, improved agricultural practices, stronger environmental regulations, and better land use planning are contributing to improvements in the water quality of the Duck River and thereby improving the habitat for these species.

Designation as a state scenic river will contribute to a greater awareness, interest and focus on the Duck River, which will hopefully result in more help for these species and increased protection for their habitat.

One of many rare species that can be found in the Duck River is the federally and state endangered Birdwing Pearly Mussel. While a small number of this rare mussel can be found in the Clinch, Powell, Elk and Tennessee Rivers, the only place in the world it exists in any great numbers is in the Duck River.

Due to its declining numbers and increasing threats, the Birdwing Pearly Mussel was listed as endangered by the USFWS in 1976 and was included on a 1980 list of the "10 most endangered" species.

The Birdwing Pearly Mussel depends on a particular species of fish, the Banded Darter, to host its young. Therefore, the protection of the fish host is critical to the long-term survival of the mussel. To protect this and the many other species of mussels that inhabit the Duck River, the entire river has been designated as a mussel sanctuary by the TWRA, thereby prohibiting commercial harvesting of mussels or any disturbance to their habitat. This protection is in addition to that provided to the Duck River as a designated state scenic river.

Today state, federal and local government agencies are working cooperatively with individual landowners and conservation organizations like The Nature Conservancy and the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association to improve and protect the water quality of the Duck River. Public/private partnerships are emerging involving local school groups. These actions will help prevent other species, including mussels, from becoming endangered and possibly even extinct.

Another federally and state endangered species that makes its home in the Duck River is the Pygmy Madtom. This small, two-inch long black and white catfish is one of the most rare fishes in the U.S., and was listed by the USFWS as endangered in 1993. It is found only in the Duck and Clinch rivers and nowhere else in the world. This fish is also an indicator species for river conditions, as it is very sensitive to toxic chemicals and increased sedimentation.

With its designation as a state scenic river and mussel sanctuary, it is hoped that public attention and concern for the Duck River will ultimately lead to its long-term protection. The long-term survival of the tremendous biological diversity of the Duck State Scenic River, as well as the continued enjoyment of its scenic beauty and recreational opportunities is directly dependent on how its watershed, or the land surrounding it, is used.

How the watershed is used is entirely up to us. Individual private landowners play a significant role in controlling the majority of the land use along the Duck River, and landowners can take measures to ensure that they are doing their part to protect it. We can take steps to ensure that agricultural runoff and other pollutants, such as waste from septic tanks and runoff from lawn chemicals, do not enter the river. We can work to stabilize eroding banks, restore forested buffers, control access to the river by livestock, and make sure that discarded items and trash do not wind up in the river.

As we visit the Duck River to canoe, swim, fish, enjoy its peaceful tranquility, or to hunt, we must keep in mind that we are each stewards of this beautiful river. We live, work and play in its watershed. How we, as stewards, treat this resource will be the single most important factor in determining what condition we leave it in for our children. Clean water is critical to every form of life on earth, from mussels to humans. Let's all do our part to protect Duck State Scenic River and all of the other rivers and streams in Tennessee.

To find out more about the Duck State Scenic River and the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Program, contact the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation at 615-532-0431.

For additional information on the Duck River Wildlife Management Area, contact the TWRA at 931-840-4042.

For more information, visit the Web site: www.tdec.net/nh.

(Reggie Reeves is the director of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation's Division of Natural Heritage.)

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