

Lyndeborough property is as good as it gets for 'brookies'

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Biologists have determined brook trout to be indicators of ecosystem health and are continuing their campaign to get the word out. If "brookies" inhabit a stream, the odds are good that the waterway is in excellent condition. (Bea Lewis/Sunday News Correspondent)

LYNDEBOROUGH - A population of wild brook trout has been discovered in a Lyndeborough stream, and the prime habitat that supports them should be protected, a fisheries biologist told the New Hampshire Fish and Game Commission.

John Magee detailed during a Wednesday meeting of the Commission at Gunstock Recreational Area, that a 40.3-acre parcel of land encircling a prime stretch of Schataquog Brook is available and could be purchased using \$50,000 from the department's Fisheries Habitat Account.

"The stream is really important here. It is cold, clear and looks dramatically different from anything else in the watershed," Magee said.

The only native stream-dwelling trout species located in the eastern U.S., "brookies" require cold, clean water to survive and thrive. They are extremely sensitive to environmental changes and habitat alternations, and as a result are an important indicator species. Population decline can serve as an early warning sign of a reduction in the overall health of the of the aquatic ecosystem.

Located in the Piscataquog River watershed, the Lyndeborough Road property Magee is recommending the state acquire abuts conservation land. On June 23, the Piscataquog Land Conservancy signed purchase and sales agreements on two properties totaling 90-acres that are in the same area that Magee is asking the state to preserve.

Schataquog Brook is not only home to native trout, but slimy sculpin, a nocturnal fish known to inhabit swift, rocky-bottomed cold streams. The area, Magee said, is among the highest ranked on the state's habitat plan because of the brook trout, which has been designated as the state fish.

The property has groves of large hemlocks and white pine, and the stream is being consistently refilled with groundwater, Magee told the commission. A rich forest canopy helps keep water temperatures cool.

Under questioning by the commission, Magee said no genetic testing has been done to determine if the brook trout in the stream are truly native - showing no influence from hatchery-reared fish. But the department has data from Schataquog Brook dating back to 1938, when biologists ironically vetoed stocking it as they determined the water was "too cold," and that released fish wouldn't grow.

Present day research has shown that in reality, warmer water slows brook trout growth.

Magee said 8-inch fish determined to be 2 years old are now being caught there. Growth is defined by the quality and availability of forage and habitat. Typically, juvenile brook trout reach sizes of 3 to 4 inches by the end of their first summer.

The Piscataquog Land Conservancy is working to raise about \$300,000 to purchase land in the same area, Magee told the commission.

Tom Jones, a land protection specialist with PLC, said if protected, the parcels will be key additions to the mosaic of conservation land straddling Lyndeborough, New Boston and Franconia.

The properties now owned by the Charles A. Proctor Trust would connect more than 1,500-acres of existing conservation property.

Jones said the properties PLC hopes to buy have frontage on Cold Brook, of which the Schataquog is a tributary.

The land has a history of being used as pasture, and grazing has prevented streamside trees from becoming established and providing needed shade for good brook trout habitat.

In PLC management, Jones envisions a restoration of habitat that might encourage wild brook trout populations to come back to Cold Brook.

According to Fish and Game, it is believed that wild brook trout were once present throughout all watersheds in the state. A combination of warming stream temperatures, changes in water chemistry, habitat fragmentation, loss of spawning sites and habitat complexity have led to reduced and isolated populations of wild brook trout in New Hampshire and throughout the species' native range in the Eastern U.S.