

STATE EPA REPORT

Scenic stretch of Olentangy shows impact of area growth

By Spencer Hunt
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The explosive growth of new homes and businesses in Delaware County is threatening wildlife in a scenic stretch of the Olentangy River, according to a new state study.

Dirt and chemicals that storms wash off Delaware construction sites and new lawns, roofs, roads and parking lots are polluting a section of the Olentangy considered an excellent habitat for fish, including the bluebreast darter, a threatened species.

The darter makes its home in the streambed rocks and riffles near Highbanks Metro Park, where the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency recorded a decline in wildlife quality since 1999.

The study is part of a state effort to reduce pollution in the Olentangy. Environmental groups say they wonder whether the Ohio EPA will promise the same protections it has proposed for the river's more famous neighbor, the Big Darby Creek.



CHRIS RUSSELL / DISPATCH

A survey stake marks a lot near the banks of the Olentangy River for a subdivision off West Orange Road in Delaware County.

"I think a lot of people don't realize that the wildlife and water quality in some sections of the Olentangy are every bit as good as Darby Creek," said Robert Frey, a geologist and member of Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed.

"Development is happening so fast in Delaware County," he said. "By the time people realize what they are losing, it's already going to be gone."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Delaware is the fastest growing county in the state and one of the fastest growing in the country. The population surpassed 142,500 in

2000. Much of that growth is occurring near a 22-mile, state-designated scenic section of the river that runs from the Delaware Dam south to Old Wilson Bridge Road in Worthington.

Holly Tucker, who helped write the report, said tests near Highbanks and Hyatts Road show a decline in fish species that breed in rocky streambeds.

"Steps should be taken to reduce the effects of urbanization," the EPA report concludes. "If not, future surveys may indicate a complete loss of

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this exceptional fish community."

Just what steps will be taken is unclear. Vince Mazeika, the EPA's Olentangy project leader, said a report that will set the maximum "load" of pollutants the river can handle won't be ready until summer.

Meanwhile, the EPA has proposed unprecedented protections for the Darby. The agency wants to make developers show how they would reduce erosion and stormwater runoff before they are issued building permits.

Those permits would help end a freeze on urban development in much of western Franklin County that the Darby drains. The EPA ordered the moratorium in 2002 to protect the stream and its 26 state-listed rare and endangered species of fish and mussels.

Frey said he'd like to have

similar protections for the Olentangy.

Bob Gable, scenic rivers program coordinator for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, said the darter and three rare species of mussels found in the Olentangy don't match the Darby's wildlife. But he said the Olentangy is no less deserving of protection.

Some local officials say they have taken steps recently to protect the stream. David Efland, Delaware's planning director, said the city makes builders set aside streambank land for permanent conservation.

Orange Township officials require a minimum 25-foot setback from the center of ravines and other tributaries that feed the Olentangy, said Thomas Farahay, an assistant zoning inspector.

"We've become a lot more protective of areas like that," Farahay said. "It's not in our code, but we've insisted on it." shunt@dispatch.com



Threatened waterway

The rapid growth of new homes and businesses in northern Franklin and Delaware counties is polluting a rich habitat for fish in the Olentangy River. That includes the bluebreast darter, a threatened species found in Highbanks Metro Park.

The bluebreast darter

- ▶ Reaches 3 inches in length
- ▶ Eats mainly insect larvae from the stream bottom
- ▶ Prefers fast-flowing sections of large streams where the streambed consists of sandy gravel and large stones
- ▶ Spotty distribution in the northern and central portions of the eastern U.S.; threatened by degraded water quality



Sources: Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Natureserve