

Hellbenders

Written by Jeff Poppens
Tuesday, August 20, 2013

Have you ever seen a hellbender? It is a two foot long salamander that lives in the creeks which flow up to the Barren River. I've seen them twice, a bout 25 years ago, in the Long Hungry Creek.

The state biologist and the curator of the Nashville Zoo at Grassmere are looking for signs of hellbenders. We spent Wednesday afternoon wading our creek and the Long Fork Creek, lifting up big rocks and observing aquatic life.

Like plants, animals are classified by genus and species, and then the broader category of a family. Hellbenders are unique, with only 2 other species in their family; a giant Chinese one that gets six feet long, and another one from Japan.

This family of amphibians dates back to the dinosaur age, which very few animals existing now do. They sure look prehistoric, with a big nose and little feet. The Hellbender Society, a group of scientists interested in them, is quite concerned about the dramatic decrease in their populations recently.

The magazine "Tennessee Conservationist" had an article about the decline of hellbenders and questioned whether Glyphosphate was responsible. This is the active ingredient in Round Up, a widely used herbicide. Hellbenders eat crayfish, and poisons concentrate upward in the food chain.

The scientists in the creek with me confirmed these fears. Monsanto falsified research to get Round Up approved, and it is deadly to the salamanders and frogs in our creeks. They've watched amphibians suffer as herbicide usage increases.

A bottle brush crayfish zoomed out from under a rock they lifted. It has hairy antenna and beautiful scarlet markings down the back. They are only found in Tennessee and Kentucky in

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the Barren River watershed, and this was the first one ever documented in the Long Hungry.

I learned a lot with these guys. They want to come back and canoe the creeks and look for hellbenders again. We would love to hear if anyone has spotted any recently.

Herbicides are very, very dangerous, causing cancer and many other health issues. The widespread use of them is having drastic effects on our environment. Please be extremely cautious with them, and consider alternatives like mowing. Decision to spray all distribution lines without asking land owners permission has grave consequences for public health and is an environmental disaster.

I have a sign at the shop that says "Do Not Spray, Organic Farm." The state road department sprayed herbicide on either side of the sign.

Hellbenders are the "canary in the coalmine," or the first sign that things are getting dangerous and we need to change what we're doing. Don't believe Monsanto when they claim Round Up or 24D are safe. Herbicides kill plants, animals and you.