Cable Hoover/Independent

Volunteer Hamish Thomson peers into a small pool in the Zuni Mountains Saturday. Thomson and a small group of other volunteers from the Albuquerque Wildlife Federation came to do restoration work on the fragile watershed that houses the Zuni bluehead sucker.

Fish story

Volunteers protect endangered fish's habitat

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McGAFFEY — About a dozen volunteers with the Albuquerque Wildlife Federation led by forest service personnel drove though miles of dirt roads across a forest of ponderosa trees Saturday in search of three small ponds where one of the last colonies of Zuni bluehead sucker fish is struggling to survive in the Zuni Mountains.

Beth Von Seggern, a retired psychologist from El Morro, got out of her truck followed by Jack Davis, a biology professor from Las Cruces, and inspected the ponds. Despite prolonged drought in the Southwest, the forest was green, the ground was moist and covered with grass, the ponds had water and the tiny fish was thriving in two of the pools.

"I was excited. They lived another year," Von Seggern said, referring to the small bluish-headed fish, a candidate for listing as an endangered species under the Endangered

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Two Zuni bluehead suckers swim in a clear stream in the Zuni Mountains Saturday.

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Volunteers Phil Carter, left, Kristin VanFleet, Kristina Fisher and Michael Scialdone build a small rock dam to deter erosion in the Zuni Mountains Saturday.

Fish story

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Species Act since 2001.

About a year ago, Von Seggern and Davis, along with other AWF volunteers, helped build retention walls around the spring-fed pools and fences to prevent damage from wildlife and livestock. The small ponds, about 20-30 feet apart, are not connected, only during flood events.

Because signs of flooding were detected by forest personnel, the group then determined that torrential rains in September must have flooded the area.

"Without the structures, it would have wiped everything out," Davis said about the rain. "It takes one disaster to take it out. When you have a group of 100 fish living in a pond, if a deer dies and falls in the pond and poisons the water, it kills all the fish. That's their universe ... It's a wet universe. The fish have no control of how they got there, and they can be moved to another pond any moment."

Consuelo Zamora, district wildlife biologist with the Mount Taylor Ranger District, said the Zuni bluehead sucker fish is a hybrid — the result of two different species.

"This fish occurred because of a geological event millions of years ago."

Zuni bluehead sucker fish are probably a consequence of the formation of the many mountain ranges of western America that separated drainage basins, reports Stephanie Carman, with the Conservation Services Division of New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Scientists believe that in the case of Zuni bluehead sucker, a stream capture occurred in the Late Pleistocene.

This stream capture brought part of the headwater of San Jose Creek, a Rio Puerco-Rio Grande tributary, into the Rio Nutria, a Zuni tributary, and it enabled for two different species of fish to intermingle, thus, creating a new species.

"The fish is evidence of an event that occurred millions of years ago," Davis said referring to the formation of the continental divide.

"Normally, you don't see that evidence in biology, but in the rocks," said Kristina Fisher, vice president of AWF, who was also on site Saturday.

Fisher, who has worked on public policy for the most part, said restoration efforts and revisiting sites allows volunteers to see the impact of their efforts, and it is also a good excuse to get out and enjoy nature.

"It was exciting also because we all work on these projects and don't get to see the wildlife. Here we do. We are conservation nerds."

Throughout the day, the group rebuilt fences, collected rocks from nearby hillsides and rebuilt structures to protect the ponds and help the fish population survive another year.

First collected in 1873

The Zuni bluehead sucker occurred historically in at least the Zuni River system upstream of the Arizona-New Mexico border. It was first collected in 1873 from the Zuni River near Zuni Pueblo, and then in 1948 and 1960 in the rios Pescado and Nutria.

The first systematic survey for the species in New Mexico was conducted in 1978 and 1979. It was documented persistence in the Zuni River drainage. Populations were found in Agua Remora, upper Rio Nutria, and the Zuni River below the rios Pescado and Nutria confluence.

More recent surveys determined the distribution of Zuni bluehead sucker in New Mexico to be limited mainly to the Rio Nutria drainage upstream of the mouth of the Nutria Box Canyon.