



Georgia's 2017

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Georgia Department of Natural Resources

RACCOON CREEK

State Agency Protects Land, Water, Endangered Fish in Fast-Growing Paulding County

INTRODUCTION:

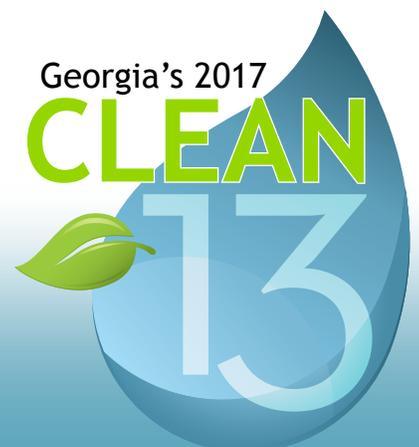
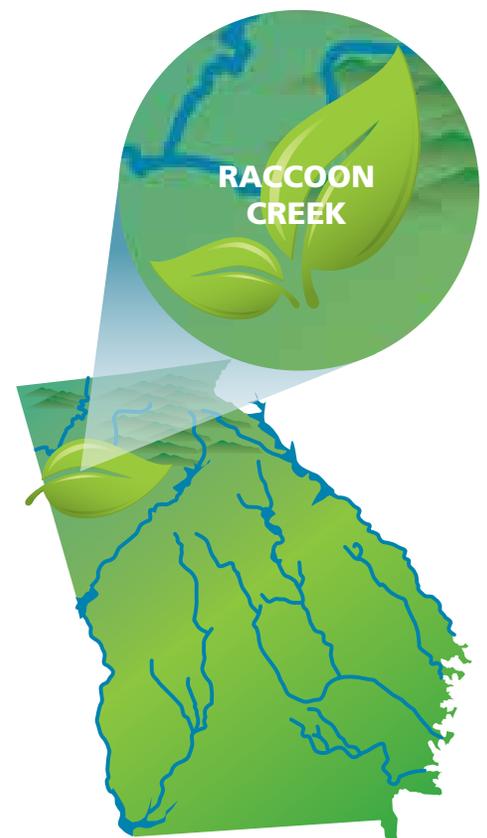
When doctors examine patients, they look in their mouth: “Open wide and say, “Ahh.” The same health test works for Georgia’s streams. Look at the mouth of any creek and generally you can tell how healthy it is. A creek spilling muddy water into a river has some upstream health concerns; a stream pumping clear water generally has a clean bill of health. Unlike its muddy neighboring streams that drain other parts of fast-growing Paulding County, Raccoon Creek empties clear, sediment-free water into the Etowah River in Bartow County. It owes its health to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and a host of other partners that during the past decade have helped preserve 43 percent of the land drained by Raccoon Creek and restored portions of the creek to protect an important piece of Georgia’s natural heritage--fish and mussels that are found only in the Etowah River, and no where else in the world.

THE WATER BODY:

Raccoon Creek is an 18-mile tributary of the Etowah River that flows through Paulding and Bartow counties and is part of the larger Etowah River basin. The Etowah is home to 76 species of fish and is considered globally significant in terms of temperate freshwater fish diversity. Of those 76 species, Raccoon Creek is home to 43. It is the only known habitat for the federally protected Etowah darter in the Etowah basin downstream of Lake Allatoona and supports the largest known population of the federally threatened Cherokee darters in the lower Etowah River basin. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has identified it as a stream critical to the survival of these species. In 2013, southern rainbow mussels were found in the creek for the first time in decades, providing hope that restoration and protection efforts on the creek could lead to the reintroduction of four federally-protected mussel species.

THE CLEAN:

Flowing through the heart of the Paulding Forest and Sheffield Wildlife Management Areas in Paulding County, Raccoon Creek has been the focus of the DNR for more than a decade.





Since 2005, DNR has collaborated with federal and local governments as well as private citizens and non-profit organizations to protect 16,932 acres. Contributions from federal, state, local and private donors have amounted to nearly \$70 million for land acquisition, and today, more than 43 percent of the total land area in the Raccoon Creek watershed has been permanently protected.

In addition to land acquisition, DNR has worked with partners like Paulding County, The Nature Conservancy, Kennesaw State University, Georgia Power Co., Natural Resources Conservation Service, Georgia Forestry Commission and others to restore sections of the creek and monitor fish populations following those efforts.

In 2013, The Nature Conservancy spearheaded the restoration of a 1.2-mile section of Raccoon Creek to improve habitat for protected fish species and stabilize eroding stream banks, and in 2015, a bridge culvert on Pegamore Creek that was blocking fish passage was

removed and replaced with a free-span bridge, thus reconnecting isolated Cherokee darter populations with those in Raccoon Creek.

The multi-layered partnerships have been unique, according to Brent Womack, a wildlife biologist who has been DNR's on-the-ground lead with the Raccoon Creek project.

"The project is the partnership," he said. "That's what has made it so successful."

For Womack, the preservation of the creek is personal. A native of Paulding County with family roots there dating to the 1800s, he grew up catching trout on the upper reaches of Raccoon Creek. During his life he has seen the steady march of progress transform other wild stretches of Paulding County, and sees the large swath of protected land just 35 miles from the state capitol as a feather in the cap of this suburban community, providing important wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities and an economic and tourism boost without the usual water, sewer and other infrastructure demands of traditional development.

"We've got to keep these places so our kids will know what nature is like," he said.

DNR's work is far from done, however. The agency is currently seeking another \$1.8 million to acquire additional land in the upper reaches of the Raccoon Creek watershed, and once again has lined up private partners to cover nearly half the costs.



Top: Georgia Department of Natural Resources personnel work with volunteers and other Raccoon Creek partners to conduct a fish survey in reaches of the creek that have been restored. Left: A Georgia Department of Natural Resources biologist measures a juvenile Cherokee darter during a fish survey of Raccoon Creek. Above: Raccoon Creek in Paulding County is home to the federally endangered Etowah darter. (Photo by Bill Harbin)



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