

Seahorse inspires more searching in Lafayette[®] e River

NORFOLK

Scientists this summer found a surprise living at the bottom of the Lafayette River: a seahorse.

The discovery sparked curiosity and excitement among those who follow the restoration of the waterway, a branch of the industrial Elizabeth River, and caused researchers to suggest that this little creature may signal something big.

"You wouldn't expect to see seahorses in a highly polluted system, since they like clean water," said Walter Priest, a scientist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, based in Gloucester Point. "To see one here, it's one of those charismatic things. It really is a harbinger of good things."

Priest, who grew up on the Lafayette, was speaking this week from the back of a science boat owned by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. He and other researchers were out Tuesday dragging a weighted net along the muddy river bottom, taking inventory of aquatic life

they retrieved from a waterway once given up for dead.

They also were hoping to find another seahorse or two.

After the first seahorse was discovered at the mouth of the Lafayette on July 7, not far from Norfolk International Terminals, photos and a brief summary were posted on a website for the Elizabeth River Project, a local environmental group. People went nuts.

"I've heard more public comment on that one posting than anything," said Joe Rieger, senior scientist with the advocacy group, based in Portsmouth. "It's just one of those species that people really relate to. It creates immediate interest."

Rieger recalled seeing just one other seahorse in the Elizabeth River. That one was caught during a trawling survey near Waterside in downtown Norfolk about two years ago.

"We couldn't believe it," he said. "A seahorse? Really?"

According to the Chesapeake Bay Program office, which coordinates state and federal efforts at cleaning up the troubled estuary, seahorses can be found in the middle and lower parts of the Bay.

Among the many variety of seahorses in the world, only one species calls the Bay home: the lined seahorse, named for the linear ridges of yellow and gold that ring its body.

These multicolored creatures typically attach themselves to eel grass beds in the Bay by curling their tails around swaying grass stalks. They bob in the water like anchored boats and suck up particles of food that pass by with their vacuum-like snouts.

Eel grass beds, however, are struggling to survive against pressures such as warmer water temperatures, cloudy water quality and pollution. Seahorses, not surprisingly, are struggling, too.

Along the way Tuesday, scientists ran into other surprises on the Lafayette. A pod of dolphins, including babies, were cruising for food far upstream, not far from the Granby Street Bridge . a rare sight, the scientists said.

Continued Next Page



A sign indicates a new oyster reef in the Lafayette River in Norfolk, Va., near the Granby Street bridge. The photo was taken Sept. 11, 2012, during a scientific survey to look for aquatic life in the river. (L. Todd Spencer | The Virginian-Pilot)



In July 2012, scientists found a lined seahorse during a survey in the Lafayette River in Norfolk. The discovery has excited environmentalists and scientists trying to restore the river, which is a tributary of the Elizabeth River. (Courtesy of Chris Moore, Chesapeake Bay Foundation)

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Among the 18 different species of fish and shellfish uncovered during the trip, the partners documented numerous brown shrimp, the kind sold by the bucket at seafood restaurants. Silver-and-black-striped spadefish, flat and pretty but often not seen in waters like the Lafayette, were visible in multiple samples.

And the team collected a squid among the watery mishmash that scientists yanked up from the bottom with each trawl.

"Watch him change colors," said Chris Moore, a scientist with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, as he stroked the slippery back of the squid in his hand. Trying to thwart an attack, the squid quickly went from light brown to a deep purple.

The surveys are done to chronicle what exists in the river now so researchers can compare what lives there when restoration work is complete. That way, they can tell if the ecosystem is recovering or attracting new types of marine life.

Oddly, there is little if any eel grass growing in the Lafayette, which made the seahorse even more of a surprise. Instead, the animal was living within a red-bearded sponge, which resembles a fan-like plant.

Rieger recalls shaking the sponge and seeing the seahorse drop into a tub where fish samples are collected. Scientists could tell it was a male, based on his pouch, and was dark brown with golden lines. After being measured and photographed, it was carefully dropped back into the river.

On Tuesday, Rieger shook each red-bearded sponge that came on deck. He peeked within its waxy fronds and kept close vigil for a seahorse.

But none would show. Not all day.

"Oh, well," Rieger said. "We tried."

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A spider crab and a blue crab are part of the count after a trawling run in the Lafayette River in Norfolk, Va. The trawling Sept. 11, 2012, was part of a scientific survey to look for aquatic life in the river. (L. Todd Spencer | The Virginian-Pilot)