Eastern hellbenders have a muscular tail and short limbs with webbed feet. They are excellent swimmers in the large, free-flowing streams that make up their preferred habitat.

Penta students work with endangered species

By Blade Outdoor Editor Matt Markay and Blade artist Jeff Basting

A sk any group of high school girls to handle slimy, squat, squat, wet toad-like animals and they’ll likely run screaming from the room. But students working with the hellbenders at Penta Career Center in Toledo, Ohio, don’t flinch at the notion of handling these unique amphibians.

Though they are about 3 years old, their chance of survival was dramatically increased by the efforts of the Toledo Zoo, Penta Career Center, and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

In the past, hellbenders suffered a tremendous decline, which was most likely due to habitat destruction and pollution. Now, the species is endangered and not releasing them into streams until they are fully collected to be raised in a controlled environment

“By raising the young hellbenders in captivity, we have the potential to reverse the decline of this species,” said student Leah Liskai, a junior at Penta Career Center.

Hellbenders are one of the largest aquatic salamanders in North America, and they can be found from North Carolina to Arkansas and Tennessee in small portions of several adjacent states. The Great Hellbender, a subspecies, is found in pockets of Indiana and Missouri.

Recent field research showed drastic declines in hellbenders numbers, including a more than 80 percent reduction in the Ohio hellbender population. The Ohio Hellbender Partnership was formed to work to reverse the decline, which was most likely due to pollution, predation, and loss of habitat.

Since hellbenders need very high water quality, the cold water in the Otter Creek at Penta Career Center was perfect for the species.”

The hellbenders are released into streams in the Ohio River watershed.

“Without the dedication of our partner organizations and Penta, we simply would not be able to move hellbenders to the river needed to be raised in a controlled environment,” said student Mariah Vollmar.

The students at Penta Career Center work with the hellbenders since August, “Observations have definitely raised awareness of how we need to be careful in the river,” said student Mariah Vollmar.

They have learned about the biology of the hellbender, including how the species is adapted to the environment and how to care for the animals.

“I feel like we’re giving them a fighting chance,” said student Mariah Vollmar. “We’re helping them grow and get established in the wild.”

The hellbenders are released into streams in the Ohio River watershed.

"We are very excited to see how enthusiastic the students are about working with the hellbenders and making sure they have no lotion or perfume on their hands — this might cause them to collectively cringe.

There are times at Penta Career Center, however, where a cadre of young women is raising endangered eastern hellbenders, and doing so with energy, passion, and the full understanding of the critical role it plays in restoring the population of this native Ohio salamander.

"They love working with the hellbenders, and they have taken a real interest in this project. It is exciting to see how enthusiastic they are," said Nicole Costello, instructor of small animal care at Penta.

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“ar far as it concerns education, I believe it is very important to have a hands-on experience with the animals,” said student Leah Liskai.

This would not be successful without their help. Only through collaboration can we help. Only through collaboration can we help. Only through collaboration can we help. Only through collaboration can we help.

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