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Reptile News

## NY Press: Salamanders in Salamanca (Hellbender)

Discussion in 'Reptile News' started by Herp News, Apr 12, 2013.

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**BUFFALO NEWS** (New York) 17 March 13 *One-Tank Trip: Salamanders in Salamanca* (Larry Beahan)

*Photo @ URL below:* Hellbenders, a rare and reclusive type of amphibian, exist only in the Allegany and Susquehanna River sheds.

If you've never seen an Allegany hellbender, you're not alone. But if you're willing to take a ride to the Southern Tier, now could be your chance.

Hellbenders are salamanders that grow up to 29 inches long and can live for 70 years. They are flat with tiny eyes, long bodies and stubby legs. You find them under rocks in fast-moving streams where they live on worms, fish and crayfish.

These reclusive and rare amphibians are growing scarcer and scarcer. They exist only in the Allegany and Susquehanna River sheds. The Seneca Nation of Indians Fish and Wildlife Department and a number of zoos are working to restore hellbenders to their natural numbers. The Senecas have opened a Hellbender Rearing Facility at 3689 Center Road, near the Seneca Allegany Casino in Salamanca. There you can see hellbenders at all stages of development being raised in glass tanks for later stocking in the Allegany River.

The facility is open to the public year-round for casual drop-ins, but if you would like a formal tour, call the Allegany Conservation Office at 945 6421 in advance.

The Senecas also have built a Walleye Fish Hatchery, a "green" building powered by 26 solar panels on the roof and 24 battery packs that store enough electricity to power the building for four days.

The hatchery is open to the public from April to November. The best time to

visit is around the middle of April when the fingerlings and slightly larger fries are almost ready for release.

Clayton Ludwick, a conservation officer for the Seneca Nation, conducted our tour, which, I believe but am not certain, was my second look at a hellbender. I saw something once in Red House Lake a long time ago that might have been a hellbender. He looked quite slimy and unhandsome to me but maybe that was because I had never heard of them back then.

George Heron, an old friend who was once president of the Seneca Nation, told me: "They used to catch a lot of them in the Allegany River and just threw them back." I remember his look of amused alarm as he said, "Old-time Indians say, 'Hellbenders got a devil in 'em. They're poisonous.'"

Our tour assembled outside the little white barn on Center Road that houses the hellbender rearing program. Ludwick, our guide, had brought along two other Fish and Wildlife Service officers. He said a federal grant helped fund programs to save walleye and hellbenders.

"Walleyes are overfished. Hellbenders just seem to be dying out," he said, describing both the Hellbender Facility and the nearby Walleye Hatchery before we went inside.

It is so crowded with glass hellbender tanks that there is room inside the barn for only about six visitors at a time. Ludwick stayed outside answering questions and chatting with those waiting a turn.

A woman who identified herself as a newspaper reporter said, "I heard that hellbender skin is toxic. If you handle them and then touch your eyes they'll get inflamed."

Ludwick confirmed her statement. "The mucus on their skin is mildly toxic. It's their only defense. It makes them taste bad to predators."

Inside the building, tanks were bubbling and hellbenders of varying ages lolled about in them. One mature hellbender immediately caught my attention. His little beady eyes stared intensely at me. I stared back. And I swear he stared harder, but I had to let him win because I wanted to see the rest of the tour.

That big specimen, who had engaged me, was about 26 inches long, a mottled brown or khaki in color, lying quietly in the bottom of a glass fish tank, his long powerful tail curving out. He snuggled against a rock, his big stubby feet hanging motionless. His only movement was the slow undulation of the flap of skin that extended along either side of his abdomen between fore and hind legs. On top of the rock sat an unsuspecting crawfish while two minnows swam about. When asked about these other creatures the officer said, "They're his dinner."

Another smaller tank held 10 hatchling hellbenders in the larval or tadpole

stage swimming about vigorously. A drinking glass on the table against one wall contained a live embryo still in its egg casing waiting until it was mature enough to leave. One of the conservation officers explained, "We collected these guys as fertilized eggs from under rocks in the Allegany River." Earlier, I had looked at the Seneca Conservation website, [www.senecaconservation.com](http://www.senecaconservation.com), and watched a video of a 4-year-old, adolescent hellbender – they are mature at 8 – being released into the Allegany River by a scuba diver. In this "nursery" for hellbenders, I thought about this poor ugly young fellow in the video. He had been carefully nurtured, fed and protected for his entire life, then sent into the strange new world of rocks, fish, fishermen and swirling water to make it on his own. I felt like one of my kids was going off to school as I remembered him swimming hesitantly away.

Ludwick said the hellbenders are returned to the river when they are about 4 years old.

"We'll try different sites till we locate the best ones," he said. "It's a funny thing. Our best hellbender site right now is in the Allegany River where Tuna Creek [Tunungwant Creek] comes in, and that is about as polluted as you can get.

He noted that hellbenders have never been bred in captivity, but several different facilities are trying.

"It's a race," he said. "A lot of zoos are trying to breed hellbenders. There is no reason why we can't be the first. We have all the knowledge and more experience."

<http://www.buffalonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130317/LIFE02/130319446/1057>

Herp News, Apr 12, 2013

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