

2009 Convention Recap: Part 1

Brian Skidmore

11915 Sugar Tree Dr.
Tampa, FL 33625
ichthyskid@aol.com

After months of planning, when the 2009 Convention finally arrived on October 1st, it seemed like the four-day weekend flew by. The official activities didn't start until Thursday check-in, but the convention crew were over at the hotel late Wednesday evening getting the tanks and tank stands set up and bringing in equipment. Thursday morning we were back at it, setting up the rack of 24 10-gallon holding tanks (Fig. 1) and two larger display tanks in the foyer area (Fig. 7). With the registration table and computer system up and running, we were ready to start receiving check-ins and registrations by noon. Folks were already starting to trickle into the registration area, since some had arrived early on Wednesday. Some of the people who opted to drive down, took the scenic route and collected here and there along the way. Our long distance travelers were Tom and Lanita Watson who flew in from Washington state and the Sanchez family who drove all the

way from California – now that's a road trip!

Mike Jacobs and Jim Cormier manned the registration table, with assistance from our local Tampa Bay Aquarium Society members, Patti Moncrief, Jim Norris, Jim Cormier and Mike Lobello, who helped with the sales table. Registrants received their name tags, auction paddles, freebie stuff, coupons, and the Convention Program listing all of the activities and presentation agenda. When Casper Cox arrived, he brought in the NANFA T-shirts, including the official NANFA logo shirt, surplus shirts from prior conventions (at discounted prices) and the new 2009 Convention shirts. I must say, Casper out-did himself again with the T-shirt design – a beautiful rendering of our native Flagfish (*Jordanella floridae*) by Bart Gelesh. The colorful Flagfish was presented on an ocher yellow shirt with innovative Florida state background design created by Casper. Thanks, Casper, for volunteering your creative expertise once again to create a



Fig. 1.

A custom rack of 10-gallon tanks with pre-conditioned water and sponge filters was prepared to accept native fishes.



Fig. 2.

Patty Moncrief of the Tampa Bay Aquarium Society runs the Sales Table featuring NANFA T-shirts, Big Muddy card decks and live food cultures.

fantastic convention T-shirt! And thanks to young artist Bart Gelesh, who donated his time to create the beautiful artwork.

Besides the NANFA T-shirts, other items on display at the sales table (Fig. 2) included NANFA Big Muddy playing card decks, books (including the “hot off the press” new edition of the *Florida Collecting Guide*), live food starter cultures, live plants and custom-made field photo tanks.

By Thursday evening we had a good crowd of folks gathered at the Clarion Hotel (Fig. 3) and things were shaping up for a nice turnout (in spite of the down economy). Folks gathered and lounged around in the registration area foyer, catching up with friends and planning for weekend activities. After dinner we opened up the Hospitality Room upstairs. We were very fortunate to have Yuengling brewery as our official Hospitality Room sponsor and they provided four different brews for the convention attendees to sample and enjoy. Yuengling even provided some fantastic four- by eight-foot banners with a large version of our color NANFA logo and their “welcome” to the convention goers! The Hospitality Room proved to be a great opportunity to meet new people and catch up with old friends. We displayed many of the donated items to be auctioned on Saturday, to whet everyone’s appetite for the big auction.

Friday promised to be a busy day, with a full agenda of presentations starting at 9:00 am to kick things off. Dr. Brady

Porter of Duquesne University was our lead-off speaker, and Brady delivered a very interesting presentation, entitled “Morphological Systematics and Biogeography of the Sailfin Shiner Species Complex, *Pteronotropis hypselopterus*, from Florida.” Brady has been working with this species complex for a number of years, and he and his associates have gathered sufficient data to warrant classification of a number of new (separate) species within this group.

As part of a “tag-team” effort, St. Louis University Ph.D. candidate Jason Allen shed some light on the phylogenetic relationships between the various species within the *Pteronotropis* minnow complex. Jason’s presentation entitled, “A Genetic Perspective on the *Pteronotropis hypselopterus* Complex”, also focused on the emerging relationships within the sailfin shiner species group. The data and information shared by Brady and Jason is “cutting edge” in the field of North American native fishes systematics and nomenclature and really served to prime the would-be collectors in attendance to go out and collect some of these beautiful shiners and study their unique characteristics.

Philip Kukulski of Michigan kept things lively as he shared his very enlightening experiences with aquarium care and breeding of the Bluenose Shiner (*Pteronotropis welaka*). This beautiful minnow species, which also happens to be a Florida native, has always generated a lot of interest and mys-



Fig. 3.

Doug, Joe & Maurite talking to Tony Terciera (off-camera to the right).



Fig. 4.

Michael Hill from the FWC.

tery amongst native fish enthusiasts and aquarium hobbyists. Philip's presentation, entitled, "The Bluenose Shiner: Onerous Aspects in Captive Propagation," highlighted the great lengths that a dedicated aquarist will go to in order to unlock the mystery of successfully spawning one of our "holy grail" native fishes.

For our fourth presentation of the morning, Michael Hill (Fig. 4), a 32-year veteran of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), presented an overview of some of the unique habitat and stream restoration projects he has been involved with. Michael's presentation, "Stream Restoration in the Florida Panhandle," included some great "before" and "after" photographs of Florida streams and rivers which had historically been altered, and which through innovative design and determination have now been restored to their former natural course and character. Michael demonstrated to us that when streams or habitats are restored, it doesn't take long for the formerly present native species to move back in and re-establish breeding populations. The highlight of Michael's presentation was the restoration of a small stream through a golf course on Eglin Air Force Base property, where the project design included a skylight in one of the necessary culvert crossings of the stream because the endangered Okaloosa Darters "don't like the dark." A successful marriage of biology and engineering!

To wrap up the morning series of presentations, Charlie Nunziata, Mike Jacobs and myself (Fig. 6) shared their experiences in producing and publishing the *Florida Collecting Guide*. The emphasis was on the evolution of this undertaking, from what started off as an idea to publish a modest pamphlet to assist our Florida visitors with an interest in collecting native fishes, then developing into a second and ultimately a third edition of the *Florida Collecting Guide*. Their goal was to produce a comprehensive and useful guide to identification, collecting techniques and aquarium care parameters for the many non-game fresh (and brackish) water fishes that call Florida their home. Production of the *Florida Collecting Guide* has been a labor of love for the authors and editor, and we hope that other NANFA affiliates and state chapter groups will perhaps be inspired to some degree so that they will undertake similar efforts in their region. One thing is for sure, we learned much more than we knew from the onset of our journey and we now have a much better appreciation for the diversity and beauty of our native Florida fishes.

With our sponge-like minds having absorbed a full morning's worth of juicy information, it was time to take a lunch break. Fortunately there were dozens of eating establishments within walking distance or a short drive from the hotel, so we didn't have to travel far to find a good place to eat. Burgers, Mexican, Asian, American – eater's choice. After satisfying



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Fig. 5.

Doug Dame (right) engages in lively conversation about exotic fishes with Kelly Gestring of the FWC.

our appetite, we settled back into the hotel conference room to take in the afternoon series of presentations.

Kelly Gestring (Fig. 5) of the FWC kicked the afternoon off with his presentation entitled, “Florida’s Efforts to Regulate, Assess and Manage Exotic Fishes.” Kelly’s presentation included some great photographs of many of the exotics that have entered and, in some cases, established breeding populations in our semi-tropical wetlands and waterways. Through ongoing research by the FWC, a significant body of data has been generated relative to the effects of introduction and establishment of exotic fishes on our native fish fauna and habitats. Somewhat surprisingly, the data suggest that the decline or extinction of native fishes nor the destruction of their habitat has occurred as a result of exotic fish introductions. Apparently, the exotics tend to find their own unique “niche” within the habitat and, in most cases are not directly competing with the native fishes for resources — food, cover and breeding substrate. This is not to say that the FWC endorses the release of exotics, which they do not. We all need to do our part to not release aquarium fishes into local water bodies and not transfer fishes from one water body to another.

Dr. Franklin “Buck” Snelson delivered a fascinating overview of another of the Florida favorites, our diminutive beauties the pygmy sunfishes. Buck’s presentation, “The Pygmy Sunfishes of Florida, With the Description of a New Species,” provided a comprehensive overview of the different members

of the genus *Elassoma*. His presentation also included details leading to Buck’s pending description of a new species — *Elassoma gilberti*, the Gulf Coast Pygmy Sunfish. The pygmy sunfishes always elicit excitement from native fish enthusiasts and Buck’s presentation was well received.

Bob Muller “mixed it up a bit” with a fantastic presentation titled “Care and Breeding of Darters and Minnows in the Aquarium”. There is no doubt that Bob is one of the most experienced and successful breeders in the native fish hobby. Through a lot of trial and error and determination, Bob has been able to spawn and raise over 40 different species of darters and minnows — quite an accomplishment! Bob generously shared with us his techniques, tank setup conditions and “secrets” to success in spawning and raising these fascinating groups of fishes. Bob’s message to the group was, “Through a small effort on the part of many, we can each make a significant contribution by breeding native fishes and, where circumstances warrant, help to perpetuate species populations and potential habitat reintroduction of rare species.”

Nate Tessler, a graduate student at the University of Toledo, presented a poster entitled “The Impact of Ditch Dredging in Agricultural Streams of Northwestern Ohio on Stream Habitat and Ichthyofauna.” Nate reported that the findings of the study reveal that channelization and/or ditching of historic meandering creeks results in decreased habitat diversity, which in turn results in decreased fish diversity. Nate



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Fig. 6.

Brian Skidmore (left) previews the weekend itinerary with Jason Allen (center) and Doug Stuber (right).

entertained questions following his brief presentation, and his poster was on display for all to view for the remainder of the 2009 convention.

Speaking of posters, Casper Cox brought along with him a special surprise — a huge vinyl poster/banner with the newly created 2009 NANFA Convention flagfish design for all of the attendees to autograph. This was one of Casper's personal donations to the group and, as it turns out, he presented this as a special gift to the host group. A hearty thank you to you, Casper!

Our final presentation of the afternoon was a DVD movie produced by Wes Skiles of Karst Productions, Inc. entitled, *The River Returns*. Mr. Skiles' movies have been featured on The Discovery Channel and have featured a number of Florida's unique features, such as sinkholes, underground aquifer caves and wetlands. *The River Returns* takes the viewer on a journey up the extensive St. Johns River along the northeast coast of Florida, with footage of wildlife, springs, caves and developed portions of the watershed. The emphasis of the movie was on how human actions such as fertilizer application and trash dumping can impact our waterways, and often our source of drinking water.

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Fig. 7.

Doug Dame busily aquascaping the Florida natives display tanks.

2009 Convention Recap: Part 2

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Ed. note — Last issue, Brian described for us his experiences with the setup and registration for the convention. He then walked us through the first several speakers. We pick back up with Brian on Friday evening at the convention.

Following a break to get a bite to eat for dinner, we reconvened in the conference room Friday evening for a special “Live Foods Workshop” hosted by Mike Jacobs and Bill Shields of the Suncoast Killifish Society. Mike and Bill gave an excellent “how to” overview on culturing a variety of live food organisms including microworms, grindal worms and white worms, along with a demonstration on the proper way to decapsulate brine shrimp cysts. Culture samples were passed around for inspection and starter cultures were also available for purchase at the sales table in the registration area.

Friday evening wrapped up with more socializing in the Hospitality Room. Some folks also took the opportunity to plan out their Saturday field trip forays.

Saturday morning found the hotel bustling with activity as convention goers hustled to finish their breakfast, get their

collecting gear gathered and make sure they located their designated tour guide for the various field trip destinations. After handing out maps and directions to each of the groups, our intrepid collectors were off to enjoy a beautiful Florida day collecting native fishes.

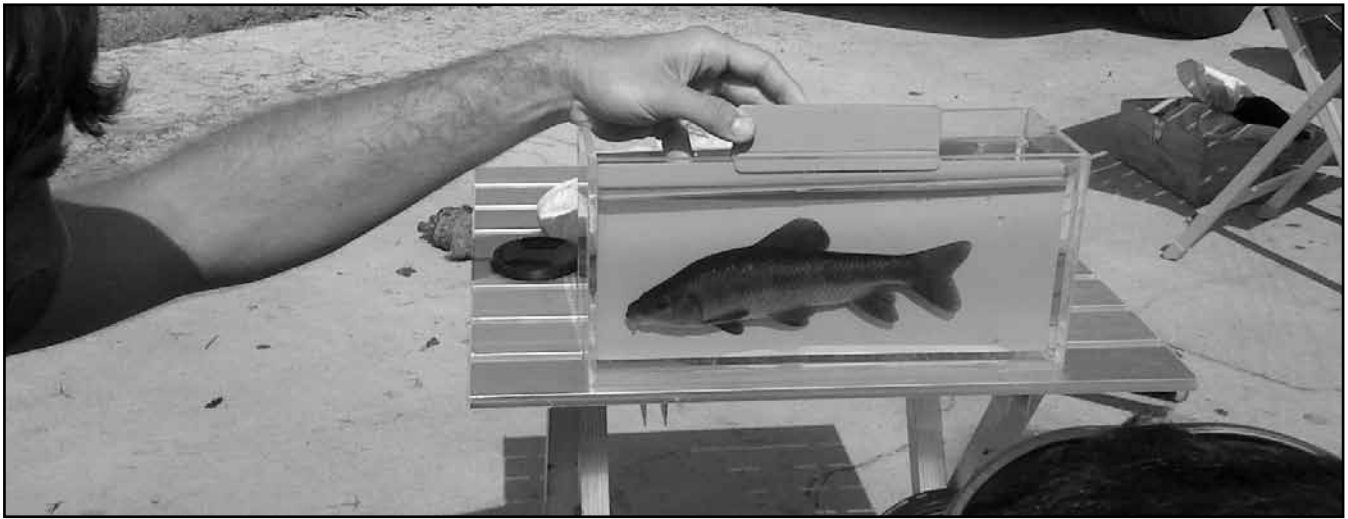
Doug Dame led a small group to the South Skyway Bridge on the southwest edge of Tampa Bay where salt water fishes such as Green Sailfin Mollies, Diamond Killifish, Sheepshead Minnows, Gold-Spotted Killifish, Rainwater Killifish and Gulf Pipefish were hauled in with each pass of the seine.

Doug Stuber and Brady Porter (Fig. 1) guided a group down to southern Hillsborough County to the Alafia River drainage. This group was successful in finding the very beautiful and soon-to-be-described Alafia Sailfin Shiner at the picturesque Hurrah Creek. Other species collected here included Coastal Shiner, Dusky Shiner, Lake Chubsucker, Swamp Darter, Speckled Madtom, Spotted Sunfish, Bluegill, Hogchoker, Mosquitofish, Brook Silverside and Seminole Killifish. The group even set up a “field photo lab” to shoot on the spot photos of the catch (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1.

Doug, Bobbi, Brady, Peter & Bob.



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Fig. 2.

Photo Tank Session. Being photographed is a Lake Chubsucker (*Erimyzon sucetta*).

Our third group headed out to the Hillsborough River drainage with intrepid leader Bill Shields. Locations along the route included: Rotary Park and Morris Bridge Park, both on the Hillsborough, as well as Baker Creek at its confluence with Lake Thonotosassa. The group was able to collect a variety of natives including Florida Bluefin Killifish, Golden Topminnow, Mosquitofish, Swamp Darter, Everglades Pygmy Sunfish and Flagfish, as well as some non-natives such as Tilapia, Black Acara and Weather Loaches. Bill's unrecognizable and heavily soiled brand new convention T-shirt was a testimony to the fact that he didn't just supervise from the banks!

Jaap Jan deGreef played host to a group who headed down to his homestead property near the small town of Parrish in northern Manatee County. In addition to providing folks an opportunity to try their hand at collecting in Gabel Creek, where they netted Hogchokers, Ironcolor Shiners and silversides, Jaap also treated everyone to a barbecue picnic and a tour of his fish "house", tropical fruit garden, and huge show aquarium in his living room. Jaap's superb hospitality, along with some unexpected surprises, was definitely a crowd pleaser.

On Saturday afternoon the different field trip groups began to filter back into the hotel, with people lugging in buckets and bags full of fishes to be placed in the prepared holding tanks in the registration area foyer. By Saturday evening the tanks were full of a variety of fishes and other creatures, providing a focus for observation and discussion. After a good "hosing off" — or a warm shower for those so inclined — and a change of clothes, folks began to assemble in the

registration/lobby area in anticipation of the traditional Saturday banquet and auction. As a primer to the evening's events, Tony Terceira moderated a fish photography workshop. Tony, who is the official photographer and photo editor for the American Killifish Association, shared his experience, techniques and beautiful photographs. After a very informative PowerPoint outline and summary, Tony and the rest of the group migrated out into the foyer area for some hands-on photography using a prepared photo tank setup.

By 6:30 pm we were beginning to gather in the banquet room for dinner. With the banquet staff running about ½ hour behind schedule, Phil Nixon stepped in to keep us all entertained by kicking off some pre-dinner auctioneering. Was it just me, or did the table with the open wine bottles seem to be bidding higher and more frequently than the others? After Phil infused the group with his lively auction style and we distributed some of the auction items on display, dinner was served. Following our tasty dinner, which was accompanied by an unexpected — and a bit distracting — serenade of gospel music from the adjoining banquet room, Dr. Devon Graham delivered a very entertaining and informative presentation on the Florida Everglades ecosystem. Devon's mastery of his subject was well balanced with his humorous slides, and he proved to be a great sport as he "competed" with the lady from the next room belting out gospel tunes.

After a round of applause for Devon, and some announcements from the NANFA Board of Directors (BOD), Phil Nixon cranked the auction back up. We had many fantastic donated auction items ranging from books, to nets, to beautiful artwork. Tony Terceira's signed and matted 8"x10" photo-



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Fig. 3.

Jim Cormier (left) & Charlie Nunziata.

graphs proved to be especially popular. Thanks to all the individuals, organizations and manufacturers who donated and helped to make the auction successful. With the bidder number system used this year for the auction registration, Mike Jacobs and Jim Cormier (Fig. 3) were able to quickly get folks checked out and paid following the auction.

For those who weren't yet ready to call it an evening, we headed back up to the Hospitality Room for more socializing and some planning for the Sunday field trips and journeys back home. My beautiful wife Diana, with some assistance from Bobbi Diller and Lanita Watson, was a very gracious and attentive hostess, making sure everyone had a cold drink and plenty of food. The mingling and conversations that take place in this type of setting are justification that providing such an opportunity for casual socializing is an important component of any successful NANFA Convention.

Sunday morning found everyone packing their bags for home or readying their collecting gear for the last round of field trips. The Sunday field trip destinations included the Santa Fe River drainage northwest of the Gainesville area, a series of locations in and around Ocala National Forest, and for those heading even further north on their way home, a stop at Wacissa Springs just southeast of Tallahassee. For the lucky few who were able to take even more time, Casper Cox hosted a group of die-hard adventurers at the Florida Marine Lab near the lovely town of Carabelle in the Florida panhandle. All of these trips

proved to be fruitful not only terms of native fishes collected, but because of the great company and the intangible pleasure of being outdoors — experiencing nature's many wonders.

A convention recap article would not be complete without thanking those individuals who helped to bring it all together. The NANFA Board of Directors was very helpful in providing guidance and answering questions during the planning stages. Sajjad Lateef stepped in late in the planning process to help get critical information posted on the website. Tom Watson was especially helpful coordinating registration information and providing as-needed documentation for solicitation of donations. I would like to extend a special "thank you" to Casper Cox who provided guidance and suggestions, lined up our T-shirt artist and once again created a perfect design for our convention T-shirt. Members of the local Tampa Bay Aquarium Society — Patti Moncrief, Jim Cormier, Jim Norris, Mike Lobello and Hank Darin pitched in to help with the registration and sales tables. Special thanks to our field trip guides — Doug Stuber, Doug Dame, Ken Normandin, Brady Porter, Bill Shields and Jaap Jan deGreef. We greatly appreciated the time and talent generously given by all of our guest speakers who kept us informed and entertained — the presentations are the backbone of any convention.

The Convention Committee: Mike Jacobs, who prepared the Convention Program, handled the registration packages and database, coordinated the field trip links for the website, coordi-

Sidenote

An interesting and encouraging thing happened at this convention, and while I'm sure that this isn't the first time we have seen this phenomenon, I do want to make particular mention of it here. As we absorbed the information delivered in each of the various presentations, from professional ichthyologists and academia to avocational ichthyologists and hobbyists, the wheels started to turn on both sides. Dr. Brady Porter, having had the opportunity to listen to presentations from accomplished hobbyists like Philip Kukulski (Fig. 4) and Bob Muller, recognized how these individuals, and others like them, had already contributed greatly to our store of knowledge about native fishes. But Brady also saw additional opportunities. He and his colleagues have suspected that the life cycle of our native sailfin shiner species involves an obligate stage where the newly hatched juveniles "hang" onto shrub branches dangling into the water until such time as they are ready to become pelagic/free swimming. What Brady wanted to know

is, how long does this occur for, is it indeed obligate in their life cycle and do all of the species in this complex share the same behavior? Not long after the 2009 Convention, Brady passed on a message, which I posted on the NANFA Forum, requesting involvement (research) from those members who are keeping and attempting to reproduce sailfin shiners in aquariums. This is a great example (and a unique opportunity) to reinforce the importance of scientists working with enthusiasts to expand our knowledge or prove a theory. For Brady and for Jason Allen, who over the past several years have taken to the field in search of voucher specimens for their ongoing study of the sailfin shiner species complex, this collaboration began with enlisting the skills and local knowledge of NANFA members in the southeastern United States. These members were more than willing to jump into the creek and seine up some of their local shiners for classification and study. Let's hope that this kind of cooperation becomes the standard in the study of our native fishes – both groups have so much to gain.

nated the audio-visual needs for all of our speakers, and generally handled all things technical and electronic. Bill Shields, who constructed the rack system for the 10-gallon holding tanks, set up our native fishes display aquariums, led field trips and generally pitched in wherever necessary. Charlie Nunziata, our NANFA Regional Representative, who once again proved to be a tremendous help and was a large reason for the success of this convention. Charlie coordinated all auction donations, helped to line up presentation speakers, coordinated registrations and payments with Tom Watson, served as liaison with the BOD and generally helped me to retain my sanity.

On behalf of the 2009 NANFA Convention Committee and the Central Florida Regional Chapter of NANFA, it has been an honor and a pleasure to host the 2009 NANFA Convention. Meeting new friends and putting a face to a name is always the greatest pleasure and benefit from attending one of these conventions. "Thank you" to all who took the time to visit us in Tampa! 🐟



Fig. 4.
Philip Kukulski.