

# Finship and Fun: A Report from the 2003 NANFA Convention in Huntsville, Alabama

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**T**hursday morning, June 5, our group, like many others scattered across the country, loaded our vehicles not just for a convention, but for an expedition. Luggage, cameras and road food were a small part of our gear. Seines, dip nets, aerators, buckets, and coolers were packed so we could bring back fishes for our home aquaria. Magnifying glasses and jars were added for observing unusual invertebrates. Snake hooks, pillowcases, mist bottles, and critter corrals were added for any reptiles and amphibians we had an opportunity to photograph. At the last minute my wife Dena suggested raiding the prize box for the “Fabulous Fishes” program we host with local NANFA members. Along came rubber sharks, marine biology coloring books, and an assortment of fish-themed squirt guns, games, paperweights, and toys—donations for the NANFA auction.

Five of us piled into two vehicles. Our crew consisted of Dena and me, Heather Smith, Tyler Strange, and Clark Strange. We drove straight to the campus of the University of Alabama at Huntsville. Our only significant delay occurred when the Jeep briefly overheated outside of Birmingham. (The problem was attributed to driver error.) We arrived after 10 p.m., too late to register for the meeting, but our packets had been thoughtfully left for us at the Beville Center’s registration desk, heightening our anticipation for the meeting to come.

The next morning we learned that the NANFA meeting coincided with that of another convention—one for psychics, occultists and holistic healers. Members of both conferences were staying at the Beville Center but could be distinguished from each other without the aid of a Peterson field guide. NANFA members were casually, and colorfully, attired in

shorts, fish-themed T-shirts, and faded caps. The others dressed more formally, favoring black blouses, crystal pendants, and an occasional turban. There was little intermingling. Both groups had their own meeting places and their own agendas.

## Breeding Killifishes and Darters

The NANFA agenda started early Friday in the campus’ biology building, Wilson Hall, with continued registration, coffee, and get-togethers among old friends and new acquaintances. The day session of guest speakers was called to order by NANFA president and convention host Bruce Stallsmith. Bruce described the next day’s field trips, introduced the trip leaders, and encouraged members to sign up early for the location of their choice. Members were also requested to have gas tanks filled, lunches packed, and Alabama fishing licenses in hand. After that, it was time for the talks.

Joe Scanlan (Montgomery, AL), retired ophthalmologist and active killifish culturist, was the first to speak. Joe began his talk with topics familiar to everyone in the audience—early experiences with fishes. He described his boyhood interests in rearing guppies and his first encounter with a killifish, the broad killifish or barigonchi (*Cyprinodon dearborni*), which he brought back from the Caribbean island of Bonaire in bottles of drinking water. Most of Joe’s talk, however, was devoted to his recent work with the stippled studfish (*Fundulus bifax*). Joe provided lots of practical tips for killifish fans, such as earthworms as conditioning food and techniques for extracting fertilized eggs from gravel. One of the points of his talk to which everyone could relate, however, was the importance of

recruiting younger members into our ranks. The audience, dominated by middle-aged (and slightly older) men, gave ample testimony to our need to appeal to younger members.

J.R. Shute (Conservation Fisheries, Inc.) then spoke on rearing imperiled Alabama darters. J.R.'s talk focused on two species with pelagic larvae: goldline and boulder darters. The goldline darter (*Percina aurolineata*) is restricted to the Cahaba River system and is listed as "threatened" by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The boulder darter (*Etheostoma wapiti*) is restricted to the Elk River and is listed as "endangered." Both have been successfully propagated at CFI. Goldline darter progeny were provided to EPA for water quality studies and boulder darter were released as part of a population augmentation plan for the recovery of that species. J.R. explained how details of rare and endangered darter husbandry can be worked out using common and secure surrogate species, such as bloodfin (*E. sanguifluum*) and speckled (*E. stigmaeum*) darters. J.R. also provided tips on how eggs can be separated from substrates by swirling the mix in plastic shoeboxes illuminated by flashlight, and how the small minnow-like larvae can be fed rotifers and green water before switching them to brine shrimp. J.R. concluded by showing a great video of speckled darters spawning.

### Menaced Mollusks and Percid Pigments

During the subsequent break, a mysterious and odoriferous pool of water began to well up from a vent in the stage behind the speaker's podium—an appropriate precursor to Jeff Garner's report of the foul fate of Alabama's aquatic mollusks. Jeff, the state malacologist, provided a grim statistical summary of Alabama's species-rich fauna, 172 bivalves and 174 operculate snails, many of which are in dire straits. Of the mussels, 27 are extinct, five are functionally extinct (known from a single specimen collected over the past 10 years), and 41 consist of only one or two populations. Of the snails, one family, the Pleurocercidae, includes four species that are extirpated and 33 that are extinct, 29 of which were endemic to the state. Another family of tiny (<5 mm) snails, the Hydrobiidae, are poorly documented, but were once common in habitats like Big Spring, in Huntsville. The Big Spring hydrobiid, like the whiteline topminnow (*Fundulus albolineatus*) with which it co-occurred, is now extinct. It was last observed living in the water-filled hoofprints of roaming livestock! Jeff noted that Alabama is the home of the largest single extinction event in modern times—the impoundment of the Coosa River. As the pool of water behind him subsided, though, Jeff

ended his talk with the optimistic observation that six species, considered extinct, have been recently rediscovered.

Optimism was also evident in the attention that native fishes were getting not just locally in Huntsville, but also nationally in a publication familiar to all aquarists. The July issue of *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* was dedicated to native fishes. It contained articles by NANFA members Chris Scharpf, Rob Denkhaus, Bob Bock, Charlie Nunziata, J.R. Shute, and Bruce Stallsmith. It also included a profile of Mark Binkley's hatchery and aquarium supply business, Jonah's Aquarium. *TFH* generously sent complimentary copies to Bruce and these were made available gratis to the attendees. Within minutes of their distribution, members were eagerly paging through the darter-festooned issue.

Brady Porter (University of Georgia) spoke next on color and phylogeny in snubnose darters. Brady pointed out that species of the subgenus *Ulocentra* are distinguished primarily by male breeding colors, but that these traits are problematic. Color varies seasonally and is not an intrinsic quality of the organism but of our own perception of the organism. Darters, in fact, are believed to have tetrachromatic color vision, somewhat akin to our own vision when we look through red-blue 3-D glasses. Because of a yellow "filter" in their eye, they probably have reduced capacity for discerning blue, and enhanced capacity for discerning fine shades of red. He then explored alternative groupings of darters, providing DNA sequence data supporting one morphological classification, and continued with a lively discussion of fish pigments.

Brady noted that fish cannot produce carotenoids (red-based pigments) which are "borrowed" from the algae-eating prey that they eat (aquatic invertebrates). He then described an experiment in which aquarium-housed fish fed *Tubifex* (containing xanthophylls, oxygenated carotenoids) normalized the pigments in all the species when compared to wild-collected fish. The aquarium-housed fish, however, largely appeared to have normal (species diagnostic) coloration even though their carotenoid composition was normalized. This was explained by a retention of carotenoid concentration in the chromatophores (pigment containing cells). Brady concluded his talk with a video of the spawning of the threatened Cherokee darter (*Etheostoma scotti*), the female of which is quite persnickety, repeatedly cleaning spots on a rock by pecking at the rock before depositing a single egg there.

Before breaking for lunch, members were warned to bring lots of drinking water and sunblock on the field trips, and were cautioned not to take any palezone shiners (*Notropis albizonatus*) at Paint Rock, which are listed by the state as an

endangered species. Poster displays were also pointed out for members to visit during the extended break. A full-size poster of the meeting logo, created by Casper Cox, was displayed prominently on one wall. Members were encouraged to sign it and offer personal messages of congratulations to absent members Chris and Stephanie Scharpf, whose own spawning and rearing activities made it impossible for them to attend this year's convention. Displayed on the opposite wall were two posters from the 2002 Corcoran Education Grant awardees Dave McNeely and William Caire. These posters illustrated fishes and fish research in Trader's Creek in northwestern Oklahoma. The colorful posters were provided to schools and interested individuals as a way of increasing public awareness of the local fauna and as a means for identifying fishes. These were the first educational tools produced and widely-distributed under auspices of the Corcoran Grant. They received rave reviews from meeting attendees.

Members used break time to visit with each other and some of the speakers. I took the opportunity to drop off a "sampler" of preserved fishes that my colleague Steven George had prepared for Bruce. It contained an assortment of sturgeons, paddlefish, gar, and goldeye guaranteed to pique the interest of any fledgling ichthyology student interested in primitive native fishes. Many members visited a small room crammed with donated items and began to plan their auction strategies. Others visited the adjoining room to purchase Casper's beautiful T-shirts, already proudly worn among many members. Others were looking over the goods being sold by Jonah's Aquarium. Dena purchased some Perfect Dipnets (popular and selling briskly) to enhance our collecting prowess on the next day's trip, and copies of *Fishes of Alabama and the Mobile Basin* to improve our taxonomic capabilities.

### Troubled Waters in Alabama

After lunch, Ned Mudd, environmental attorney and activist, took the podium. Echoing the concern expressed by several other speakers, Ned observed that the rivers in Alabama have been mistreated and that extinctions are "out of control and must be stopped." He warned that lawyers should be the "last line of defense" for endangered fishes. Rather, private individuals knowledgeable about fish should be spearheading conservation efforts. His talk was a "call-to-arms" for NANFA members. Ned urged us to volunteer in grassroot conservation campaigns, to educate the public about native fish issues, and to "reinvent" NANFA as an organization with a clearly-stated mission to save fishes. He encouraged the audience to become

personally involved by providing comments to federal agencies on permit applications for projects that could impact water quality and fish habitat, noting that sometimes just 25 letters can halt a project.

Urging NANFA to adopt a code of scientific conduct, Ned pointed out that we had an ethical obligation to be proactive and environmentally progressive. He recommended that we publicly advocate adoption of recovery plans for endangered species and that we designate an individual to alert membership when permitting issues surface that could impact native fishes. Ned cautioned that environmental advocacy may not be lucrative (Ned supports himself as a musician and composer), and may not be expedient (the Alabama sturgeon case took nine years to resolve), but that our success as an organization to protect native fishes will determine whether we continue to function as naturalists and aquarists or become fish historians.

Following Ned's talk, fish posters were again a point of interest during the break, as Scott Mettee (Geological Survey of Alabama) appeared with a stack of posters illustrating the fishes of Alabama. Scott brought plenty, but almost everyone wanted one. Audience members were soon making plans where to hang the colorful poster and which of the species they hoped to see before meeting's end.

Randy Haddock (Cahaba River Society) also expressed concern for the rich aquatic communities of Alabama, and then provided an overview of the major faunal groups and their natural history. Randy covered fishes, turtles, aquatic insects, crayfishes, and plants. His talk included historical anecdotes, such as native Americans noosing river redhorse (*Moxostoma carinatum*), and ecological principles, such as functional feeding groups of freshwater invertebrates. Randy had some eye-catching photographs, but his video of mussels with "lures" that mimicked crayfish and chironomids were particularly impressive.

### Spawning Fishes in a Large River and in Small Containers

Scott Mettee followed with a talk devoted to his work with three fishes in the Alabama River: longnose gar (*Lepisosteus osseus*), paddlefish (*Polyodon spathula*), and blue sucker (*Cyprinostomus elongatus*). Scott tagged fish with external tags (allowing individual fish to be readily identified and their locations reported by anyone catching them) and with surgically implanted sound-emitting tags (allowing researchers equipped with hydrophones to track movements of individual fish). Gar

were extremely mobile, moving up to 40 miles per day. Paddlefish were also mobile, moving 20-40 miles during their spawning season.

The blue sucker, though, was perhaps the most amazing of the three. This fish moved up to 300 miles round-trip, upstream over the Claiborne Lock-and-Dam during high water in the winter, and then upriver where they took up an “arboreal” lifestyle in the foliage of inundated trees. After spawning in the spring they moved downstream, at lower river stages, sometimes necessitating a 20-foot drop over the spillway of the dam. The species appears to have a strong homing instinct, with some individuals being recorded over a nine-year period. They also appear to have a long life. Data from fish size and growth rings suggested ages of up to 30 years, but application of one population model indicated more remarkable longevities of up to 60 years! Scott plans a follow-up age-and-growth study to document the age structure of the population.

The last talk of the day was given by Brian Jones (Dauphin Island Estuarium) and was based on his experiences as an aquarist-curator. Much of Brian’s talk consisted of practical, and often innovative, tips for the native fish aquarists. Emphasizing the importance of good water quality and nutrition, Brian provided breeding hints for several species: chillers for sailfin shiner (*Pteronotropis hypselopterus*), java moss for least killifish (*Heterandria formosa*), and egg-recovery chambers (made from PVC, screen, and Zip-Lock® bags) for naked goby (*Gobiosoma bosc*). Brian explained in detail his techniques for breeding Gulf killifish (*Fundulus grandis*). Young from this species are required year-round at the Estuarium as a source of food for seahorses, pipefishes, jellies, and salamanders, so a breeding colony is maintained under climate- and light-controlled conditions that promote year-round egg production. Fish are bred in a special device known as the “funnel of love,” which allows fish free movement over a surface that collects sinking eggs. Some of the specific topics Brian discussed are rarely faced by the average home aquarist—including barracuda care, effects of stress in sharks, and cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*) constipated by barnacles—but generic themes of effective transportation and handling, minimizing stress, and diagnosing pathological conditions were common for all aquarists.

After the last of the formal presentations, Bob Muller gave a short overview of NANFA’s Breeders Award Program. Bob, himself an accomplished breeder of darters, described the program’s scoring criteria, availability of information at the NANFA website, and the long-term goal of creating a

freely accessible database on captive reproduction of native fishes. Bob encouraged meeting attendees to make future submissions and announced two winners, Pat Halligan for breeding multiple generations of blacknose dace (*Rhinichthys atratulus*), and Philip Kukulski for multiple generations of Okefenokee pygmy sunfish (*Elassoma okefenokee*). After that we were dismissed for dinner. We were all on our own for the evening meal but no one strayed very far from the Center. We were all anxious to see some native fish films produced by NANFA videographers.

### From Ocean Depths to Riffle Bottoms

Fritz Rohde (North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries), known to most members for his passion for small freshwater fishes, gave us a glimpse of his professional work as a marine ichthyologist. Fritz narrated a video he shot from a submersible, 80 miles off-coast, and 300-feet below the waters of North Carolina. This location, containing lush reefs of bryozoans and corals, has been proposed as a Marine Protection Area (or MPA) and is inhabited by numerous species of fishes. During the video we saw more than 40 taxa! Many of these species were instantly recognizable, such as groupers, moray eels, and grunts.

Some of the fish shown, though, were true “tropicals,” like rock beauty, damselfish, and butterflyfishes. These fishes apparently represent spawning and established populations. The status of one well-known species, however, is uncertain. The Pacific lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) was visible and clearly identifiable in parts of the video. Fritz reports that more than 15 of these fish have been observed, but where they came from, and whether they are reproducing is not known.

Fritz concluded by observing that scientists probably have a better understanding of the moon than we do of off-shore marine habitats. He also commented on the irony that some of the “ivory tower” biologists who make recommendations and set fishing policy do not go out and see, catch, and touch the fishes that they regulate.

Rick Phillips, another fish videographer, demonstrated that you do not need underwater cameras or submarines to make fascinating videos of native fishes. He presented three short subjects: Tennessee dace (*Phoxinus tennesseensis*) spawning in the nests of stonerollers (*Camptostoma* sp.), congregations of longnose gars over riprap in a raceway; and spotfin shiner (*Cyprinella spiloptera*) spawning in an aquarium. These videos provided inspirational viewing for minnow-chasers ready to pursue their favorite pastime on Saturday.



Fig. 1.

Head 'em up, move 'em out: Darter roundup by riffle-kickers (L-R) Doug Dame, Chip Rinehart and Charles Ray, and block-netters Jan Jeffrey Hoover and Tyler Strange. Photograph by Dena Dickerson.

### Appalachian Ichthyology

Members were up early the next day preparing for a day in the field. At breakfast, Martin Moore was resting up from his 11th-hour, solitary drive up from Mississippi. Martin had the foresight to bring with him surplus aquarium nets and breathable bags which had been donated a few months earlier for Mississippi's "Fabulous Fishes" program. They were eagerly seized by those anticipating abundant and desirable fishes. After milling about members split up into groups, rallying around one of the four respective trip leaders: Bruce, Casper, Stott Noble, and Steve Ellis. There they received last-minute admonitions regarding collecting permits and fish licenses before hitting the road.

Groups were then divvied up into a series of "crews" for each vehicle, with up to 10 vehicles per trip. Rob Denkhaus, Dena, and I brought walkie-talkies, which were distributed among the vehicles in our group and greatly facilitated communication between the crews. Without those radios, Dena and Ron Humbert would have not have been able to share their observations of roadside herpetofauna with riffle-obsessed ichthyophiles, and most of us would still be trying to catch up with Steve, our trip leader and high-performance pace car driver.

Our group visited Paint Rock River. (Bruce's trip to Sipsy River is described on pp. 7-8.) The first site we came to was disappointing. The rain-swollen stream was turbid, swift and deep, so we went farther upstream. The middle site was much better. Water was clear enough for snorkeling and shallow enough for dipnets and seines. We parked in a small lot, located conveniently near a seiner-friendly boat ramp, and everyone hit the water. Clarity was sufficient to allow fish-watching and several members donned masks and snorkels. Early collecting efforts were dominated by dipnets and small seines, and solitary collectors and twosomes.

Later, as larger nets were unrolled, collectors coalesced into energetic groups of perfectly choreographed riffle-kickers (Fig. 1). Collective efforts proved much more productive for numbers of fish and numbers of species. Excitement ensued as minnows, madtoms, and darters were pulled from the seines. Some went into a variety of unusual containers (including modified drinking bottles, jars, small plastic tubs, and buckets), but many more were examined and quickly released. This site also produced some spectacular rock bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*), which received a lot of attention.

Afterwards, in the town of Estill Fork, we lunched at an oddly uninhabited general store that contained only a couple of vending machines. Those who had stashed some of Casper's





Fig. 2.

Herpetological bycatch: Heather Smith examines a softshell turtle seined while collecting fish. Photograph by the author.

MoonPies lunched faster (and better) than the store's candy- and cracker-customers, but everyone fed expeditiously and sped off to the uppermost site.

This site was even better than the last—although our appearance had the unintended effect of rousting a family of local anglers from their fishing hole. The little group of frustrated fisherfolk were good-natured but incredulous. They were astonished that we were trying to catch tiny fish, that we were doing it for fun, and that most of us had driven quite a distance to do so. The fish at this site were especially memorable. The northern studfish (*Fundulus catenatus*) were bigger and more abundant than I had ever seen before. Heather, working a grassy riffle, collected a softshell turtle (Fig. 2), along with some blueside darters (*Etheostoma jessiae*), a species of interest to Brian Skidmore. The two of them worked together to find more. As sometimes happens, fish disappear only after you start looking for them. The blueside darters proved elusive, but they were able to collect one more specimen.

As collecting, and collective energy, waned, a longnose gar was seined near the spillway by a group led by David Ramsey and Charles Ray. Confident that better gar were to be had, the rest of us organized a full-scale assault on the pool where the displaced anglers had been fishing earlier. John Bongiovanni and I manned a 20-foot seine in deep water (safely, of course, due to our natural buoyancy) and overlapped with Rob and Heather on a 10-foot net in water of moderate depth. The result was another impressive gar (Fig. 3)—and subsequent debate over which of the two gar was larger, toothier, and more impressively pigmented.



Fig. 3.

Gar-gangtuan catch: The author admires the largest fish in Paint Rock River, a longnose gar. Photograph by Dena Dickerson.

Repeated seine hauls through the pool provided shiners by the hundreds, and a formidable taxonomic challenge as we tried to determine field characters of Tennessee, palezone and rosefin (*Lythrurus ardens*) shiners as they swam in our improvised pen. Judiciously avoiding the endangered palezones, Tyler carefully removed a few of the beautifully colored Tennessee and rosefin shiners, placed them in buckets, and completed our small collection of aquarium fishes.

### Banquet and Auction

Conventioneers returned from the field with little time to spare before the banquet. Fish were transferred to larger containers, catches compared, and trades proposed over fish-filled coolers while clean-up commenced. After some fast showers, our group made up three grab bags of fish prizes to add to the auction stash. Members drifted downstairs as the food was brought in and needed little prompting when the dishes were uncovered. After a brief feeding frenzy, President Stallsmith addressed his constituents, giving a special welcome to first-timers and announcing this year's education and research grant recipients. After Chip Rinehart, Dustin Smith, and Fritz Rohde were designated as next year's hosts, and Columbia, South Carolina, as next year's meeting location, and after everyone had gotten their fill of food, the serious business of the evening began.

Auction duties were shared by Phil Nixon, auctioneer, and Jeff Geyer, demonstrator. Phil gave a spirited description of each and every item, large and small, offering suggestions

## *Sipsey River Collecting Trip Report*

NANFA president Bruce Stallsmith led a group of about a dozen conventioners on Saturday's collecting trip to the Sipsey Fork of the Black Warrior River. The group traveled west from Huntsville on the interstate for about an hour and a half toward Bankhead National Forest. Bruce provided walkie-talkies to assist the caravan in communicating while on the road.

Driving rains that morning didn't bode well for collecting. When we first arrived the samplings weren't very productive. The walk down to the river was long and steep, but the ground was rocky and sandy so that the path was stable and not slippery. The water was higher than Bruce had seen before and, despite the rain, was pretty clear. The site included a beautiful gorge with overhanging stone cliffs with rivulets falling over the sides. The bottom of the river was sandy, with long pools and scattered small riffle areas. Pat Johnson and Mark Otnes snorkeled upstream while the rest of us seined downstream.

We caught the following fish: burrhead shiner (*Notropis asperifrons*), Alabama shiner (*Cyprinella callistia*), largescale stoneroller (*Campostoma oligolepis*), blackspotted topminnow (*Fundulus olivaceus*), Tuskaloosa darter (*Etheostoma douglasi*), speckled darter (*E. stigmaeum*), river darter (*Percina shumardi*), Mobile logperch (*P. katha*), muscadine darter (*Percina* sp.), shadow bass (*Ambloplites ariommus*), longear sunfish (*Lepomis megalotis*, including one large, colorful male), warmouth (*L. gulosus*), and spotted bass (*Micropterus punctulatus*). Other interesting animal life included several giant millipedes in the parking lot—about 1/2" to 2" long. And at one point, someone was seining with a skink happily perched on his head.

When we were ready to leave, the snorkelers were still way upstream, so a few people had to go look for them. It turned out that the snorkelers had discovered some nice, large riffles that were full of fish. This was different from conditions downstream, so they all stayed a little longer. The site was beautiful and ideal for fish observation because of the clear water. Alabama shiners were seen spawning. Mark Otnes saw males with a red tail, white trim, and blue dorsal fin. He was snorkeling with an aquarium net.

After snacks in the parking lot, we headed to a second spot that wasn't too far—perhaps a 5-10 minute drive—away. This spot was at Borden Creek in the Sipsey Wilderness, a subunit of the Bankhead National Forest. We parked by a trailhead for a hiking trail through the Wilderness. Borden Creek is a tributary to Sipsey Fork of the Black Warrior River. The site was heavily wooded and more shaded than the first site, but like the other the water was very clear and there were lots of rocks and riffle areas.

We found many fish in the riffles, including largescale stoneroller, Alabama shiner, Tuskaloosa darter, speckled darter, Warrior darter (*Etheostoma bellator*), redspot darter (*E. whipplii artesia*), and bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*). Brady Porter assisted with identifying the darters and he kept samples for genetic analysis. He was pleased to find the undescribed Muscadine darter.

on just how it could be used and by whom. Phil showed real marketing savvy by combining items, especially the not-too-popular "treatment" for green water, into novel and attractive combinations with more desirable products, like brine shrimp hatcheries. Jeff, however, had the more challenging job of selecting the next item, displaying it, tantalizing the audience with it, and then running it out to the winning bidder. Jeff's occasional commentary and imaginative modeling really sold most of the items. Bidding was especially spirited on some items, but no donation went unsold, including the surplus decals Casper made for the directional signs. These giant topminnow silhouettes were extremely popular. It seemed like

everyone wanted one to take home as a keepsake. Action was particularly heated, though, on the one-of-a-kind donations. The crown jewel of the donated material, though, had to be the 100-gallon tank set-up. Josh Geyer won that bid—and confirmed that his dad was one heck of a "pitch" man. After the auction, members lined up in front of Rob and his tally sheet, to pay their bills and enrich the coffers of NANFA.

### **Homeward (and Other Destinations) Bound**

We checked out early the next morning, amidst a flurry of departing conventioners. As I waited in line, I watched an

The snorkelers again were far away from the seiners, upstream to a side tributary. Mark Binkley went to get them when it was time to return to Huntsville for the banquet, but he discovered some big pools that hadn't yet been checked out. He and Pat Johnson found some redeye bass (*Micropterus coosae*) that caused them to linger at the site while the rest of us called it a day.

### *Sunday's Trip to Flint River*

On Sunday, some of us headed back to the Flint River, where Casper Cox had led a group the day before. The weather was beautiful—quite different from Saturday morning.

Casper took a caravan of eight or nine cars to a site just downstream of a dam. Here the nets pulled up some interesting catches. Casper and Pierre Gagne chased down a huge bowfin (*Amia calva*) almost directly below the dam's concrete wall. A short time later, one seine yielded so many bluegill, warmouth and black crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*) that someone called it “enough for a fish fry.” Downstream were some beautiful rainbow darters (*Etheostoma caeruleum*) in spawning colors, one of which was destined for a trip to California. Alabama banded sculpin (*Cottus carolinae infernalis*) were also found in the riffle areas, as were stonerollers, topminnows, snubnose darter (*Etheostoma simoterum*), and greenside darter (*E. blennioides*).

As the morning wore on, many NANFAns left to get on the road to return home or to head to the airport to catch a plane. The numbers dwindled so that by lunchtime only about four cars remained. Casper took us to a local barbecue joint that served the local culinary specialty—white barbecue sauce with chicken.\* After eating lunch, we headed to a second site near a canoe livery. Casper struck up a friendly conversation with the owner of the livery, who allowed everyone to park their cars and go down to the river on his property. It turned out that this man is pretty active in a local organization dedicated to conservation issues concerning the Flint River.

By this time, though, the remaining faithful were pretty exhausted, so the fishing was minimal. Casper and Ranger Bob did muster up enough energy to practice their “power seining” technique. They ran full-speed ahead with their seine downstream in pursuit of blotched chub (*Erimystax insignis*). Their dedication paid off, though, with several nice specimens.

— Susan Binkley

\* I worked out a recipe that's a pretty good imitation of the Huntsville white barbecue sauce. It's delicious on any kind of chicken including baked chicken: 1/2 cup mayonnaise, 1/4 cup vinegar, 1/8 cup water, 1/2 teaspoon salt (or to taste), 1/4 teaspoon pepper (or to taste), 1 teaspoon sugar, 1 Tablespoon lemon juice.

older woman with a dragon-crested scepter in her hand chat with the desk clerk. She was explaining to the clerk that, although she was a witch, she only practiced “white” witchcraft. The woman probably seemed no less odd than the other departing conventioners—their brails and dip nets in hand chatting about the colorful little fish that they were taking home with them.

For many members, though, Huntsville was only a beginning. Much of the post-breakfast discussion Sunday centered not so much on the previous days' discoveries, but more so on sites that would be visited in the days ahead. Our own group made final plans for a parabolic return to central

Mississippi, via Burgess Falls and Tishomingo, where we searched not for fishes but for salamanders. For others, though, the focus was definitely on native fishes, as information on snorkeling and collecting sites was eagerly exchanged amidst departures. The excitement of their “finship” was a tribute to convention organizers Bruce Stallsmith, Ruth Fledermaus (Bruce's wife), Casper Cox, and Steven Ellis. They put together a fun-filled, action-packed meeting that gave us all first-hand experience and appreciation for the region's aquatic fauna, and that challenged us to go out and do it all over again on our own.

For details on this year's convention, turn the page! ➔