

# 2009 Convention Recap: Part 1

Brian Skidmore

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

**A**fter 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.



© Brian Skidmore

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



© Brian Skidmore

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



© Brian Skidmore


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.

...continued in the next issue of AC 



© Brian Skidmore

Fig. 7.

Doug Dame busily aquascaping the Florida natives display tanks.