

What in the World is a Darter Hunt?

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(photos on page 16)

Looking for something a little different to do on a weekend during the month of May? Here's an annual event that has free, guided collecting trips to several localities in southeastern Minnesota. The trophies in this pursuit are, of course, darters. Minnesota may not be an epicenter of darter diversity, but we do boast a few gems (e.g., Banded, Iowa and Rainbow). There is also a smorgasbord of other species regularly collected such as Southern Redbelly Dace, Stonecat and Banded Killifish. The Minnesota Aquarium Society (MAS) sponsors the event and it's open to all MAS and NANFA members. This is very much a family affair so spouses and children are welcomed too. MAS (now 81 years young) was founded in 1931 by some St. Paul residents who maintained fish ponds in their yards.

The first Darter Hunt I attended was in the early 1990s. When no one offered to organize it the following year, I stepped up and have led two and sometimes three outings every year since. Some excursions are lean with as few as four attendees, but generally 10-15 persons show up. NANFA members who have made appearances include Twin Cities' residents Tom Ward, Troy Brantner, Jared Cruz, Robin Engelking and Konrad Schmidt. In 2010, Peter Unmack joined us while he was in town as an MAS guest speaker. The late John Bondhus (NANFA's founder) also attended a hunt or two and brought his two children who always had a blast seining and dip netting.

A Department of Natural Resources permit is required to collect darters and MAS has an annual limit of 75 which has so far satisfied every one's needs, but the group can also take minnows and other species designated as bait fish. Stipulations of the permit include any fish or offspring kept for home aquariums cannot be bought, sold or traded, and of course, ever again released. I also have a personal stipulation that a Darter Hunt will *never ever* be scheduled on Mother's Day! As for myself, it's the perfect way to spend Mother's Day, but I don't believe most wives/moms would see it that way!

Participants need only bring their exuberant enthusiasm, waders, sunscreen, clothing for spring weather (including a change just in case of a dip) and BYOB (Bring your own buckets or styros) to transport the "fruits" of their labor home. Since every weekend in May is a crap shoot weather-wise, I gather emails and keep everyone posted whether or not a scheduled trip is a go or a bust.

The first trip is the longest day because we try to collect at three sites. We meet at the scenic town of Welch which is nestled in a hollow at the foot of towering bluffs along the Cannon River. After arming ourselves with waders, seines, dip nets and float buckets, we hit the water in groups of four or five. Some collectors kick net solo, but most work on a seine gang where two people hold the net and the rest kick over boulders downstream into the net. The booty is scooped from the seine and

placed in float buckets. When I feel we have more than enough fish, we head back to the bank and put our catch in plastic Kritter Keepers for viewing. Even though the bright, green-colored Banded Darters are the quarry here, young and old alike are fascinated with the "spineless wonders" in the streams such as crayfish, stonefly larvae, hellgrammites, water scorpions, and yes, even lowly leeches. After a thorough and careful selection of keepers, most of the catch is released back into the Cannon River. Many in the group bring nothing home but photos and simply enjoy discovering the secret life of streams. The physical exertion in the stiff currents takes its toll and every one welcomes lunch at the Trout Scream Café which is just a short skip and hop from the river.

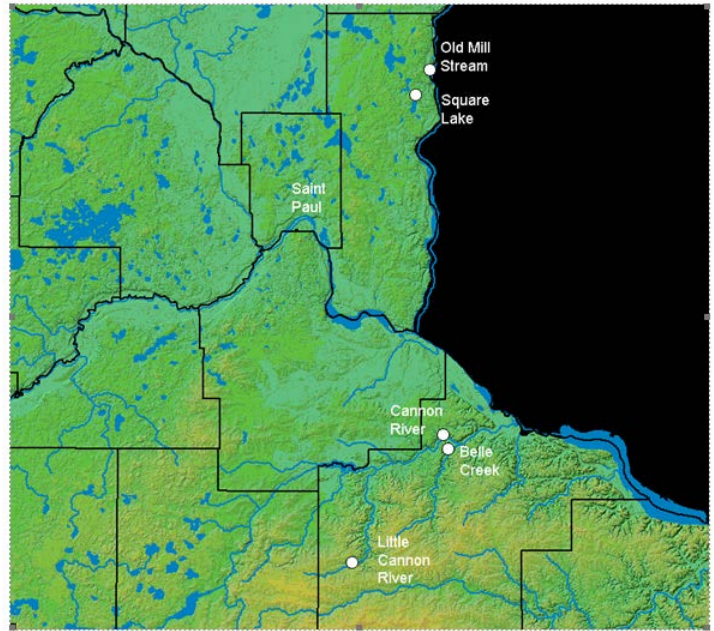
After lunch, the caravan of cars rolls out of Welch to nearby Belle Creek. This site is located on state forest land in another deep, but narrower valley. The stream community here is very different from the larger Cannon River and the species of choice is the Fantail Darter. We also help monitor a Rainbow Darter reintroduction which was an Eagle Scout project of Bryan Stefansky in 2004. After counting and photographing specimens and admiring the vibrant colors in the males, all are returned to finish their mission of hopefully someday spreading downstream into Cannon River where they also once occurred. The last stop for this trip is the headwaters of the Little Cannon River. Here the landscape is gently, rolling hills which are mostly pasture and some crops.

Darters are abundant, but not the only prize we seek here. Many love sampling the beautiful Southern Redbelly Dace, Blacknose Dace, Common Shiner and Central Stoneroller. I used to allow the group to take some Redside Dace home, but since this species has been proposed for Special Concern status in Minnesota, I insist all are released after deeply appreciating their gorgeous red color and uniquely large, upturned mouths.

The second outing begins at the historic town of Marine on St. Croix. The town was the first settlement in Minnesota where a saw mill was built on Old Mill Stream. Today, the site lies in the valley of the St. Croix River National Wild and Scenic River. Upstream of town, Old Mill Stream holds a fly angler's dream of trophy Brook Trout, but near the mouth, large, chunky Rainbow Darters dwell in the riffles and pools. Again, our catch is viewed by all in the plastic Kritter Keepers and a few gems are selected before releasing the rest. We have to keep our energy up for the last leg of the Darter Hunt and most order a sandwich from the Deli at the Marine General Store. Everyone assembles outside at a Gazebo in the city park to dine with good company, and of course, carry on the never ending discussion about fish. The final destination for each Darter Hunt is Square Lake County Park. The lake has had the notable distinction for many years of being one of the clearest in Minnesota and the reason why so

many scuba divers frequent its depths. The lake is also home to the last species on our groups' wish list: Iowa Darter and Banded Killifish. Scuba divers and other park users descend on us from "land and sea" to check out what the raucous hubbub is all about. The divers express amazement and an increased awareness about what they've seen underwater. The others learn about a lesser known member of the perch family and marvel that darters are related to the Walleye, Minnesota's State Fish.

MAS sponsors an annual fish show every April and there is a native fish class. In the past, Southern Redbelly Dace and Spottfin Shiner have made appearances. However, most notably, a male Rainbow Darter took Reserve Best of Show in 2002. (Photo on p. 16). I entered the little fellow as a patriotic nod to the events of 9/11/2001. He was placed in a tank containing white gravel and with his intense red and blue stripes, many members and visitors were captivated by his striking colors and adorable disposition. Many could not believe he had been collected a year before during the 2001 Darter Hunt. It was the first year the judges awarded a Reserve Best of Show. They were completely torn between my darter and a South American killifish. I must confess that David Schlessner, author of *North American Native Fishes for the Home Aquarium*, was one of the judges that year and he **may have** been responsible for pushing the Rainbow over the top. But, I should also add, the number of judges at our show usually number around 10-12, so David wasn't the only one to deem this fish as outstanding!



Darter Hunt collecting sites



Peter Unmack, front



Jenny Kruckenberg (left) viewing and enjoying the catch.



NANFA founder, John Bondhus, center back.

MINNESOTA DARTER HUNT

see page 28

(photos by Konrad Schmidt)



Banded Darter, *Etheostoma zonale*



Iowa Darter, *Etheostoma exile*



Rainbow Darter, *Etheostoma caeruleum*, (Reserve Best of Show 2002) ©Ted Jolivette