

Back to the Swamp

Dustin Smith

Lexington, South Carolina 29072
dsmith73@hotmail.com

It was nearly ten years to the day when I once again set foot in the Okefenokee Swamp. A lot has changed in ten years, both for me personally and for NANFA as a group. I have three children that I didn't have then and the responsibility that goes along with them. NANFA has been transformed in a positive way by the addition of the Forum, tremendously increasing the organization's outreach and education capabilities. Key members have served and moved on and others have thankfully taken their places.

When Michael Wolfe approached me about making an anniversary trip "Back to the Swamp," I saw it as both an opportunity to see some cool fish that I haven't seen in a while and to take a fresh look at NANFA and the current active membership. I offered to write a recap of the last trip and compare the camaraderie and species collected between trips.

The original trip was an idea that I had and expressed to our then-Georgia regional rep Steven Ellis. I had spent a lot of time travelling around my home state and got the itch to see some different fish. Steven took the idea and ran with it, making it far better than I had even imagined. Steven was an enthusiastic and active member of NANFA at the time and is an all-around great guy. One of my all time favorite moments collecting came when Steven, still dressed in waders and a machete, entered McDonalds and ordered the Big N Nasty. The poor girl working the register didn't know what to make of him.

At the time of the original trip, I was still very much a newbie. I had been out collecting around South Carolina for a while but this was my first trip out of state. This would also be my first opportunity to get out and meet my fellow NANFAns and I could not have asked for a better group. The list consisted of the NANFA President Bruce Stallsmith and his wife Ruth, David Smith, former president Dick Stober, Charles

Ray, and Jody Schnerrenberger from Alabama; The Snorkelmeister Casper Cox and his son Coby and Lamarr Eddings from Tennessee; BOD member Martin Moore from Mississippi; Doug Dame from Florida; Geoff Kimber and family from Kentucky; Steven Ellis along with his stepson Jonathan Massie and his friend Joey Gullo from Georgia; and Chip Rinehart and I from South Carolina. This was a Who's Who of southeastern native fish hobbyists and I was about to get some serious schooling on collecting techniques, native fish identification, and fish transportation. Better yet, I made friends that weekend that have lasted for over a decade now and saw fish that I have rarely seen since in such glory.

The original trip began with everyone meeting up and trading fish they had collected along the way. I saw my first Rainbow Shiners (*Notropis chrosomus*), not in a flowing stream in Alabama, but in a hotel room in far southern Georgia and I will never forget how otherworldly they looked. The electric glow of this fish in color is not something that can be easily or accurately described. I also saw the largest pygmy sunfish I have ever seen. They were Banded Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma zonatum*) and came from some secret spot in Alabama. Chip and I contributed Bluebarred Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma okatie*) and Blackbanded Sunfish (*Enneacanthus chaetodon*) and fish were passed around.

Our base for this trip was Waycross, Georgia, and we made trips to the surrounding swamps, creeks, and rivers. Steven had scouted the area prior to our arrival so we had choice picks for our sampling. The first spot we sampled was Perch Creek just west of town. Here we found our first Okefenokee Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma okefenokee*) and Pygmy Killifish (*Leptolucania ommata*), which were our target species. They were fairly common here along with Everglades

Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma evergladei*) and Lined Topminnow (*Fundulus lineolatus*). The following day we headed to a swampy spot called Twelve Mile Post. This spot produced much of the same species as well as Golden Topminnows (*Fundulus chrysotus*) (photo on page 19) and some very impressive sirens (*Siren* sp.). The highlight of the trip was the drought-stricken Satilla River, which was so low that you could easily walk across it. The low water made it possible to collect large numbers of Taillight Shiners (*Notropis maculatus*) and Brook Silversides (*Labidesthes sicculus*). The shiners were bright pink and the silversides were electric greenish-yellow with bright red noses. I had never seen either of these species colored up this much and it was a sight to behold.

The follow-up trip started March 29th, 2012, and was once again based in Waycross but this time planned by new Georgia rep Michael Wolfe as an anniversary trip of sorts to bring together the current local crowd and revisit some of the same sites in the interest of fellowship and great fish. Michael recently became the Georgia regional rep and has since made his region one of the most active in NANFA. This trip coincided with another of Michael's great projects, that of attempting to visit all of the type localities in Georgia to see if the species described from there are still present. This trip was also well attended, especially by Georgia members, including Alejandro Perez, Keith and Becca Hudgins, Dave Ramsey, and Michael. They were joined by Mike Lucas of New York; Mark Binkley of Ohio; and Chip Rinehart, Stephen Beaman, Rob Godzinski, and myself from South Carolina.

Michael, Alejandro, Rob, and Mike had already spent some time in the Alapaha River drainage and been able to observe a number of fish. They started well west of Waycross and worked their way to the east seeking other species before the rest of the group arrived.

The first site we visited was Kettle Creek and was part of Michael's type locality project. This creek, found in what is now the town of Waycross, is the type

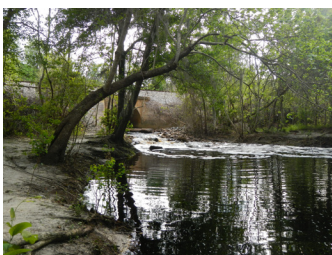
locality for the Okefenokee Pygmy Sunfish. We searched in vain for this little guy but did not turn up any, though we did produce many very colorful Pygmy Killifish and Golden Topminnows.

The group then visited many of the 2002 sites with much the same results. At Perch Creek we found both Everglades and Okefenokee Pygmy Sunfish still present with addition of Pygmy Killifish, Bluespotted Sunfish (*Enneacanthus gloriosus*), and Banded Sunfish (*Enneacanthus obesus*), among others. At Twelve Mile Post, we found much of the same as before with the addition of a few Mud Sunfish (*Acantharchus pomotis*). Unfortunately, the Satilla River site we previously visited was now marked "No Trespassing," so the group was forced to visit another site further upstream. This site also contained nicely colored Taillight Shiners, though it required a little more work to produce them.

After sampling the Satilla, the groups split up again, with Mike and his original group heading south to further sample the southern part of the swamp and the rest heading west. One of the fish that has eluded me throughout my time collecting in South Carolina is the Banded Sunfish. I have seen them sparingly in North Carolina, Florida, and northern Georgia, but never in my own state. Michael's group had taken quite a few over in the Alapaha River so we decided to look that way for some and see what else we could find along the way. After enjoying a meal of barbecue and fried mullet, we went searching. We ended up getting Bandeds along with Pugnose Minnows (*Opsopoeodus emiliae*), more Mud Sunfish, and lots of Everglades Pygmy Sunfish.

All in all, we collected well over 20 different species. While this may not seem terribly impressive to those from species-rich states, it is quite an accomplishment in the darkly tannin-stained streams and swamps of southern Georgia.

My first trip to the swamp gave me inspiration to pursue my interest in natives. I learned many tricks under the watchful eyes of the likes of Dick Stober, Steven Ellis, and others. I enjoyed the fellowship and camaraderie as much or more than I did the fish. My return trip proved to me that, though the faces may have changed, the friendships and shared admiration of our native fishes remains very much the same. 🐸



Kettle Creek
Photo by
Michael Wolfe

Images by Micahel Wolfe



Twelve Mill Post: Rob Godzinski, Keith Hudgins, Mike Lucas and Stephen Beaman (left to right)



Mike Lucas pondering life as he wades in the Alapaha River



Alapaha River



Dipnetting on the railroad tracks. A technique developed by SC members. Chip Rinehart, Dustin Smith, Alejandro Perez and Stephen Beaman (left to right)



Siren



Flier

Fish in Focus: *Elassoma evergladei*

Images provided by Michael Teesdale



male



female



male



male

Fishes Found in the Okefenokee Swamp

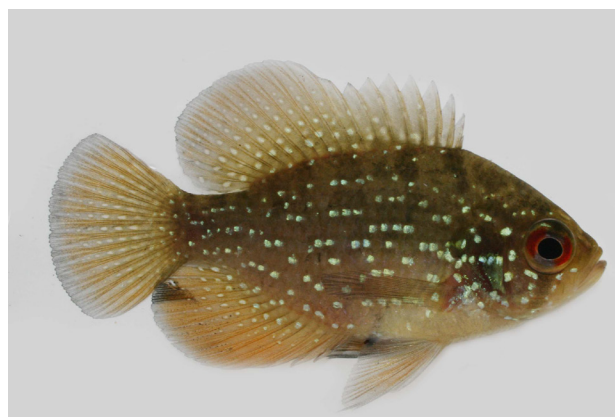
Images provided by Dustin Smith



Golden Topminnow - Cooper River drainage, South Carolina



Brook Silverside - Wateree River drainage, South Carolina



Bluespotted Sunfish - Edisto River drainage, South Carolina



Taillight Shiner -
Lynches River, South Carolina