

Blue Ridge Parkway Snorkel Camp

Breeding Colors, Splendid Behaviors

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(All images by Todd Crail unless otherwise noted.)

Todd Crail, his wife Erica, and their Ohio friends had already been camping near Linville Falls, North Carolina for a few days before my son, Cobalt, and I arrived late Wednesday evening on May 12, 2010. Just as we drove up and were being introduced to shadowed female voices with names that began with J, a helicopter thundered in low and circled the campground, not once but three times descending ever closer with its searchlight sweeping the treetops. Some were concerned that we had been involved in some type of criminal activity, but knowing I had my NC fishing license, I was untroubled. Those black helicopters again. Ed Scott and Michael Wolfe had already set up camp; Ed in his vintage VW and Michael in his tent. Susan Chambers was car camping and the J ladies (Jen, Jenny, and Jennifer) had arranged their tents.

After an awkward sleep on hard ground and a quick morning breakfast, we drove west into Yancey County, and then bore northwest following the wide North Toe River upstream just beyond Loafers Glory. We then cut sharply west following the road that overlooked the Cane River. Parking at a wide spot I took a quick look but the visibility in the river was not to my liking. So while the guys descended with seines and the ladies with hammocks, I drove determined upstream past a river-rocked general store, on past many patches of newly tilled fields, and well beyond to the US 19E near Burnsville. Turning up alongside the Cane River, I found the ruins of a great dam. Returning with great enthusiasm to the lounging readers and turbid-water snorkelers, I assured them a promise that clear water was before us. After a stop at the rocky store for some NC Cheerwine, the regional beverage of choice, and lunch provisions, we were soon snorkeling among the mound builders, the pearlescent shiners, and



All the Greensides below the broken dam at Cane River oddly had dark caudal peduncles yet appeared quite healthy. Casper Cox

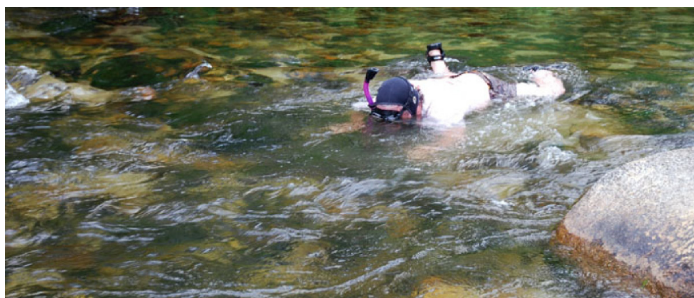
black-caudaled Greenside Darters. Species were counted, admired, and photographed in the cool, clear water. With the ancient ramparts rising from the creek bed and towering above the flowing pool below, the structure looked like Gondor from the epic “Lord of the Rings”. Danger lurked in the clear water with twisted, protruding rebar and frayed, rusty steel cables, but the fish beckoned us on with color, displayed finnage, and behaviors until the cold eventually drove us from the water. A creek-side lunch in the sunshine was followed by another immersal, this time downstream of the lounging ladies and with my wetsuit now double layered. There I found silt and fewer fish and none of the excitement that was experienced below the broken dam. I returned upstream for another round of activity in the clear pools and riffles. Striped Shiners dominated the high mounds while the River Chubs stayed just beyond our easy view. Tennessee Shiners were hinting at the translucent orange glow that was yet to burst into a pulsing orb. Mirror Shiners were flagged with well marked dorsal fins. The fish were gathering for the

spawn but not quite ready it seemed. Male sunfish had marked their preferred sites with a dish of clean sand and gravel. It was an ideal location and the ancient dam standing over us made for an awesome experience.

The sun was dropping to less than two hands and the shivering had again taken hold of all except Todd in his Greenfin Darter quest. Car horns called him from the water and we dried in the late afternoon sun, gathering our belongings for a GPS promise of nearby Blowing Rock BBQ and banana pudding. All were shared and passed about at the long table of this fine establishment.

Back at the campsite a wrinkled white sheet was pulled tight, camp chairs terraced, and soon images were being projected onto the campsite screen. Images of Bluenose and Rainbow Shiners, carnivorous plants, Ed Scott's latest film, "The Minnow Parade," and finally, today's images of Gondor, tuberculated heads, and new-found darters which took us late into the night.

Day 2 found us following the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP) east and halting alongside Price Lake for a 2.5 mile circumventing hike. Ed and I were meandering slowly, admiring the flora and noting the spring flowers still in form and with a slight but persistent hope of finding a cluster of Tulip Morel, perhaps still standing this late in the season. Jack in the Pulpit and Mayapples were still in flower and other fungi were admired along the quiet trail. We crossed a footbridge and then another with catfish, shiners, and suckers below. It is hard for me to resist such temptation and I could not again. Backtracking to the van, I left a note on Todd's windshield and drove to the nearby trail access and boat launch. I quick-footed wetsuitless, back to the creek with both Ed's and my camera mask and snorkel in hand. I eased into the small creek just downstream of a pool but an elderly fisherman had



The author snorkeling bare skin, oblivious to the chilly May waters.

waded upstream and reduced the visibility. The slightest substrate disturbance released silt and debris, but with patience I was able to make out the White Suckers, trout, and bullheads along with Rosyside and Blacknose Dace. I snapped a few photos and then my camera screen went dark, shorting out. I fumbled with Ed's video setting and caught a few blurred movements, but with just enough focus to document the shadowed fish. With the group likely returned from their hike, yet still wanting to study the riffle above for darters, I reluctantly climbed out of the water, began walking back and soon met Ed coming to fetch me.

After a long lunch in a pig-decorated eatery, maps offered the promise of a town named Happy Valley, which was also marked with a canoe icon, and thus beckoned us eastward. The Yadkin River Blueway canoe launch was tarnished with murky flowing water and minimal visibility but seine hauls of fish were coolered for Susan and her aquariums. Moon Pies and bottles of Cheerwine were passed around and later purchased to share with friends beyond the normal distribution routes. Fuzzy floaters, big Dandelion-like fluff, drifted by, making for an enchanting scene but I desired a full-body immersion.



The Blue Ridge Parkway BBQ Gang clockwise from the bottom left beginning with Erika, Chris, Michael, Ed, Casper, Cobalt, Jen, Jenny, Emily, Susan and Todd.

Wet from wading and now eager for a clear-water snorkel, we turned back west toward waters I had visited during my earlier North Carolina wanders. At the Wilson Creek bridge we looked down at beautiful,

smooth-flowing, clear water with an invitingly clean, sandy substrate. A quick scout by Todd found access which was marked by a Bluehead Chub mound and I soon found myself in aquarium-clear waters. Since my main Olympus camera was now waterlogged, I switched to my backup but it only recorded disappointing images. The clarity of the water was stunning and I soon focused on what was before me. I eased into a deep pool lined with logs and the local sunfish crowd. Redbreast Sunfish, Rock Bass, and a Green Sunfish were there while redhorses worked the sandy pockets beyond; Michael recorded several nice images of them gathered and resting, stacked like cordwood. A couple more chub nests were located but with the sun now low and a rumbling sky of darkening clouds, we were urged back to our vehicles. Organizing our caravan, we took off for a quick search to locate another site I remembered. Soon though torrential rains came and with wipers sweeping furiously we turned north and made the steep ascent back to the BRP campsites. The lightning was flashing bright throughout the drive and with the crackling thunder ever closer, I wondered how the others were faring.

Under the pavilion's protection the ladies had prepared a cook fire in the corner and prepared a full meal. We all contributed delicacies to the shared table adding homemade wines, Wisconsin morel cheese, island tinned rum cake, and fresh avocados that complemented the rice, beans, and grilled bratwurst. Everyone finished the meal with slices of birthday-candled cheesecake and a happy song to the newly 53-year old me. Ed remarked that only he amongst us had seen that age already. The white sheet was moved to the pavilion and another swapping of memory cards and cables made for a long evening. A full day of driving, seining, and snorkeling followed by a night of projected images makes for a very long day indeed!

The third day was proclaimed Casper's day of snorkeling and was promised a return to the clear waters of Wilson Creek for a thorough and complete inspection. Cobalt and I preceded this with a breakfast stop at Famous Louise's Rock House Restaurant in Linville Falls which sits astride the juncture of three counties. We ate in Burke County while the eggs were scrambled in Avery County. The register and jelly jars were over in McDowell County. I don't know how they figure taxes in such a place but the table in the county over was a full 2 dollars less for the same meal! I'm

still a bit baffled by the county tax rates and will select my table location a bit more carefully next time.

Arriving at the creek as the others were gearing up, Cobalt and I decided to drive upstream in search of my remembered site. A deep canyon, boulder pools, trout fisherman, and a fish camp community were not what I had remembered but it was intriguing for a future visit. We returned back to the group and then drove east to Johns River and followed it upstream. The water was churning muddy from the night's rain and the seemingly altered landscape increasingly frustrated me. Cobalt pointed out a house of mugs, a small house covered with mugs of all markings and we turned into the driveway for a closer view. Even the fence and mailbox were covered with mugs! Interesting, but by now I was fully bewildered and with the river muddy and opaque we decided to return to the group at Wilson Creek. It is pleasing to see what a protected watershed can provide for a clear stream like Wilson Creek while it is agonizing to witness the muddy Johns River with its adjacent disturbed ground exposed to heavy rains.



A fine mound built by a mighty Bluehead Chub and patrolled by an intruder, the ever expanding population of Warpaint Shiners, not native to Wilson Creek.

In the clear water of Wilson we had an excellent day and we found plenty of species and activity at the Bluehead Chub nests. madtoms, Fireyblack Shiners, Greenhead Shiners, mighty redhorses, and Warpaint Shiners filled our masks and camera lens. Herds of stonerollers grazed for algae, a few tuberculataded males worn weary by their pit-digging activity. Though the water had lost its crystal clarity because of yesterday's torrent, it was still nice in the bright sunshine. We planted ourselves below the mounds and

watched the Blueheads linger just out of reach while Warpaints defended their prized spot above the mound's crest. It is amazing how many stones a chub must gather to build these mounds, at least 1,372 stones, as I gave out counting any more. While observing one of the higher mounds, Ed was able to document a new species of chub, the Chubby Chub, aka the Snorkelmeister, who was actively gathering stones with his mouth and contributing them to an existing mound. The day was filled with wonder and while some were below the surface, others gathered images from above of flowers and snakes and bugs and birds, both by camera and renderings.

With contentment, we drove westward crossing the Swannanoa River to just east of Asheville putting us in Mill Creek. I had been there before on one of my wanders and upon entering the water, four species of darters were immediately in my facemask. A quickly assembled Chubby Chub nest gathered the stream's inhabitants eager for something newly exposed or perhaps the promise of a spawning event to come. Redlines, Fantails, Logperch, and Greensides were in close proximity while Saffron Shiners and Mirror Shiners were jostling above. I was content to stay here for nearly 30 minutes but eventually moved downstream to see what was going on elsewhere. I moved just below Todd and into the waters of the Gilt Darter. Two Gilts, proud and confident, were displaying full finnage, quivering and teasing one another. Tail fins curled, flicking rapidly like a cat's tail, luring each other to attempt caudal fin bites or full-body broadside strikes. With lack of camera, I called out to the others and we were soon all gathered within a couple feet and watching the Gilt battle, the pair oblivious to our presence. For probably 15 minutes we watched their domination dispute as they tumbled and drifted further downstream, well beyond the fight's territorial origin.

Check out: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idijWE94EW4>

By now I was shaking from the cold water and abruptly stood up and proclaimed I had reached complete satisfaction. To end the day and finish the trip with this visual treat was all I could ask for. Todd pursued them further downstream and with his skills, captured some unique and amazing video of this activity that few have ever seen.

Close to Asheville, we used the GPS to locate Salsas, a Mexican-Caribbean restaurant where I once had one of my finest meals ever. Cobalt and I, being

dry and ready, while Todd was still stripping off his gear, departed to arrive early and claim a large table for the group. Already busy inside but with the patio available, the waiter edged three tables together when I promised him hungry folks would soon arrive. Checking the menu, the prices alarmed me and a policy of not breaking the bill individually began to cause concern. When I relayed the policy to the newly arrived group, Michael promised "No worries" and that it was not going to be a problem and he would handle it. We soon ordered from the elaborate descriptive menu and the meal was most excellent. Michael's "no worries" was himself paying for this wonderful meal of appetizers, drinks, and dinner for the entire BRP campers. Thank you Michael very much! We enjoyed a variety of menu items with each of us trying something new which were passed around and shared. While enjoying the meal, we noted and totaled our species count for Mill Creek and reached 21 for our short immersion period with many more possibilities with an extended stay. This is the second time I have been to Mill Creek and the protected watershed upstream beckons an exploration in the future and Salsas is located nicely between Mill Creek and my home in Chattanooga. A double bonus!

Time to say goodbye to all with Cobalt and I heading back to Johnson City, and the others dispersing to their homes. An excellent experience was had by me, and for all I am sure. A hearty thank you to Todd for organizing this trip, the ladies' camping hospitality and their patience while we snorkeled, and to Michael. The fine fish, the wonderful snorkel sites, the late night screenings, the cheesecake celebration, and the new friends all added up to ~~an~~ exciting adventure and a memorable trio of days.



**Famous Louise's Rock House Restaurant
in Linville Falls Fritz Rohde**

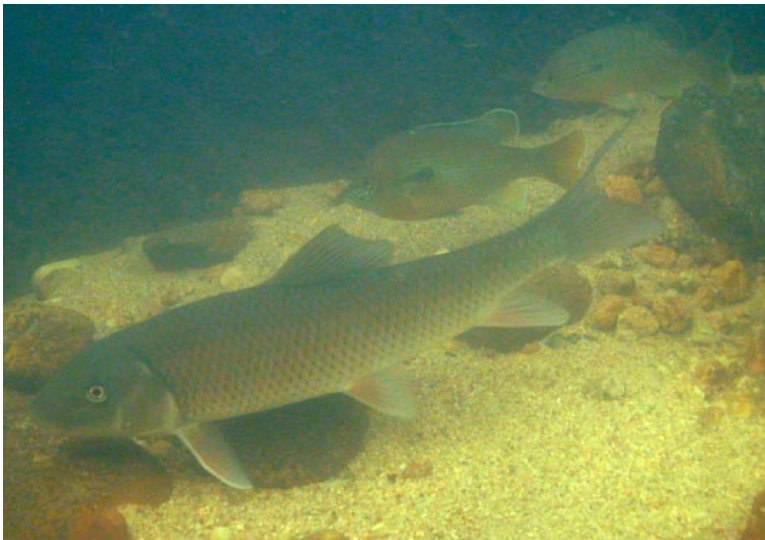
Additional BRP images by Todd Crail



Fish Flurry (River Chubs - Cane River)



**Mountain Brook Lamprey -
Mills River**



**Notchlip Redhorse and Redbreast
Sunfish - Wilson Creek**

**Striped Shiner -
Cane River**

