

A "FISH WALK"?

by Parke H. John, Jr., North East, Maryland

I have written this article to inform you, the membership, of an experience concerning native fish that you may find interesting. As a native-fish hobbyist, I enjoy collecting, identifying, and keeping native fish. I have four tanks, three freshwater and one marine. Most of my collecting is done in Cecil County, Maryland, with some expeditions to shore areas for saltwater fish. These activities have brought a lot of joy to me; however, I have been looking for a way to communicate some of my knowledge and experience to the general public in a way that would present a conservation message. After all, wouldn't it be great if people looked at the creeks, streams, ponds, lakes, swamps, bays, and oceans of our world as the unique, diverse, beautiful, and miraculous biosystems that they are, instead of "It's just a creek."

All this came together one day while I was out birding (yes, another goofy hobby) with a friend, Charlie Gant. Charlie is an avid birder and naturalist and is on the board of directors of the Fair Hill Nature and Environmental Center in Cecil County. On this and previous trips, I had been telling him of my experiences fish-collecting and of my aquarium interests.

We were leading a bird walk in one of our state parks when suddenly he turned to me and asked, "Did you ever think of doing a fish walk?"

I said, "What?"

Charlie said, "A fish walk, just like a bird walk only you look at fish."

At this point, I immediately tried to think of all the reasons why it would not work. There really weren't many, so I told Charlie to give me a week to think about it. A couple of days later I contacted my fish-collecting associate Bob Willman, who much to my surprise thought it was a great idea and said he would help. I then called Charlie and told him to set it up.

The Fair Hill Nature & Environmental Center (FHNEC) responded with a flyer announcing the activity for August 24, 1992, from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. There was also an article in one of the local papers announcing this activity a few days before it occurred.

The big day arrived. The day before, the remnants of tropical storm Andrew had passed through. The weather forecast was for clouds and showers. I expected ten to 20 people. The weather was beautiful. Over 75 people showed up!

I started with introductions and then gave a 20-minute talk on items such as: what and why we do this, safety, licenses and permits, conservation, and a demonstration of fish-collecting techniques. I also talked about field guides and distributed some lists of fish that we might find. Some questions followed, and then we walked to the creek, checking the minnow traps I had set the night before. The first trap was empty. The second trap held a small Pumpkinseed and a 1½"-long Smallmouth Bass. I placed these in small aquariums and the crowd passed them around. Bob Willman then demonstrated the casting net and caught a 7" White Sucker on the first cast. This was also passed around. Another trap was checked, and then Bob and I went to work with the seine. More fish were produced and passed around. Everyone seemed to enjoy this thoroughly. The questions were good and there was a lot of enthusiasm.

The rest of the program continued--the youngest children in the creek with dip nets, the older children using the seine net, and Bob and myself answering questions from adults while wading up and down the creek. The activity wound up about noon.

Judging from all the input I received during and after the activity, the Fish Walk was a success. Many of the people stayed after the program to thank Bob and myself. It was the best-attended event in the history of FHNEC. Another newspaper article followed, in the Wilmington (Del.) News-Journal, Delaware's largest newspaper, which covers northeastern Maryland.

I found this whole experience very rewarding and would recommend that other members give it a try. If you are interested and can find a nature organization to sponsor it, contact me. I can provide an outline of my talk, give you more details, and answer questions.

You will find it as rewarding as I did.

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