

**THE ADVENTURES OF THREE FISH-COLLECTORS IN NORTHWEST FLORIDA
& SOUTH ALABAMA**

by Bill Ballard, Fairhope, Alabama

In early May of 1987, I went on a collecting trip with fellow NANFA members Dick Stober and Mike Lucas. Dick lived then in the same general area where I lived, but Mike came all the way from Rochester, N.Y. to join us.

Dick was really in charge of most of the trip, since he knew where to obtain the fishes we most wanted to catch. These were Notropis welaka and N. hypselopterus, which neither Mike nor I had captured before.

Leaving my place about 9 a.m., we drove to Tallahassee, Florida, which is a distance of about 250 miles. Here we rented a motel room for our headquarters for a day. We then drove a number of miles out of Tallahassee to a rather wide, spring-fed stream. In this stream grew much Sagittaria. In many places it was very thick, forming a solid mat of vegetation. Swimming among the weeds were numerous N. hypselopterus and a few Lucania goodei.

N. hypselopterus very closely resembles the N. euryzonus found in my area, but males have much showier fins. The top of the fish is tan. Beneath this is a thin orange stripe running from behind the head to the base of the tail. Under this is a wide blue-black stripe covering most of the side of the body. The belly is white or light cream. On males, the dorsal and anal fins are large in proportion to the size of the fish (adult male around 2"). The dorsal is sail-like, giving this fish the common name Sailfin Shiner. There is a distinctly visible gap between the lower rear "base" of the dorsal fin and the back of the fish--not the case with N. euryzonus. The Sailfin's dorsal is black at the bottom, then comes a light pinkish band, and the tip is black again. The anal is light brownish-orange with a pink tip. The pelvic fins also have these colors. The tail is light brownish-orange. Females are smaller and duller, with normal, small, shiner fins with a little black in them, and a tan anal fin.

Lucania goodei is about 1½" long with a greenish gray body. A black stripe runs horizontally down the center of the fish. In males, the dorsal and anal fins are bluish, and sometimes there is some red at the base of the tail. The fish we caught here were rather striking because, instead of blue, the anal fins were pink, and there was a bright pinkish red at the base of the tail. Females have no fin colors. These little killifish are peaceful in nature.

We spent several hours here catching numerous hypselopterus and a few Lucania. We put the fish in plastic bags, which were then filled with oxygen from a cylinder we brought along. The bags were put in styrofoam containers and we returned to Tallahassee to spend the night.

The next morning we left Tallahassee and slowly worked our way back west (towards home), stopping at each likely collecting spot we saw. In a small, swampy lake by the side of a road, we caught a few juvenile Banded Sunfish (Enneacanthus obesus). The smaller ones impressed me because their sides were covered with large gold spots. In my area, I find the related Bluespotted Sunfish (E. gloriosus), but at comparable size the latter are not as colorful. At this site, we also caught two Elassoma okefenokee which were a dark gray with blue spots arranged in groups on their sides.

A bit farther along, we stopped by another lake, this time a large one. At first, all we found were some Fundulus chrysotus (available at my home) and Gambusia. Then I started seeing strange-looking fish in about three feet of water. My initial impression of these fish was of a cross between a baby bass and a killifish! Knowing the impossibility of this, I was determined to catch some of these fish. With Mike's help, I seined up some after a few tries. Once caught, it was clear that they were killies, though we did not know what kind. Even Dick--a NANFA member of many years--could not identify them. We had netted two males and one female. All were around four inches long. The males had orange-pink anal fins. All had a series of dots covering the body and dorsal fins. We puzzled over these fish for some time, with Dick suggesting that they might be an odd variation of the Southern Studfish (Fundulus stellifer). Back at home, I finally identified them with the Atlas of North American Freshwater Fishes. They were Seminole Killies (Fundulus seminolis).

In the afternoon we reached the place where the Notropis welaka could be found. I was quite excited because I'd heard so much about them. We found them where a small spring-fed stream entered a deep, clear, larger stream. We caught a good number of them, but only one fish lived up to my expectations. This male had a wide grayish stripe on the body that was covered with bright silvery speckles. The dorsal and anal fins were much enlarged and light yellow with gray borders. The nose was a distinct bright blue. The other fish were much drabber. A few males had a bit of color, but nothing brilliant. Drab males and females are nothing special, which may explain why people sometimes do not find the fish where others previously have. One way to tell an uncolored welaka from similar shiners is to look carefully at the side of the fish. The welaka will have a faint horizontal stripe that looks pinkish or light

lavender. Sexing immature welaka is difficult. I thought I had several more females than I did. Some of my females later turned out to be males. We were probably too early in the year to see fully colored fish.

We also found an interesting variety of N. euryzonus here. I'll discuss these later on.

Also here were numerous L. goodei, but these were a drab variety with faint blue on dorsal and anal fins of males.

We spent another night in a motel. By now our car (Dick's) was overflowing with styrofoam containers and bags. In the motel, we had to resort to putting some bags in drawers to make room for all of them.

The next morning we returned to get a few more welaka and two F. olivaceus, then headed west again.

Our next stop was near Choctawhatchee Bay in a small stream. Here we found a very colorful variety of N. euryzonus. I will now describe these fish. N. euryzonus is very much like N. hypselopterus, but the fins are smaller and plainer and the orange stripe is brighter. On the standard kind, the dorsal is black below and clear or faintly yellowish above. The anal fin is more or less tea-colored. On the variety at the welaka site, the upper dorsal was a distinct yellow-green. On the Choctawhatchee type, the anal fin is a bright orange, especially towards the rear.

We also caught Heterandria formosa, Fundulus cinquulatus, and two kinds of sleeper gobies (Dormitator maculatus and Eleotris pisonis).

Next we went to my family's house at Perdido Bay in Alabama. In this area, I took Mike and Dick to some of my favorite spots, where we caught Sailfin Mollies (Poecilia latipinna), Elassoma evergladei, and Lemon Killies (Leptolucania ommata). These Elassoma differ from the Okefenokee kind by having the blue spots evenly spread over the body rather than gathered in clumps.

After supper with my family, we returned to my place. Dick left us there and continued home.

Next morning Mike and I went out for some brackish and marine collecting. First we went to Destin, Fla., where we snorkeled for marine fish. As Mike was not used to this kind of fishing, I did most of it. I caught some Cocoa Damselfish (Pomacentrus variabilis), bright blue above and yellow below, and Slippery Dick (Halichoeres bivittatus) wrasses. Then I got a great treat: I caught a Jackknife

Fish (Equetus lanceolatus). This is a beautiful fish with a long, curved dorsal fin. The body is light cream with a wide black horizontal stripe that also extends up the dorsal. Another black stripe is in front on the head. This was the first (and only) Jackknife Fish I ever caught.

Nearby, I caught some Pearly Razorfish (Hemipteronotus novacula). These are also attractive. They are odd-looking, with very thin bodies and guilty-looking eyes (as though they had been caught doing something bad). The body is pastel pink with a pearly-colored spot behind the gill. Dorsal and anal fins are pink with light blue lines.

Returning to Pensacola, Florida, I took Mike to a bayou area to catch Fundulus confluentus and Adinia xenica. Just as we arrived, a thunderstorm struck, forcing us to remain in my car. When the storm ended, it was almost dark, so we fished frantically and did catch some of both species.

The next morning, Dick had to catch a plane home. After delivering him to the airport, I finished the trip alone by catching some Notropis signipinnis. This is another colorful shiner. The body is brown on top. Below that is a broad gold stripe. Under this is a nearly black, wide stripe with small gold flecks in it. The dorsal, anal, and tail are yellow with bright orange to crimson borders. The tail also has a black spot at the base. The pelvic fins are light yellow with light orange to crimson borders. The tail also has a black spot at the base. The pelvic fins are light yellow with light orange borders. Maximum size is 3".

With this species, as well as N. euryzonus and N. hypselopterus, the color lasts all year. N. welaka, at least in the wild, is dull during the colder months.

It was great fun going on this trip. I saw new areas and new (to me) fish, and also showed NANFA friends some of my spots.

There was a sad aftermath, however. Most of the freshwater fish developed ich and many died. At the end of June, I returned alone to get more welakas and hypselopterus. This time I did the trip in one frantic day, and kept the fish in styrofoam coolers without the bags. As of now (early December, 1987), I still have five each of welaka and hypselopterus in good health, though the former are not in color.

I think the bags, even with oxygen, had been too crowded.

Another aspect of this collecting trip was treated in "Fringe Benefits," by Richard Stober, AC, Jun-Sept, 1987, 13.