

The Alabammy-Whammy

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Somehow I “signed on” for a December 2005 fish collecting trip to Alabama with Jim Graham and Phil Kukulski. As with most of my adventures and misadventures, the outing sounded like a great idea during the planning stage. After all, it had still been warm just a couple of months ago!

History should have given me a clue that December weather is pretty iffy, at best. In 2004, Jim Graham and Klaus Schoening inveigled me into a South Carolina trip that presented a mixed bag of weather—a couple of t-shirt-and-shorts days followed by a couple of days when I couldn’t pile on enough warm clothes.

An Internet search determined that the odds of pleasant weather for Tuesday, Dec. 8, through Sunday, Dec. 11, were pretty good. The historical high averaged in the 60s and lows in the mid-30s. Pretty nice.

The drive down on Tuesday was pleasantly sunny and warm. We got to our base—a motel in Athens, Alabama, in the north-central part of the state—in the early part of the afternoon. Since Phil was all “geeked up” to get some fish, we went collecting during the last two hours of daylight. Or, to put it more correctly, Phil and Jim went collecting while I took pictures and shouted advice from the bridge.

In truth, I am not nearly as avid a fish collector as I pretend. Additionally, I am a pretty avid photographer. Lately, most of my fish collecting outings have been at least 50% photography, and interest in photography increases as the outside temperature drops.

When I looked over the north side of the bridge crossing the first stream we stopped at on Dec. 8 and saw ice on a log, I knew this was going to be a camera-dominated afternoon.

Early Wednesday morning, 23° F, found us heading east to a couple of collecting sites featured during the 2003

NANFA Convention. While I was busily taking pictures of frost-coated leaves and twigs, Jim and Phil were in the water catching fish. The day turned out to be sunny and pleasant with the temperature getting close to 50°. I stayed both warm and dry and took lots of pictures. The dedicated fish collectors were successful, too, catching some colorful Redline Darters along with other darters and shiners.

Thursday, the “patented Grimes weather” caught up with us as a cooler rain front marched through the state. We drove south about 150 miles to look for Rainbow Shiners. We found some at our first stop. Jim and Phil shamed me into leaving my camera in the van and getting into the water to help with the collecting even though it was raining and the temperature was in the mid-40s.

Since we were catching fish, I decided this collecting thing was a lot of fun despite the weather and was getting into the spirit of things. Then, with about 10 Rainbow Shiners in the bucket, the old saying—*The things you see when you don’t have a camera handy*—again proved to be true.

Jim misstepped and fell into the creek! Once the splashing stopped only his toes and nose protruded above water. What a great photo opportunity!

The van, with my two cameras, was only a couple of hundred yards away.

The big question is: Was it reasonable to ask Jim to stay immersed in 40° water for the three or four minutes it would take me to scoot to the van and back with my camera? Probably not.

As Jim approached the stream bank and began to drain, I did ask, strictly in the interest of photographic history, if he would be willing to re-enter the stream and recreate the “nose and toes” scene. Jim, usually so accommodating, refused to discuss my proposal.



Fig. 1.

Phil Kukulski (l) and Jim Graham (r) seining an Alabama stream on a cold December day. Photo by the author.

After a side trip to Wal-Mart where Jim bought underwear, socks, shirt, and, of course, bib overalls, we resumed collecting. The other spots we tried that day were nearly inaccessible to Jim and myself, but Phil, younger and more agile, managed to collect some spiffy darters and some minnows that appeared to be a *Pteronotropis* species.

It was a long drive back to the motel that evening but, for me at any rate, it was considerably lightened by the memory of Jim's unplanned dip in the creek.

Friday morning went beyond chilly to downright frigid. We had decided to look for Scarlet Shiners, but with the nasty cold, we opted to try a different location for more Rainbow Shiners. The day warmed to 36°, the high for the day. It was plenty warm enough for Jim and Phil to hit the water and for me to take a lot of pictures. (I needed the habitat pictures for a friend's article on Rainbow Shiners. That's my story and I'm sticking to it!)

In short order, Jim and Phil caught enough shiners for our limited needs and we headed back towards what we hoped was a location where Scarlet Shiner would be found.

But first, we detoured to photograph an abandoned cotton mill. I tried to imagine all the activity at the mill when it was in its "glory," with farmers bringing in huge wagonloads of cotton to be "ginned," and bales of processed cotton being loaded on trucks. I have a pretty good imagination and I was able to conjure up quite a sight. A fun spot to visit.

By the time we got to the Scarlet Shiner site, the temperature had dropped to 33°. I decided to stay in the van and start writing this article while Jim and Phil, wearing waders, winter jackets, stocking caps and rubber gloves, hit the water.

Those two guys labored mightily and soon caught a number of shiny silver minnows that looked to be different than what we had caught on earlier outings.

I should have been embarrassed by my lack of collecting spirit, but every time I ventured out of the van to shout a few words of encouragement, I got a blast of that 33° air and decided there was only enough adventure in that creek for two people. Besides, I didn't think it would be fair for me to dilute the fun Jim and Phil were having. That's my story and I'm sticking to it!

The weather forecast for Saturday was for a morning low of 18° and an afternoon high of 45°. I hinted that getting an early start for home might be a good idea. But Phil—who apparently never gets cold—was already planning and plotting collecting sites in the northwest corner of Alabama for Saturday and couldn't be deterred by common sense.

I'll give Phil credit, though. He collected from early morning till dark that day. Jim was in the water with him for all of it except for the last hour. They caught four different kinds of darters and plenty of minnows. They even swore they were having a good time despite the ice that had formed across the stream. Absurd! Their brains must have been frostbitten!

The upside of Jim and Phil sloshing around in these ice-berg-laden waters was that I got to photograph nine darter species that we don't get to see in Indiana.

I intend to return to Alabama for more collecting. (My fishing license is valid until December 2006.) But I'll go back when the temperatures are a bit more comfortable.

Because there are lots of spiffy fish there just waiting to be caught. 🐟