

THE BAIT STORE COLLECTOR

by Konrad Schmidt, Hammond, Wisconsin

I strongly repress the idea of checking bait stores for unusual collectibles. After all, I really prefer being outside and trying my nets in some new and intriguing lake or stream. Even after many years of collecting, I still feel the anticipation as the seine breaks the surface, wondering if there will be something new, or--just as rewarding--a species collected previously, but displaying peak spawning colors. Nevertheless, curiosity eventually wins out. I can't help doing a little window-shopping once in a while.

My first half-hearted attempt several years ago did not produce any great results. At that time, I would feed six dozen Fathead Minnows to three five-pound Oscars and assorted other large cichlids. I would check for oddities, but this would only rarely produce a Brook Stickleback or Northern Redbelly Dace. Checking other Twin Cities bait stores was also not very productive--only White Suckers and occasionally Golden Shiners.

I have since tried rural bait stores and fared considerably better. In Brainerd, Minnesota, I found one dealer that carried six distinct minnow species. Unfortunately, I had neither aquariums nor specimen jars with formalin to key them out at a later time. In Cass Lake, Minnesota, after awkwardly explaining to the dealer what I was looking for, he cordially invited me on a grand tour which included a thorough sampling of all his storage tanks. The catch included Central Mudminnows and Finescale Dace (called Rainbow Chubs in those parts), including one chunky individual more than five inches long. When I was ready to leave, I was amazed at the dealer's refusal to accept any payment for the fish or his time. He found the whole episode quite entertaining and asked me to come again.

Near Madison, Minnesota, a commercial minnow-collector stopped his truck to ask me what I was doing as I was retrieving my minnow traps. I believe that at first he thought that I was moving in on his territory. Again, after a short introduction, I was given yet another friendly tour of his collecting equipment and huge plywood minnow tank complete with aeration system. I asked what kind of minnows he regularly collected. He didn't know because the bait stores he sold to didn't care, but he offered to show me a netful or two, which revealed an enviable hodgepodge of minnows. I yearned for a second, longer look to at least identify a few species, but I was sure he wouldn't care for my dissecting his products to satisfy my curiosity.

Finally, my last unusual (but admittedly not random) find almost (but not quite) turned out to be the "Willow Cat." Northern Fishes by Samuel Eddy and James Underhill cites as

one of the Stonecat's attributes its excellence as a bait fish. They mention that it is sold in bait stores under the previously mentioned alias along the Mississippi River below Lake Pepin. On one collecting trip to southeastern Minnesota, I decided to follow-up this lead and found "Willow Cats" to be readily available in Winona bait stores. Unfortunately, the dozen I purchased, though small, were uncharacteristically chunky for Stonecats. I later positively and regrettably identified them as the much more common Tadpole Madtom.

I hope that this article has generated some interest among others who have "stooped low enough" to explore an occasional bait store here and there. I often collect in other states and would appreciate learning of any "odd ball stuff" which may be available on a local or regional basis. This inside information would be very useful in maximizing quality time collecting in the streams, and minimizing wasted time frequenting seedy bait stores of ill repute.

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