

# **The Bantam Sunfish** **(*Lepomis symmetricus*)**

by Mike Stegall

One weekend back in June of 1972, I visited my parents who live in a small town on the Mississippi River. On that Saturday

morning my father and I went seining for small sunfish to put in my tank back home in Jackson. We drove about 50 miles that day and seined a few Oxbow Lakes with meager results. On the way back as we drove on a levee we saw a bar (borrow) pit which is just about two miles from where I grew up. We decided to stop here since I felt that even if all I caught was a little food for my fish at home, the trip would not have been a complete waste.

I had not seen that particular bar pit in years. It appeared to be quite deep, but it had a good bed of moss (algae) growing along the shore. We walked up to the edge of the water and observed that the moss was working alive. There was about two feet of very shallow water between the shore and the moss. In this narrow strip there were many small saucer size nests, each protected by one or two small sunfish. The first seining netted about 30 of them. I had no idea what species they were. Obviously they were mature, but only about three inches in length. Coloration was observed to be predominantly olive with a brighter hue of green outlining each scale. The dark gill flaps were outlined in red and the eye had red surrounding the pupils. Previously I had not seen a picture or read a good description of this particular sunfish but I thought that I had netted and keyed out just about every species of sunfish indigenous to that area with perhaps the exception of one. So unless I had found *Lepomis stegall* (sic.) which was sorta doubtful, it had to be the bantam sunfish (*Lepomis symmetricus*).

Once back home I placed three pair of these rascals into a twenty gallon high aquarium. Soon it became obvious to me that this was definitely one of the easiest sunfish to adapt to the home aquarium. Although other sunfish are more colorful, the bantam is still very attractive. It is a robust, hardy, active sunfish maturing at the size of approximately two inches. If the tank in which they are maintained has some hiding places they do not appear to be afraid of anything. After a couple of weeks they would beg for food when I entered the room. They are very aggressive bluffers; never saw one actually attack another in their size range. They eat anything from worms to flake food. This same three pair made nests and were in one stage or another of spawning all summer long. I did not bother to raise any of the fry since I visited my parents often and could obtain mature adults with little trouble. To show just how far my over-confidence had reached, in September I decided to put something else in this tank and returned the bantams to their bar pit. This was to be my permanent source and all I had to do would be to return with my trusty net and catch all I need. Little did I know at that time the spring of 1973 would bring the worst flood the Mississippi River has seen since 1927. All the bar pits were flooded until mid summer and when the water finally receded the moss was left high and dry on the side of the levee and

the bantam sunfish were gone. Each year since that time I returned to find no moss and no bantams.

In 1977 the moss began to form again and lo and behold I caught a few fry. This spring there was more moss and I finally caught bantams again. Because they are so difficult to find and particularly to identify in a net full of other species *Lepomis symmetricus* is rarely observed in private collections. And unless my aquarium floods next spring I don't plan to be without them again.