

THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

The Best Sunnie in the Show

Robert Bock

1602 Tilton Drive, Silver Spring, MD 20902
bockhouse@earthlink.net**M**

any native fishes are like spring flowers. Tulips, daffodils, and crocuses erupt from the earth in late March or early April, blazing with brilliant hues of red, yellow, white, and purple. Likewise, many sunfishes, darters and minnows take on their spawning colors as the water begins to warm. (In fact, many native fishes from colder climates need a winter cool-down period before spawning.) In spring, fish that are drab and unremarkable often rival the more colorful tropicals sold in stores.

Mind you now, I don't keep fish just for their colors. (In fact, my wife once asked, "Bob, can't you bring home small colorful fish instead of big ugly ones?") My interest stems from their role in the ecosystem. When I see a body of water, I want to explore it, and bring just a few of its inhabitants home to learn what they feed on, how they breed, and how they behave towards their own and other species. If the fish colors up nicely, so much the better.

Don't get me wrong, though. I respect the fact that other people are interested in fishkeeping primarily because they like colorful fish. But I'm an ambassador for native fishes, and feel an obligation to let people know about the great fish that reside in the waters of our home country. And recently, I came upon another chance to do just that.

I had been collecting longear sunfish (*Lepomis megalotis*) from the C&O Canal, near Tobytown, Maryland. (The C&O was a shipping channel financed by George Washington to provide a trade route to Ohio). The canal runs parallel to the Potomac River, which is too shallow and rocky for shipping, and consists of a series of locks designed to transport barges uphill. It's a historical park now, no longer used commercially.

The calm waters of the canal provide a haven for fish that don't like the fast current of the Potomac. One such fish, the longear sunfish, isn't native to the Potomac, but was probably introduced from the Ohio River. However, the longear is native to western New York state, even though it's now in very

short supply there. Norman Soule, who runs the Cold Spring Harbor Fish Hatchery on Long Island, asked me to ship him some longears for a display on the fishes of New York.

I was angling in the C&O for small longears to ship to Norman when I caught a mature male. He was a beautiful fish, having a rounded shape, slight cephalic hump, and intense colors. The fish was too big to ship to Long Island, but since he was so colorful, I brought him home and put him in one of the free-standing goldfish tubs I have in my back yard.

When my local fish club, the Potomac Valley Aquarium Society, announced it was having a bowl last October, I saw a chance to let people know a little more about native fishes. The weather had been cool, and I knew that my longear was entering winter dormancy. I brought him in the house the night before the show, and started to slowly warm the water I kept him in. When I got to the show, someone was offering heaters for the show tanks. I put the heater in, and set it for 75°F. The fish was drab gray, almost white, with only a faint hint of the color he displayed when I took him out of the canal. But when I returned the next morning, he was in full bloom: wavy, incandescent blue streaks on his gill flaps, sky blue speckles on his flanks, an orange-yellow underside, and splotches of red in his fins.

I was talking with one of the people attending the show, and let it slip that the fish was my entry. "I caught him in the C&O Canal," I said. "On hook and line."

The man looked at me, started to laugh, and then asked, "No, really. Where'd you get him?" I told him again, and he still didn't believe me. I persisted, though, and eventually he took my word for it.

Later, Andrew, the Society's president, told me that my fish had won the show category. Granted, it was the only entry in category, but I'm proud of the accomplishment anyway.

What's even better is that I helped someone to appreciate a local fish that he might otherwise have overlooked. 🐟