

BY THE BLUENOSE OBSESSED

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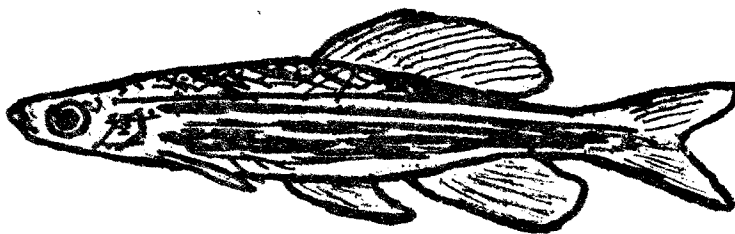
For me, this thing with the Bluenose Shiner (Notropis welaka) began over 15 years ago as a result of seeing some of them on display at an aquarium-society meeting. It was to be nearly a decade before I was able to find and collect this Notropis with its blue nose and flaring dorsal.

I searched from Texarkana, Texas to Welaka, Florida. Surprisingly enough, I found a blue-nosed shiner in Texarkana which turned out to be another species of Notropis, attractive in its own right. I drove down to Welaka and explored the St. John's River without any luck. I did find two color varieties of Lucania goodei, however, so the trip wasn't a total loss.

Quite vivid in my memory is a collecting trip which took place one January in about 1973. Some of us fish nuts were sitting around a kitchen table discussing the Bluenose and transferring to a road map some of the locations we'd learned from an expert at the University of Illinois. On the spur of the moment, we decided to make a trip over to Bogalusa, Louisiana. That evening, we all climbed into my van and drove straight through to Bogalusa, arriving there about daybreak. We ate breakfast at a truck stop and didn't waste any time beginning a search of the area waters. It was so cold that day that wet dip nets swishing through the air froze stiff as a board. We searched and searched until we nearly did the same, but at the end of it all, the only blue noses in evidence were our own.

From time to time over the years, I made many special trips with the same negative results. I was beginning to develop some sort of complex--I would venture forth fully believing each time that the elusive Notropis welaka would escape my net. Sometimes I wondered what I would do with one if I ever caught it. Finally, Dr. Richard Olson of the University of New Orleans offered to take me on a collecting trip to catch the Bluenose. It was one of those bright April mornings. Hermann Eike of the New Orleans Aquarium Society guided us across Lake Ponchartrain toward St. Tammany Parish. Eureka, there they were, those bluenosed critters swimming against the current in this small, clear, shallow creek right in front of my eyes. Inside, I was jumping up and down and cheering wildly; on the outside, of course, I tried to look pretty cool, an image tarnished when I tripped over my loose suspender straps.

Needless to say, great care was taken to bring the fish back alive. Later, in the confusion of moving to a new home, my precious shiners developed a bad case of ich. What the white parasite didn't kill, I did with the cure, which contained a mild formalin solution. Out of the twenty or so fish, I was



NOTROPIS WELAKA, m., spawning color. Blue nose, gray-to-charcoal on back and sides with silver flecks. Dorsal fin, greatly enlarged in spring. Fins tinged with bright yellow and black. Female lacks brighter colors, enlarged fin. Sketch by author.

(Darkened by AC for better reproduction.)

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able to save only two females.

Late the following March, I revisited the area where we had caught the Bluenose just the year before. All we caught were some shiners, which definitely looked like female welaka. It sure was puzzling to catch females without the sign of any males. That evening at home, these new shiners were put under close scrutiny. There were males in the group, but they appeared rather plain and unassuming. I couldn't tell the difference between the new females and the one which had survived my aquarium tragedy. I did notice a faint band of blue across the snout of the new males, but their fins were clear and of normal size and shape.

Two pairs were placed in a 55-gal. aquarium for observation. At this time, I was thinking that I might have some subspecies of welaka. The bodies of the males were spangled just like the Bluenose, but the fins by no stretch of the imagination resembled those of the Notropis welaka I knew. Most males seemed to be mature and close to full-grown. Meanwhile, I had placed the remaining dozen or so in one of my 3'x5' poly-lined ponds out back. About six inches of sand had recently been added as well as some water lilies and hornwort. At the time the shiners were introduced, the water had been cloudy, and it remained so.

Several weeks passed, and I began to notice some startling changes taking place in the males which were in the 55-gal. aquarium. The blue on the nose was becoming more visible, the dorsals were actually elongating and turning black, and the pelvics and anal fins were developing black rays with a tint of yellow. Returning to the pond and carefully peering into

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the still cloudy water, I saw that there too the males had undergone an incredible transformation. To speed the clearing process, I placed a few clumps of Water Hyacinth in the pond. Within a few days, the water became quite clear, and there were my long-sought Bluenose Shiners in all their glory-- darting blue sapphires ablaze in the water.

This demonstrated that the elusive Bluenose doesn't just vanish mysteriously from his habitat as I had imagined. Instead, it undergoes a dramatic physical change that transforms it into one of the most beautiful shiners. This might explain why all the sightings I have seen recorded have occurred mainly between April and June. I suspect that period is their spawning season.

There remain many questions. What becomes of the males in nature after spawning is completed? Do they regress back to their first form or do they die as do the salmon?

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