

By the Bluenose Obsessed

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For me this thing with the Bluenose shiner began about ten years ago as the result of seeing the *Notropis* species with the beautiful blue nose and flaring dorsal on display at one of the annual New Orleans Aquarium Society shows and exhibits held at City Park. From that Sunday afternoon until about a year ago it has been my obsession to find and collect some *Notropis welaka* which are indigenous to the southeastern portion of the United States.

My search has extended from Texarkana, Texas to Welaka, Florida. Surprisingly enough I found a Bluenose shiner in Texarkana which turned out to be some other unrelated species of *Notropis*, attractive in its' own right. Went so far as to drive down to Welaka and explored the St. Johns River without any luck; did find two color varieties of *Lucania goodei* however, so that trip wasn't a total loss.

I solicited help from everyone I could think of. Professors from both the University of Michigan and University of Illinois sent good location maps which pinpointed some actual collection sites. My fish and game literature showed collection sites also, but all in all the most recent notation I had was about twenty years old.

Quite vivid in my memory was a collecting trip which took place one January about eight years ago as some of us fish nuts were sitting around the kitchen table discussing the Bluenose and transferring some of the locations received from the University of Illinois to a road map; we decided, on the spur of the moment, 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 were literally blue in the face, but still no sign of the Bluenose.

From time to time over the years many special trips were made with the same negative results. I was beginning to develop some sort of complex finding myself venturing forth fully believing each time that the elusive *Notropis welaka* would escape my net, sometimes wondering what I would do with one if I ever caught it. Finally, Dr. Richard Olson of the University of New Orleans a fellow member of the North American Native Fishes Association offered to take me on a collecting trip to catch the Bluenose. It was one of those bright April mornings last year with Hermann Eike of the New Orleans Aquarium Society as our guide that we headed 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 was pretty cool tripping over my loose water suspender straps. Needless to say, great care was taken to bring them back alive. Later in the confusion of moving to our new home my precious shiners developed a bad case of the ich and 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 able to save only two females.

This past March, late in the month, I revisited the area where we had caught the Bluenose just the year before. This time I was in the company of another NANFA member Jim Doan. All we caught were some shiners which definitely looked like female *N. 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. It certainly was strange however, I couldn't tell the difference between these new females and the female Bluenose which survived last year's tragedy. They appeared absolutely identical on the surface. I did notice a faint band of blue across the snout of these new males, but their fins were clear and of normal size and shape. Two pair were placed in a 55-gal. aquarium for observation. At this time I was thinking in terms of this being some subspecies of the *N. welaka*. The bodies of the males were spangled just like the Bluenose. However, their fins were by no stretch of the imagination equivalent to those of the *Notropis welaka*. 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 ft. by 5 ft. poly lined ponds out back. About six inches of sand had recently been added as well as some water lilies and hornwort and at the time these shiners were introduced the water was still cloudy. 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 now showing. Returning to the pond and carefully peering into the still cloudy water I began to realize that the males had been undergoing a startling physiological change. To speed the clearing process I placed a few clumps of hyacinth into this pond and within a few days the water became quite clear and there they were in all of their glory, darting blue sapphires ablaze in the water.

This observation seems significant in that the elusive Bluenose doesn't just vanish mysteriously from his habitat as I had imagined, but undergoes a dramatic physical change most likely triggered by the natural instinct of reproduction being transformed into one of the most beautiful of our native shiners. This might explain why all the sightings I have seen recorded have occurred mainly between the months of April and June which I suspect coincides with their spawning season. Of course there are still many questions which remain to be answered as; what becomes of the males in nature after spawning is completed, do they regress back to their first form or do they just die as the salmon does? †