

THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

Can't Keep It? Photograph It!

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It's taken me a long time to realize it, but I can't keep every fish I catch. Sometimes it's tough just to keep the eight aquariums I have going—not to mention the little two-gallon window sill tanks housing assorted killies, *Elassoma* and *Enneacanthus*. Recently, I learned that photographing a fish is almost as much fun as bringing it home.

A few months ago, I bought a small digital camera. I have a great time giving PowerPoint presentations about native fishes at local fish clubs. I thought the camera would be a great alternative to surfing the net for hours and emailing people for permission to use their work. Although the camera hasn't been much of a time saver, it has been a lot of fun.

Foremost, it's given me a reason to do what I'd probably do even if I didn't have a reason: go on a fish quest. I can't hide it—I love a quest. Studying maps, searching for locations, going on long drives into the countryside, finding some isolated little stream, and then netting out one of its more obscure inhabitants is something I can't resist.

My latest project is a slide show featuring all 32 members of the centrarchid family. So far, I've got usable shots of about a half dozen of its members. And I say "usable" because I've taken a lot of shots that just didn't come out right. True, digital photography is a lot easier for the uninitiated than old-fashioned film photography, but it still isn't easy.

From experience I can tell you that one thing that will greatly assist your digital photography efforts is to read the manual before you start taking pictures. That's not as easy as it sounds, though. The manual that came with my small camera is about 200 pages long, and it was tough to find the time to sit down and browse through it. Still, after taking 200 or so virtually worthless shots of the *Enneacanthus* sunfish in the snapping turtle tank at the Riverbanks Zoo in South Carolina, I did manage to make the time to browse through the manual.

What really helped my photographic efforts was that I learned from the manual that the camera had a setting for close-up shots. Again, though, the camera was fine for "fish-out-of-water" shots, where you put the fish down on its side in someone's hand, for example. But photographing a fish in an aquarium proved to be a more elusive goal.

The close-up setting for my digital camera works best if I'm taking pictures of things that don't move. For example, I got great pictures of the wild flowers and red mushrooms that grew in Shenandoah National Park last summer. But shots of the sailfin mollies in my home aquariums nearly always came out blurry when the fish moved at the last minute. My fish, too, seem to be afraid of the camera and always swim away from it. Perhaps they think the lens is the eye of a big predatory fish.

From watching photographer David Snell, however, I learned about the advantages of a photo tank. Whenever he's planning to take pictures of fish, Dave travels with a two-gallon tank. He's had a piece of glass cut to size, to fit inside the two-gallon, parallel to the front glass. He puts the fish in the photo tank and moves the piece of glass up to the tank's front panel, so that the fish is suspended between the two panes of glass.

I've found that most fish will drift toward the lower corners of the tank. Since I don't want a shot of the fish and the tank corner, I use a thin twig to position the fish toward the center. Behind the pane of glass, I put some dark gravel, a few rocks, and maybe some plants I find at the site. The result is a natural-looking shot of the fish in its environment.

I don't want to transport disease-causing microorganisms from one site to the next, so I sterilize the photo tank after each use with either laundry bleach or hydrogen peroxide.

The camera's flash can also cause problems by reflecting off the glass and showing up in the picture. Dave Snell gets around this by setting two flashes at 45 degree angles to the glass. My camera has a built in flash. Since I **cont. on page 23**

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take most of my shots in the field, I simply rely on the sun for lighting.

With outdoor shots, you need to be careful that your camera doesn't pick up reflections from the glass. If you're not careful, the camera's lens or even your fingers will reflect off the tank glass and show up in the picture. By trial and error, you can compensate for this by varying the angle at which you take the picture. Take lots of shots, too, because reflections that you can't see in the digital camera view screen might still show up in a few shots after you upload them to your computer.

One of the members of my local cichlid club also taught me another way around the reflection problem. He recommended taking a KFC bucket and painting the inside of it black. He then said to cut a hole in the bottom of the bucket, just large enough to fit the camera lens through. Instead of casting back the camera's reflection, the glass will only throw back the black on the inside of the bucket, which the camera won't pick up.

I can't keep all the fish I catch, but I can keep a lot of images of them in my home computer. 🐟

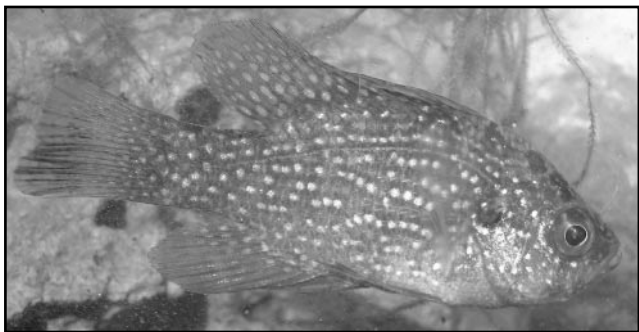


Fig. 1.

A bluespotted sunfish (*Enneacanthus gloriosus*) photographed by the author. This fish was collected in Little Hunting Creek, a Potomac River tributary where snakeheads were captured recently.