

A Little History, a Lot of Fish: Field Trip to Cedar Creek, Lebanon Church, Virginia

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During the summer of August 1999, regional NANFA members and non-members from Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, were cordially invited to spend the day at Cedar Creek in the Shenandoah Valley.

One of us (BH), acted as host and guide for a trip to a tract of land I own situated at the confluence of Cedar Creek and Mulberry Run. In addition to the authors, Mike Aloa, Andrew Blumhagen, Mark Cook, Barbara McClorey, and David Snell, President of the Potomac Valley Aquarium Society (PVAS), were also in attendance.

Cedar Creek Local History

Many Civil War battles and skirmishes were fought along the banks of Cedar Creek, as the North persistently tried to gain control of the Shenandoah Valley, the “breadbasket” to the Southern armies. Rebel forces often stashed munitions in the many caves along Cedar Creek to keep them out of Northern hands.

The Battle of Cedar Creek was fought near the confluence of Cedar Creek and the Shenandoah River (one of the few U.S. rivers that flows to the north). Both sides won and lost on the same day. The Rebels first routed the Yankees in the early morning driving them in full retreat 20 miles north to Winchester. There the retreaters met their leader, General Sheridan, who was returning from a visit to Washington, D. C., with President Lincoln. He eventually regrouped his forces and drove the rebels back down to Cedar Creek and the battle ended where it began that evening.

During President George Washington’s youth, the western side of the Shenandoah Valley was the westernmost

U.S. outpost. Washington surveyed the site for a crude 30-foot round stone fort, which still stands on the banks of Cedar Creek, about five miles upstream from the confluence of Cedar Creek and Mulberry Run. (The Cedar Creek battle site is about five miles downstream.)

The Shenandoah Valley was also the site (about 30 miles upstream on the Shenandoah) of one of the earliest permanent Indian settlements. Experts have dated the buried remains of Fugawee Indian lodge poles at about 10,000 years.

Nature of Cedar Creek

Cedar Creek originates in West Virginia at about 3000 feet above sea level, and flows generally east before emptying into the North Fork of the Shenandoah River at the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley, approximately 80 miles west of Washington, D.C. Ranked as one of the three prettiest white-water streams in Virginia, Cedar Creek is spring fed at many points along its route, making the water crystal clear and cool. Much of the creek winds through narrow valleys lined with steep cliffs and covered with various types of native plant life. The creek itself is loaded with underwater structures such as drop-offs, shelves, caves, and aquatic foliage such as ludwigia, water loosestrife, and willow moss.

Many native fish species can be found its waters. The creek even supports native brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) at the higher altitudes. In addition, there is an abundance of wildlife in the area, including deer, turkey, grouse, coyotes, and other critters.

Several varieties of semi-unusual amphibians and reptiles also abound, including wood turtles, wood frogs, newts, salamanders, skinks, and snakes.



Angling, Seining and Snorkeling on Cedar Creek

The day began with a little angling on Cedar Creek prior to actually entering the water and exploring it with seines and dip nets. Mulberry Run at the time was almost completely dry, which led us to explore Cedar Creek only. The species angled in Cedar Creek consisted of green sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*), redbreast sunfish (*L. auritus*), rock bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*), smallmouth bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*), and largemouth bass (*M. salmoides*).

After a little angling, we started upstream, slowly sampling the pools and riffles with a 4'x10' seine and dip nets. The species we sampled were bluntnose minnow (*Pimephales notatus*), spotfin shiner (*Cyprinella spiloptera*), white sucker (*Catostomus commersoni*), fantail darter (*Etheostoma flabellare*, Fig. 1), and mottled sculpin (*Cottus bairdi*). Juveniles of the following species were sampled in and among the underwater vegetation: fantail darter, mottled sculpin, yellow bullhead (*Ameiurus natalis*), redbreast sunfish, green sunfish, rock bass, smallmouth bass, and largemouth bass.

For me (MT), this was my first experience snorkeling in a freshwater stream. It was amazing, especially around the underwater foliage. Various fish species shared the underwater gardens and jungles as both refuge and territory. Prey hung out with predator—but not too closely, of course. Juveniles hid among the foliage. I was truly amazed to discover that above and out of the water my shape caused fish to scatter and hide. When I was in the water, however, fish looked at me as structure or cover, in many instances approaching to within a few inches of my face and body.

Turkey and Paddy Run

Following lunch and the fish cull, we passed out

Fig. 1.
A male fantail darter
(*Etheostoma flabellare*).
Photograph by Michael
Thennet.

NANFA new-member packets and provided a few copies of *American Currents* to non-member attendees. At that point, some of us decided to visit Turkey Run (North Fork Shenandoah drainage), located roughly two miles away. Due to an already severely dry season, the run was relegated to a series of small pools where fish populations were concentrated. We easily sampled rosyside dace (*Clinostomus funduloides*), blacknose dace (*Rhinichthys atratulus*), white sucker, fantail darter, and mottled sculpin.

After visiting Turkey Run, some members of our group had to leave while the rest of us made our way to Paddy Run (North Fork Shenandoah drainage), located about 5-6 miles away. We sampled more rosyside dace, blacknose dace, and fantail darters.

Then it was off to Orndorf's Trout Farm, which, amazingly, is the same trout farm that stocks rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) into our local Four Mile Run in Arlington, Virginia, every spring. The farm had many different spring-fed streams and reservoirs filled with rainbow and golden (xanthic form) trout, organized according to their stage of maturity. One of us (BH) ordered an almost three-pound trout (pay by the pound) for dinner that evening.

Conclusion

The Cedar Creek and Mulberry Run confluence is a wonderfully enchanting location. Field trips to this site are greatly appreciated by all who attend. Cedar Creek's crystal clear cool waters are captivating for the native fish enthusiast, exhilarating for the snorkeler, challenging for the angler, exciting for the Civil War buff, and just plain fun for everyone else. 🐟