

COLLECTING FRENCH CREEK IN NORTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

by William Estes, Prospect Park, Pennsylvania

By eight o'clock on the evening of Friday, October 25, 1985, fellow NANFA member John Clairmont and I found ourselves once again heading west on Interstate 80 to the almost fabled collecting waters of French Creek in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Specifically, we wanted to "fish" this tributary of the Allegheny River in Erie County, and, if we had time, in Crawford County (just to the south). This trip was a follow-up to a successful trip John and I had made to these waters the preceding May.

A cold, relentless rain accompanied us practically the whole length of the Pennsylvania Turnpike's Northeast Extension, which we took from the Philadelphia area (where we live) till we picked up Route 80 at Exit 35 near the town of White Haven. Once on Route 80, however, the rain and clouds vanished. Cygnus, the Northern Cross, appeared and stayed with us till shortly before we exited Route 80 at Brookville in Jefferson County at 10:30 p.m. Here we took Route 36 northwest to Townville in Crawford County.

Our reason for travelling the 379 miles to Townville in the late afternoon and night was that John's sister Mary and her husband Jim live there. They had kindly offered to put us up for the night so that we could get some pre-collecting sleep after our 7½-hour drive diagonally across the state. We had only one day to collect, so their generosity enabled us to make it a full day of collecting.

About half an hour after exiting Route 80 onto Route 36, the rain started again. By the time we arrived at Mary and Jim's home in Townville, it was really coming down. In addition, it had become very cold. Prospects for collecting next morning weren't good.

When we were awakened at 7 a.m., I could hear the ominous sounds of howling wind and beating rain. The likelihood of collecting fish that morning was remote. French Creek, if not all the streams in the area, would probably be too high to fish; and, more importantly, too dangerous to try. We arose and checked the temperature on the porch (42°) and noticed that the rain had already lessened considerably. By the time we finished breakfast and left the house at 8:15, it had stopped completely. The wind (except for occasional gusts coming straight off Lake Erie that went right through us) was hardly noticeable.

We reached our first collecting site on French Creek in Erie County at 8:40. This area is just north of the town of Cambridge Springs and east of Routes 6 and 19, about two miles north of the Crawford County line in LeBoeuf Township. Geologically, this part of the state is known as the Appalachian Plateau Province. It is characterized as a maple-beech and birch forest type. As noted, French Creek flows into the

Allegheny, which in turn meets the Monongahela at Pittsburgh, 110 miles south, to form the Ohio. Only two or three miles north of our site begins the Lake Erie Watershed. The terrain is made up of gently rolling farmlands, interspersed with small homes and their associated woodlots, and small, picturesque towns. More importantly, the streams, including French Creek, are generally easily accessible and free of pollution. I don't think that I saw a single "Keep Out" or "Posted" sign all day.

French Creek at this site goes under an old steel bridge that gracefully spans its 50-60' width. A railroad runs parallel with its opposite bank, which climbs about 15-20' to the rail bed. The creek bottom is littered with rocks varying in size from marbles to wheelbarrows.

By the time I changed into shorts and hip waders and finally entered the water and started seining about 300 yards downstream from the bridge, it was 9 a.m. John decided to fish in the area of the bridge.

The riffle where I was collecting contained the larger rocks, many of them well above the water. The depth here was never more than 3' and averaged about a foot to 18 inches. Happily, despite the rain, the water level seemed no higher than when we'd been here in May. Upstream from this riffle, the creek flowed toward me rather smoothly with a good current. It averaged about 18" deep, with many sections much deeper, especially in the center. With the exception of algae-covered rocks, there was no aquatic vegetation in this section of the creek.

I had been working the rocks for about five minutes before I caught my first fish, an adult male Greenside Darter (Etheostoma blennioides). These fish are readily identifiable by their distinctively large heads; the usually pronounced series of w's that run laterally from head to caudal; and, in the male, the well developed pectoral fins. This fish also had a surprising amount of bright green on it, and the red in its first dorsal also was especially intense for this time of year. I caught a few more Greensides, mostly young but also a nice-sized female, before I caught my only Fantail Darter (E. flabellare) that morning in French Creek. This was a small fish, not quite 2".

The nets we were using were standard 4'x4' minnow seines with quarter-inch mesh, weighted at the bottom and secured to broom handles at either side.

Our technique in fishing this kind of stream--especially for darters--was to position ourselves downstream from a promising-looking rock, then carefully position the bottom of the net flush with the creek bottom and in front of the rock. Then, while using one hand to hold the net in place, we would walk upstream behind the rock, and, with the free hand, reach down and lift the rock while using the feet to create a disturbance that we hoped would flush any under-rock occupant downstream into the net.

When the water was too deep to reach down and lift the rocks, or the rocks were too small to bother lifting, or our hands were just too numb to be putting them in the water, a second method was simply to position the net in a likely spot and again take a step or two upstream while holding the net with one hand. Then, using both feet to stir up the bottom, the seiner would grab the net with the free hand and lift it toward himself and out of the water. This method is very effective for darters, but practically guarantees sore feet by the end of the day. Both methods worked well for us.

Shortly after I caught the Fantail, John hollered down to me and gave me a thumbs-up sign. Apparently he was doing alright.

My next fish was a Banded Darter (Etheostoma zonale), quickly followed by a couple of Variegated Darters (E. variatum). These fish were as strikingly colored as when we had caught them here in May. I caught several more Bandeds and one or two female Rainbow Darters (E. caeruleum) before I finally caught the fish I had come for--a beautiful adult male Spotted Darter (E. maculatum). This fish was very dark, almost black, with a beautiful deep-blue throat. In May, I'd thought they were Bluebreast Darters (E. camurum), also found here. The dorsals, caudal, and anal were edged in white, and the sides were flecked with small reddish squares. The long, pointed snout easily differentiates this fish from the sympatric Bluebreast. The much drabber females also began showing up in my net, but these were only found in the shallower, more sluggish waters about 10-15' from shore. The females were mostly brown. Unlike the males, they had numerous black spots in the dorsal and caudal fins.

Other fish caught in this riffle area were Johnny Darters (E. nigrum) and only one cyprinid--the River Chub (Nocomis micropogon). After flipping one of the larger rocks, I was very surprised to find an 8th Stonecat (Noturus flavus) in my net. This fish was close to record size.

About an hour and a half had passed since I started fishing. By now I was very cold. That my boots had somehow managed to fill with water didn't help either. The water temperature itself wasn't too bad at 53°, but the winds that every so often came whipping and howling down the creek prompted me to go back upstream (I thought that the sustained movement would warm me up) and see what John had caught. By this time, he had moved further upstream, past the bridge, to a shallow riffle that had formed several gravel bars in a creek bend. The bars supported several types of grasses that grew almost into the water. The riffle was made up of mostly small pebbles. Except for that area at its foot, which ran 3-4' deep, it averaged only a few inches deep. The width of the creek here was still approximately 50'.

When I finally caught up with John, I could see that his collecting jar held about a dozen fish, which included most of the species I had caught downstream, including Spotted Darters. In addition, though, he had also caught two spectacular Longhead

Darters (Percina macrocephala). I had never seen these fish before and neither had John, but he had recognized them immediately. They were about 4½" long with very distinctive elongated heads. Their markings were quite indistinct, but their large size and the fact that they were new fish to me made them spectacular. In Pennsylvania, they are recognized as stream "indicator fish."

John had also caught an enormous Logperch (Percina caprodes), a fish we hadn't caught in this creek before, and two very nice Blackside Darters (P. maculata). He also caught a six-inch, unidentified Redhorse (Moxostoma sp.) that he released before I got there. Before we started fishing the shallow riffle, I seined the area where John had caught these fish, and almost immediately netted a couple of Blacksides. While John was holding the net around a particularly promising rock, I lifted it and flushed an 18" Hellbender (Cryptobranchus alleganiensis) into John's net. We had caught these harmless, though rather grotesque, amphibians here on our last trip. Finding them and the Northern Mudpuppy (Necturus maculosus), Pennsylvania's other giant salamander, under another rock a few moments later appealed to my other passion, herpetology--welcome, though surprising diversions in my ichthyological pursuits.

Moving up to the shallow riffle, I caught a beautiful 3" Rock Bass (Ambloplites rupestris) along the bank amid some debris. These fish, especially when young, always remind me of the tropical Oscar (Astronotus ocellatus) because of their vividly blotched lateral patterns. Disposition-wise, they are every bit as pugnacious as Oscars.

We caught several Emerald Shiners (Notropis atherinoides) here by (1) positioning our nets side by side in very shallow but swift flowing water, (2) having one of us hold both nets while the other walked downstream toward the nets, and (3) raising a commotion by kicking up the creek bottom all the way to the nets. This technique also turned up Rainbow, Banded, Fantail, and Greenside Darters, all of which seem to like this type of habitat.

At 11:45, we decided to quit this section of French Creek and try it at a new spot--in the town of Venango, about 20 miles south and just west in Crawford County. Along the way, we made a quick stop and did some seining at the LeBoeuf Creek, a smaller tributary of French Creek. Here we caught Greenside, Fantail, and some very large Banded Darters. John also caught a spectacular male Rainbow Darter here. Many of the male Greensides we had been catching all morning were also as brightly colored as those we'd caught in May. In fact, the only darters that weren't exhibiting spawning coloration were the Bandeds.

Also caught here were several smaller Stonecats, and John came up with another larger one. River Chubs were abundant, and we got a couple of aquarium-size Northern Hogsuckers (Hypentelium nigricans). We didn't get many cyprinids all day, but here we took either the Common Shiner (Notropis cornutus) or the Striped Shiner (N. chrysocephalus) or possibly both. The Emerald Shiner

was common here, and we caught a lone Redside Dace (Clinostomus elongatus).

Continuing on our way, we stopped at a ditch approximately 100 yards long and about 8' wide. It contained a great deal of vegetation, and was loaded with Fathead Minnows (Pimephales promelas) and the adult stage of the Red-spotted Newt (Notophthalmus viridescens). The newts apparently had gathered here from the surrounding woods.

Up till this time, the trip had been a great success and things were going quite well. When we reached the town of Cambridge Springs in Crawford County, I was intently searching for a gas station, as they are few and far between here, when I almost went through a red light in the middle of town. The act of slamming on the brakes predictably drove the styrofoam cooler containing my fish forward off the back seat, where they never should have been in the first place, and onto the floor, breaking the cooler and rupturing the plastic bag inside it. John had correctly placed his cooler securely on the floor in the back of the stationwagon. The sight of those Longhead and Spotted Darters trying to swim amid the debris from the floor in the back, under the front seat to the front, is still vivid and fresh in my mind. Now getting to the site in Venango assumed real importance as I thought I'd surely lose most, if not all, of these fish (as it was I didn't lose any); I worried that in the short time we had left, I might not be able to replace them.

By the time we reached our destination, we were already very much behind our rather loose schedule. As we still had an eight-hour drive ahead of us, we felt we could only allow an hour for collecting here at best.

The stream here was similar to our first collecting site, though perhaps a bit wider and shallower. Because of our hurry, recording stream conditions had a very low priority. Most of the fish we caught here were Greenside Darters, but we did manage to collect a few more Spotted Darters that would help supplement the expected casualties from the Cambridge Springs fiasco.

After our half-hour of collecting, we changed into some very welcome dry clothes. We headed home contented with our catch and looking forward to returning again in the spring.

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FURTHER INFO ON NW PA.: See List of Fishes from the Upper Allegheny River in New York and Pennsylvania, 40, Sept. '85, 5. There has been subsequent reference to the list in NANFANEWS cols.