

COLLECTING FUNDULUS IN COLORADO

by Edd Kray

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Colorado has two native killifish available free to anyone who is willing to spend some time knee-deep in swamp mud. One of them, Fundulus zebrinus kansae, is fairly common, whereas the other, Fundulus sciadicus, is becoming harder to find every year.

This isn't intended as a technical article, so I'm not going to go into scale counts, etc., but some basics to help you identify these species in the field might be helpful.

Fundulus zebrinus is fairly easy to identify. The name "zebrinus" should give you a clue. If you catch a small fish (up to perhaps 3" max.) with 8-12 distinct vertical bars, it's probably F. zebrinus. No, they aren't really zebra stripes, but they do remind you of them.

Fundulus sciadicus is even easier to identify in the field, as you don't even have to "turn them over." They have a very distinct white to silver spot on their backs which is easy to see even before you've netted them. From the side, the males are particularly pretty. The body has a definite blue color (almost like an Aphyosemion) and the caudal fin on males has a fairly bright red edging. Those who are familiar with Epiplatys lamottei will find F. sciadicus very much like an American version.

But let's get to the point: where do you catch them and how? First of all, you've got to consider the fact that these are small fish and, like most killies, not particularly strong swimmers. Don't look anywhere that you might find

anything big enough to make lunch out of them. Shallow waters, either in ponds, marshes, or broad areas in slow-moving streams are ideal. I've always found F. zebrinus amongst cattails. This should give you some idea of the type of habitat they prefer.

Fundulus sciadicus seems to prefer open water. The one and only time I've found them, it was in a small (3' across), fairly slow-moving stream with a maximum depth of about a foot. They were swimming in mid-water, and, when approached, dashed into a cut in the bank (perhaps good protection from predators, but an easy spot from which to net them!).

One other thing: both these species are plains fish, as their overlapping English names imply. Don't look for 'em up in the mountains. The water is too fast and cold to suit them. I've found them anywhere in the flatlands. Also, think small--the smaller the better. The best zebrinus hunting I've had was in a small creek passing under the Longmont diagonal (near 63rd St.). They liked to hide in the culverts under the road when I tried to net them.

Catching them is a challenge, primarily due to the shallow, weedy habitats they prefer. On my first trip, I brought a minnow seine and was able to catch a few, but the problem with this method is that the seines do not work too well in the shallow, cattail-filled areas where F. zebrinus are found. Dip nets can be used, but this method is even more inefficient.

At this point, I still use the seine, making many runs and coming up empty much of the time. If you find a better method, I'd like to hear of it. One thing I would recommend is that you wear a pair of "disposable" shoes when you go after these fish. There's no way you're going to avoid getting into the mud, and the wonderful odor does not wash right off.

Finally, F. zebrinus is common. If you look, I'm sure you can find some. On the other hand, F. sciadicus is hard to find, but worth it. I caught some once, about two years ago, and haven't been able to find any since. They were in a little creek on a side road north of the diagonal between Boulder and Longmont--about 500' north of a housing development. Not knowing the area well, I've driven around for hours on later occasions trying to locate that creek again and have been unsuccessful. I hope you'll have better luck!
