

COLLECTING IN THE SOUTH

by Andrew P. Borgia, Bristol, RI

This past March, a friend and I decided to spend some time snorkeling in the Florida Keys. Although I have been to the Keys many times in the past, I've always used the airlines for lack of time. This time, however, we decided to drive. As I took out the road atlas to check the route, I looked over all the rivers and lakes we would pass on the way. I was eager to see what kinds of fish lived in them.

After contacting the state fishery agencies in the states I wanted to collect in, I was ready. As I didn't have the space or equipment to take any specimens back alive, it was just a check-out for a future, more extensive trip. I thought others in NANFA would be interested to know what was taken on the trip, so if they are ever in the area, they would know what to expect.

Starting from Rhode Island, we made our way south on a cold Saturday morning. From home to Washington was hazy and cold. Many of the streams had ice on them. Moving farther south, it began to get warmer, and finally, in Skippers, Virginia, we came to a medium creek with a gravel bottom and a few submerged logs and rocks. I passed my dipnet under the stones, but found nothing. Then, under the log, I pulled up a small, gray, three-inch Pirate Perch (Aphrododerus sayanus). Since night was approaching, we pushed on to North Carolina.

The following morning, it was warmer, in the seventies. Trees were flowering and it felt like May in New England. Soon we crossed into South Carolina. There we stopped at the Black River in Alcolu. It was a fair-sized river with brown-tinted water and mud banks with a lot of weed growth. Off the main channel was a smaller stream running into the larger river. It was about two feet deep and very weedy. By dragging my net through the weeds, I took two four-inch Warmouth (Lepomis gulosus) and a beautiful Banded Pygmy Sunfish (Elassoma zonatum). It was a jewel.

We then drove through Georgia into Florida. There at the welcome center in Becker was a small drainage ditch behind the main building. Out of curiosity, we decided to check it out. It was swarming with fish! We took out our dipnets and, from the weeds, we caught many Mosquitofish (Gambusia affinis). Many of the females were heavy with young. You could see the eyes of the soon-to-be-born young. There were also some gorgeous Golden-ear Killies (Fundulus Chrysotus). The males had beautiful red fins and peppered black dots. There were a few sunfish; I took one, a three-inch Warmouth.

After these captures, we made our way down the Florida peninsula to the Keys, where we spent three days snorkeling on the fabulous reefs, watching colorful coral-reef fish.

On the return trip, I stopped in South Carolina at the Pocataligo River. It had a very weedy bottom. I collected many Gambusia affinis (Mosquitofish). I also found three small Umbra pygmaea (Eastern Mud Minnow).

Pressed for time, we headed north. This time I spotted a small weedy stream in Pine Level, North Carolina. I netted among the weeds and found a few Gambusia affinis and one magnificent Flier (Centrarchus macropterus), about four inches long.

Leaving the warmth of the southlands, it began snowing in Washington and snowed all the way to Rhode Island. But the warm rivers of the South and the great collecting they offered were on my mind.
