

RECOLLECTING COLLECTING IN SOUTH JERSEY'S PINELANDS
(Not Your Model Collecting Account)

by Bruce Gebhardt, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Pouring, driving summer rain in its seventh hour-- unpromising start to a collecting trip for which I'd rented a car. I was stuck with the car, though, so off to Southern New Jersey. It turned out to be a good day after all.

Site One was in Gloucester County--not usually thought of as Pinelands, but some creeks fully qualify with acid, soft, amber "cedar water." It was discouraging. The rain-swollen creek rushed out of the woods. I've been known to be swept away in collecting, but that creek would have literalized the metaphor. As if I needed any further excuse to chicken out, rain began pouring again. So much for Site One. On to Site Two.

Site Two was in Atlantic County, and significant because it was the last place in that part of South Jersey where I'd encountered a Tadpole Madtom (Noturus gyrinus)--five years before. They used to be quite common in that region (as they still are in some parts of South Jersey). If anyone knows another good site in western Atlantic, western Burlington, or eastern Camden Counties for that species, I'd appreciate knowing about it.

My previous visit to the site had been memorable. When I finished, blood dripped from the sloppy mouths of three leeches hanging on to my legs. Further, I'd been finned by one of those madtoms (though I'd pulled my hand away quickly and avoided maximum stick).

This time, I avoided the muddy areas--fortunately, because that was where the leeches had been; unfortunately, because that was where the madtoms had been. The water here is a 15-20'-wide, fairly swift creek connecting halves of a swamp. The halves are divided by a road and bridge crossing the stream. Walking on the sandy, firm bottom (I always like firm bottoms) towards the west bank, I netted a couple of 1"+ Creek Chubsuckers (Erimyzon oblongus) from the weeds overhanging the bank. They had an attractive wash of red in their tails. I also caught a couple of baby Bluespotted Sunfish (Enneacanthus gloriosus) and an Eel (Anquilla rostrata). I needed one of the latter for photographing, but unfortunately it slipped out of my hands. I didn't know eels could do that. That's it for Site Two, for it started to pour again. Good thing, since the downpour gave me an excuse for not venturing into the muddy parts.

Site Three was Hammonton Lake, east of Site Two on U.S. 30. Hammonton's the principal town of the Pinelands. The lake's just east of the hospital on the south side of the highway. There was a parking area there which may have been demolished since then. I'd often passed the lake and wondered what it held. About time I stopped. The bottom of the lake was sandy and muddy and

pretty much covered by little foot-high "bushes" that may have been Najas. Pushing the seine through these plants quickly produced fish. The most commonly seined species was the Largemouth Bass (Micropterus salmoides). All specimens were about 2" long. They, like the chubsuckers at the previous site, had red in their tails. Second most common was the Yellow Perch (Perca flavescens). These were rather ugly, but had some interesting patterns of black and red in the first dorsals. They were also uniformly sized at about 2". Third most common were Bluegills. They measured ½-1½". That's it, except for one baby bullhead. I didn't check his chin whiskers; the native Yellow Bullheads (Ameiurus [Ictalurus] natalis) have white or light ones, while the oft-introduced Browns (A. [I.] nebulosus) have dark ones.

With the possible exception of the unexamined bullhead (the unexamined bullhead's not worth living), it appeared from my half-hour there that Hammonton Lake was an example of a perfectly successful stocking operation--native fishes had been completely eliminated! I understand it's up for an award from the U.S. Native Fish & Wildlife Extermination Service, I think they call it.

There was a lot of bladderwort floating on the top around the margins of the lake. Between Site One and Site Two, I had passed a dirty drainage ditch around a cranberry/blueberry bog. The canal was full of bladderwort with pink flowers held six inches above the surface. At Site Three, I would photograph some bright yellow bladderwort flowers. Strange, but many sinister carnivorous plants have beautiful flowers.

Site Three was a genuine Pinelands lake, with genuine native fish, among others. I waded out from a break in the surrounding vegetation with my seine. I began taking Blackbanded Sunfish (Enneacanthus chaetodon) and an occasional Bluespotted from the weeds. Bandeds were oddly rare, though they're usually fairly common. Some ¾-½" Blackbandeds had unusually vivid red in their dorsals and ventrals. I also caught three sizes of Chain Pickerel (Esox niger) and was able to photograph specimens (1) just developing the chain pattern; (2) at 4" with an enormously distended belly full of sunfish or frog; and (3) babies, about 1¼-1½" long. At Site Four, I was to net a foot-long specimen with a nice chain pattern. I needed a photo of it, but he pulled the eel's trick on me. Word must get around. I may have to resort to legitimate angling to obtain an adult specimen. Maybe some of those studded gloves fish-filleters use to hold on to the fish would be a good idea too.

Some canoes landed while I was working the weeds near the shore. They disgorged a dozen little brats. It's common, no matter where in the world you happen to be seining, to attract kids. Seining's probably an inherently childish activity. I'm usually grudgingly accommodating to questions, but this was the

stupidest group I'd ever encountered. I told them I was collecting little fish so I could slit open their bellies and put 'em (the fish) on pizza. They believed me.

I worked 100 yds. south (to escape the kids). In addition to lots of Blackbandeds, Bluespots, and Chain Pickerel (Redfins are also rare these days), I caught a single small male Banded Sunfish (Enneacanthus obesus) that was very photogenic, except that he refused to spread his caudal fin in my photo tank. I settled for head shots.

Three or four times, my collecting and photographing were interrupted by downpours. I collected through some of the rain, shielding my specs with a cowboy hat. I'm sure that made Seineman look even stranger.

Despite several days of rain, the "cedar water" was not dirty, but it was the color of tea strong enough to over-caffeinate a good-sized county for a week. I collected 30 gallons for my tanks at home.

That reminded me of the time I collected a lot of similar Pine Barrens water and loaded the trunk of my new Toyota with cans of it. In those days, I regularly traveled to South Jersey to collect water. My sister, who'd wanted to drive my new car, was driving me through Glassboro. I told her to turn left, which she did, though I'd have preferred she wait till the oncoming Chevelle had passed. The Chevy destroyed itself against the right rear of my Toyota (no, this isn't another pro-Japanese-car article; the Toyota was a complete lemon). An ossifer of the law hopped upon the crash scene within minutes. The first thing he did when he saw all that amber fluid pouring from the trunk all over the white paint is bid me open the now-corrugated lid. He tasted the liquid to be certain it wasn't moonshine! There's always been a lot of that in the Pines. Hope I haven't written that story up in AC before. Probably have.

Because I'd sought Bluespots particularly, preferably larger ones, I decided to hit Site Four, a lake not far from Site Three that is usually a reliable producer. The water was higher there than I'd ever seen it, even in spring. I worked--and seining through thick weeds is work--for a couple of hours, interrupted by rain delays. The deer flies and horse flies were worse than they'd ever been. The one forgotten item on my planning list: insect repellent. I began to catch Blackbandeds as I ventured into deeper water, but Bluespots were scarce that day. In my previous visit, Bluespots had also been rare, and Bandeds had seemed to pre-empt what had been a Bluespot hotspot. This time, there weren't many Bandeds either.

On the way home, I stopped at a couple restaurants, but there were lines, so I left. Went home, fished out a few Blackbandeds, and made myself a pizza.

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