

COLLECTING WITH A MINNOW TRAP---"No Fuss, No Muss"

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Minnow traps (called "killie pots" in New England) are available in tackle shops. They offer a cheap, easy, and convenient way to catch small fishes. In certain circumstances, trapping is superior to most other fish-collecting methods. This article indicates some of the special uses and advantages of minnow traps, and suggests some techniques you might wish to try.

Pluses

One advantage of minnow traps is that you don't have to get wet. Another advantage is that you can set them under snags and log jams, or among thick submerged vegetation or underwater boulder fields, all of which are extremely difficult--if not impossible--to seine effectively. They can also be cast out among emergent vegetation where seining often rips up emergent weed beds. In this case, minnow traps have a minimum impact on the aquatic environment as compared to wading to push or drag a seine.

Sometimes, when one is travelling along a highway and sees an interesting aquatic habitat where wading and seining would be difficult, or when time is tight, one can cast out some minnow traps in a short time and retrieve them about 24 hours later. For example, while inventorying fish of the waters of coastal North Carolina during late November 1983, I realized that the water in the canals was too deep to seine and that the riparian cypress swamps held waters too deep, too dark, too fast, and too foreboding for wading. Under these circumstances, I figured that the best way to inventory these waters was to set minnow traps baited with "Little Friskies" dry cat food (a wide variety of animal/vegetable fish-bait scents such as "trout chow" pellets can also be used). I knew I would be passing by the same site within 24 hours. I was rewarded with my first Flier Sunfish (Centrarchus macropterus).

Techniques

In flowing water, bait can be suspended from a string or wire in a perforated can or nylon stocking tethered to remain in the center of the trap and to decant the scent plume in the current. I usually set traps in a backwater, side eddy, or undercut bank area, not in direct current.

In lakes, minnow traps can be hung from a dock, float, or piling at various depths. Even deep bottoms or holes can be sampled with a long-enough cord. Inter-pier or inter-piling areas are often productive fish locales; these deep, hard-to-seine areas can be fished by suspending traps from wharves or pilings.

Traps can be employed all year round, even through a hole in the ice. Further, since many fish are thigmotopic, they are attracted to solid--and especially, hollow--objects.

I have used not only traditional minnow traps, but also collapsible nylon $2\frac{1}{2}$ '-diameter hoop nets such as the ones used by commercial "crawfishermen" and "catfishermen" in the southern bayous. The larger funnel traps work on the same funnel principle as do the normal minnow traps, but are larger in volume. I use these nets under a scientific-collector's permit for zoological surveys.

Species

While trapping works most reliably with species of fish that will eat dry, dead, or non-live foods unhesitatingly--cyprinids are the classic "trap-ees"--one can catch a surprising variety of unexpected species. Notably, I have caught bass and pickerel which apparently swam into the trap in response to a congregation of minnows feeding on the bait; or perhaps they actually chased the minnows into the trap. It might be possible to capture females by putting a breeding male in a trap--or vice versa. Maybe rivals of the same sex could be trapped.

With available 18" sleeves that fit between the halves of the basic minnow trap, it's also possible to take eels--as well as to hold more and larger fish of "normally" trapped species.

Sunfish seem to trap well, whereas darters probably do not. I have trapped bullheads in areas where small ones were dense. I have caught killifish (*Fundulus heteroclitus*) in salt marshes, and Ambystomatid salamanders in woodland pools without any bait at all. It is possible that some fish and other animals will enter an unbaited minnow trap simply because it offers a tunnel-like shelter if placed along a bank face or log, or if the trap is covered or camouflaged. (Another reason for covering or camouflaging is that people who discover a fish trap may decide to make off with it.)

Rules

State and local regulations should be checked before using any minnow traps, but many states require only a fishing license (even a temporary license may suffice for out-of-staters). Regulations range all over the board. Some states specify that the maximum diameter of the inside funnel opening be 1". Fortunately, that size is ideal for many species of sunfish and other desirable aquarium species. Other regulations may require a tag with name and address on an unattended trap, or limit multiple traps. And so forth.

In addition to more "active" methods of collecting--seining, dip-netting, angling--every collector ought to use minnow traps when active methods just aren't feasible, practical, or convenient. This "passive" collection method can be quite productive, and is often extremely efficient.

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