

THE COMMUTING COLLECTOR (or, The Collecting Commuter):

Philadelphia's Wissahickon Creek

by Bruce Gebhardt, Phila., PA

As a sort of lark this summer, I twice went collecting in the city by bus. I wore wading sneakers and cut-offs, and took along a seine and a soft cooler bag containing: a complete change of clothes (except cut-offs; I stood on the buses home) and a towel; shoes; plastic fish bags; two big plastic to wrap the seine on the return trip; and a can of ice.

The destination was Harper's Meadow, a picnic grounds where the Wissahickon Creek crosses Germantown Ave. in the far northwest of the city, which is called Chestnut Hill. The creek is en route from its origins in suburban-rural Montgomery County to its junction with the Schuylkill River in the city. The L bus (Plymouth Meeting Mall branch only) goes past Harper's Meadow (ask for Chestnut Hill College or Northwestern Ave. to get off) a mile above the Chestnut Hill trolley loop, which is served by a trolley, two buses besides the L-Plym. Mtg., and two commuter train lines. Most of these routes start in center city or connect with routes that do.

Past Harper's Meadow, the Wissahickon is between 40' and 100' wide. The areas below the three or four riffle areas are the best places to collect. The water is rarely more than 2' deep at this site. The bottom is rocky and fairly slippery. The rather stiff current will in places defeat a seiner, unless he and his poles are strong. The best technique is to stand downstream of a large rock or obstruction in a riffle area, facing upstream. Often there will be a clear channel in such spots, and fish hang out there. The seine is shoved upstream; the poles should be held fairly horizontal to avoid the full force of the current. Of course the net bottom should be held close to the creek bottom, but there is risk of snags.

The most common species is the Blacknosed Dace (Rhinichthys atratulus), in two or maybe three varieties. The most common* is heavy-bodied with rather indistinct markings--olive back, brownish horizontal stripe, orangish fins. This variety is frequently laden with black-spot. Snails aren't that much in evidence here because of the swift current; they're under the rocks. Also, there are limpets--possible molluscan hosts--especially visible on oyster shells, detritus of an ancient picnic.

Another type of atratulus found here is much more attractive than the more common type--thinner body, distinct black stripe between gray-brown back and silver-white belly. Fins of breeding males are attractively red-orange, though specimens at other eastern-U.S. sites may be more colorful than at Harper's.

*LATE NEWS: This "most common type of Blacknosed Dace" has been identified as the Longnosed Dace (R. cataractae).

Second most common species is the Satinfish Shiner (Notropis analostanus). The breeding male of this species is among the most striking Eastern fishes; its collar pattern stands out among all fishes. All fins are edged, or doused completely, in satiny white that flashes blue, green, and gold. The pearly gray, diamond-shaped, dark-outlined scales can also "iridesce." The female, somewhat heavier-bodied and generally smaller, matches the male in the species' exceptional swimming talent, but not in color; she is silvery or washed-out beige. Few species of fish are as much fun to watch as Satinfish in creek or tank. They are incredibly swift and agile. Males challenge the seiner, dashing in and out, flicking and flashing their brilliant fins-- as they do in displaying to females.

The third most common species at Harper's Meadow is the Common Shiner (Notropis cornutus). The site has not yielded many big ones (4"-7"), however. Large males in spring have slate-blue heads, steel-blue bodies, and blood-red fins. Females range from plain silver to olive, depending on the season or the light in which they are viewed.

Fourth most common species is another Notropis, probably procne, the Swallowtail Shiner. Procne seems more identifiable at some other sites, for some reason. The species is graceful and flashy in swimming. Its pattern is the conventional brown back, black stripe, white belly. The scales on at least young ones are outlined in black, an attractive touch. Sometimes the black stripe will be topped with a line of gold that can appear purple, maroon, or violet. The stripe itself can appear zig-zag rather than solid. Larger specimens--3" or more--will sometimes be mostly silver. Even so, their shape and swimming grace make them attractive. In one visit to Harper's, when the water was very high and turbid, no procne at all were seen. In normal conditions, however, they are boringly common.

Occasionally seen at Harper's Meadow have been Banded Killifish (Fundulus diaphanus). They used to inhabit a bay fed by seepage and occasional high water, but then a youthful engineer built a stone dam across the mouth of the bay, and no diaphanus have been seen since.

The only other species seen at Harper's this summer has been the Bluegill (Lepomis macrochirus). Boys fish here, and one claimed proudly to have caught a 6" Bluegill. It's doubtful there are many other "game" species here, aside from occasional Bullheads or, in spring, trout, since parts of the Wissahickon are stocked. Despite the lack of many game fish, however, the creek does contain far more "bait" species than were seen at Harper's Meadow this summer.

Bus trips have taken 3-3½ hours door-site-door, and cost \$2, including transfer costs from the trolley to the bus.

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