

CRAIG CREEK, VIRGINIA  
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It had been a warm, dry summer by southwestern Virginia standards, but none too bad compared to back home in Kansas. I was attending Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg, in pursuit of a Master's degree in Fisheries. I had decided to take up the art of bowhunting (just what I needed, another time-consuming hobby), so I jumped at the opportunity to accompany two fellow students on a deer-scouting trip one afternoon in early September, 1987.

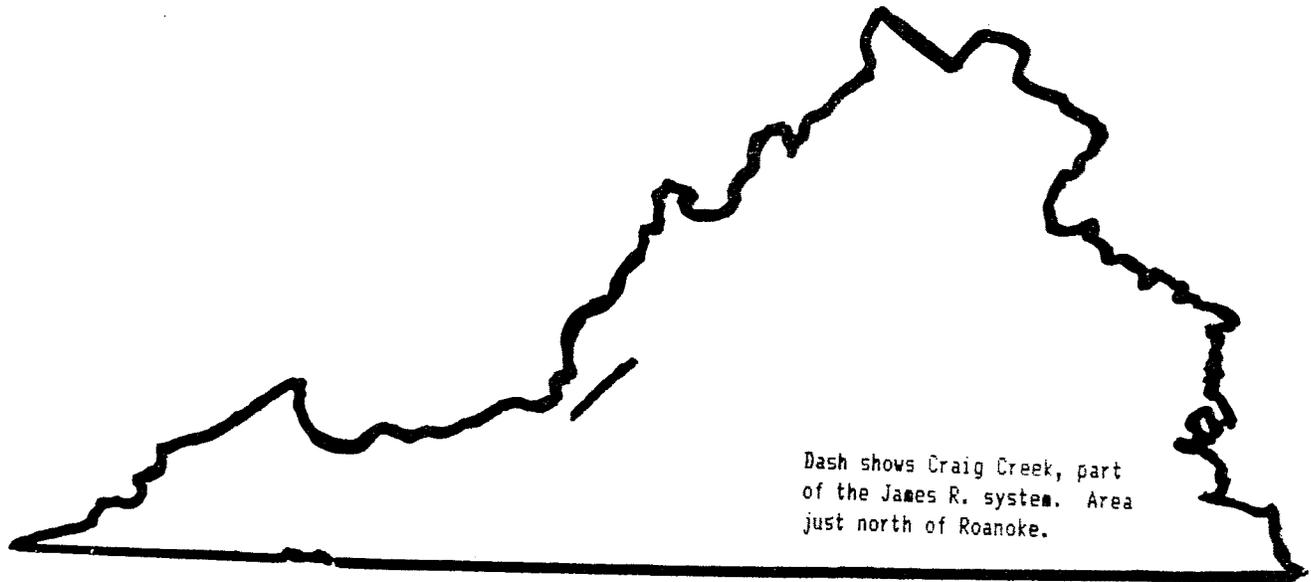
We were scouting the valley of upper Craig Creek in northern Montgomery County, one of the westernmost tributaries of the James River drainage. I had expected to see a fast-flowing, cold, rocky stream, since this reach was stocked with trout by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. I was, however, in for a surprise! Passing by one of the "Designated Trout Waters" signs, we walked down to the Creek. I was right about the rocky part--the stream bed was mostly fractured bedrock, but there was no water to be seen. In walking down the stream bed, we discovered that the dry summer had reduced this "trout water" to a few small, isolated pools (many as small as 2'x3', and all less than 18" deep) and a large pool (approx. 10'x20'). On close examination, we noted the presence of numerous small fish in the small pools and some larger fish in the largest pool. After many unsuccessful attempts to capture the fish by hand, we decided that this site warranted future attention and vowed to return at a future date.

The opportunity presented itself on September 9th. I journeyed into the field with fellow native-fish enthusiasts (though not NANFA members...yet!) Alan Temple and Mark Scott. And did we go equipped! Our gear included buckets, ice chests, aerators, dipnets, seines, a backpack shocker (a backpack-mounted generator with two probes that are held in the water to create an electric field that temporarily stuns fish in the area), and the permits necessary to use such equipment.

We arrived at the stream, and luck was with us (or the weather at least); the stream was in the same condition as on my previous visit, and we would now get to see what fish actually lived in those little pools. The cover in the pools consisted of the previously mentioned bedrock ledges, large rocks, and the roots of nearby trees. The seine was out of the question, but conditions were prime for the backpack shocker. The water temperature in one of the pools was 19°C (approx. 65°F). We proceeded to cover systematically all of the pools we could find, and found the following 18 species of fish:

1. Brown Trout (Salmo trutta)--only one found, in largest pool, approx. 12" in total length, apparently in reasonably good condition.
2. Chain Pickerel (Esox niger)--common, 3-12" total length, several taken back for aquaria. One note: it seems that the electric current may cause spinal abnormalities in larger individuals.
3. Rosyside Dace (Clinostomus funduloides)--abundant.
4. Stoneroller (Campostoma anomalum)--present.
5. Bluehead Chub (Nocomis leptocephalus)--common.
6. Crescent Shiner (Notropis cerasinus)--common, a hardy aquarium fish, nice breeding colors, somewhat aggressive, especially to other shiners.
7. Swallowtail Shiner (Notropis procne)--present.
8. Mountain Redbelly Dace (Phoxinus oreas)--abundant, good aquarium fish, nice colors, mild temperament.
9. Fallfish (Semotilus corporalis)--present, relative of Creek Chub, grows much larger, ecological equivalent of trout.
10. White Sucker (Catostomus commersoni)--two individuals found in largest pool; a large, widespread sucker tolerant of a variety of environmental conditions.
11. Northern Hogsucker (Hypentelium nigricans)--common, several young individuals, less tolerant of degraded systems than White Sucker.
12. Torrent Sucker (Moxostoma rhoethecum)--common.
13. Margined Madtom (Noturus insignis)--common, nearly all individuals found in a single small pool containing a large amount of leaf litter.
14. Smallmouth Bass (Micropterus dolomieu)--one individual found in largest pool.
15. Rock Bass (Ambloplites rupestris)--present only in largest pool.
16. Fantail Darter (Etheostoma flabellare)--present, a fairly tolerant species.
17. Johnny Darter (Etheostoma nigrum)--most common darter, a highly tolerant species.

18. Shield Darter (Percina peltata)--one specimen, a large one. How did it get there and survive the drought?



If there were 18 species in these little pools, we wondered how many we would find downstream where there was still flowing water. I personally hoped to find some more Shield Darters, a species that was new to me and looked like it would be interesting to keep in my darter tank. As luck would have it, that was the only Shield Darter we found, and it didn't survive the trip home (may have been shocked a bit hard). We found 18 species at the lower site as well, but nine were species that we didn't get at the first site (species marked "\*" were common to both sites):

- \*1. Rosyside Dace (Clinostomus funduloides)--common.
- \*2. Stoneroller (Campostoma anomalum)--common.
- \*3. Cutlips Minnow (Exoglossum maxillingua)--present; an interesting mouth adaptation, but not very exciting in an aquarium--except for a tendency to pluck out fishes' eyes!
- \*4. Bluehead Chub (Nocomis leptcephalus)--common.
- \*5. Crescent Shiner (Notropis cerasinus)--common.
6. Common Shiner (Notropis cornutus)--present.

7. Spottail Shiner (Notropis hudsonius)--present.
8. Longnose Dace (Rhinichthys cataractae)--present.
9. Black Jumprock (Moxostoma cervinum)--present.
- \*10. Torrent Sucker (Moxostoma rhoethecum)--common.
- \*11. Margined Madtom (Noturus insignis)--present.
- \*12. Smallmouth Bass (Micropterus dolomieu)--one individual.
- \*13. Rock Bass (Ambloplites rupestris)--present.
14. Redbreast Sunfish (Lepomis auritus)--one individual.
- \*15. Fantail Darter (Etheostoma flabellare)--present.
16. Longfin Darter (Etheostoma longimanum)--present, appears somewhat similar to Johnny Darter; breeding males have extremely long fins and are very colorful.
17. Roanoke Darter (Percina roanoka)--common, a colorful darter, but seen too often in this area.
18. Mottled Sculpin (Cottus bairdi)--common; I tried to keep one in an aquarium years ago; I think their favorite food is small darters.

We thus collected a total of 27 different species from Craig Creek, nine of which were found at both sites. Diversity appeared to increase as we moved downstream. In the isolated pools, the fish were confined, and we were able to get a thorough sample representing the fauna present. The increase in water temperature downstream could explain the absence of Mountain Redbelly Dace, Northern Hogsucker, and Fallfish at the second site. The Brown Trout was a relic of the spring stocking. Chain Pickerel and White Sucker are pool species and may have been missed at the second site since the deep pools were difficult to sample. The Swallowtail Shiner and Shield Darter are not very common species (and I don't know their habitat preferences, so they also might have been missed at the second site. The Johnny Darter may have been less common due to the diverse and abundant darter assemblage at the second site.

Our expedition to Craig Creek was a success. We saw a total of 27 species of fish, some of which were new to me. I

ended up with two small Chain Pickerel that started out in a ten-gallon aquarium in my office. One ended up as a dried-out fish stick on the floor, and the other graduated to a 30-gallon aquarium in my living room.

This was a good start for me in learning the fish of Virginia. Due to limitation of space in my apartment, I have resorted to keeping more photographs than fish, but I have since gone on trips to several other streams. My goals for the coming spring include trips to some streams in the coastal plain of southeastern Virginia and the Tennessee River drainage (probably the Powell and/or Holston Rivers).

