

DISMAL TRIP

by Bruce Gebhardt, Philadelphia, Pa.

The Dismal Swamp was probably named by a fish collector. That's the kind of results obtained in five or six hours of collecting in October.

The swamp straddles the Virginia-North Carolina border just south of Norfolk, Va. In fact, according to some maps, the swamp may actually be in metropolitan Norfolk. Our trip to the area was hastily planned. As a result, we wasted almost two hours trying to cut cross-country from Virginia Beach. If there's a return visit, we'll use the interstates. Another time-waster was trying to enter the swamp from the east. U.S. Rt. 17 borders its entire north-south length in Virginia. Parallel- ing the road on the west is the Chesapeake-Albemarle Canal. We lacked a license or collecting permit in North Carolina so we stayed north of the border. We found no way into the swamp by car; there might be some boat-rental places on 17, and there is boat access via some canals into the heart of the swamp. To drive as far into the swamp as possible--indeed, to do any fish-collecting at all--it is necessary to take U.S. 13 south, on the west side of the swamp, then turn southeast on Rt. 32. There is one road going east from 32 which leads to Lake Drummond. We never found it! But there's a big lake in there. A map consulted after the fact reveals that you can at least approach to within a mile or two of the lake from the west. The map implies that at the end of the road, one launches a boat into the canal, but it's possible a road goes further towards the lake than is marked on the map. There may also be some ways into the swamp from northwest of the lake. We spent our collecting time on the western fringes of the swamp.

During our unproductive cruise along Rt. 17, up and down the east side of the swamp, we stopped with no success at all along the canal. We found some fish along a drainage ditch perpendicular to the road and canal on the east side of Rt. 17. We later determined the ditch was part of a farm; we had thought it public. Nobody bothered us, even workers passing by, but it might not be wise to collect there. The ditch yielded thousands of Gambusia affinis, as any fresh water in the region does. We caught a couple of Pumpkinseeds, we believe (Lepomis gibbosus); then a Lepomis new to me--L. gulosus,*the Warmouth. To say that this fish was the highlight of the trip will incur the disbelief of readers in the south and midwest, where the species is naturally common, and in the west and southwest, where the species has been introduced.

The overall coloration--a flattering term--is similar to that of a young Pumpkinseed--dark vertical streaks on a lighter background. In sunlight, it may look overall silvery or metallic steel blue. The chief distinction of pattern is several rows of black horizontal dashes above the middle of the fish. The main feature, however, is the size of the mouth, which is huge.

*Probably.

The overall body shape is longer than that of the typical sunfish species. Ahead of the dorsal, the nape and snout taper omnibusly. The overall look resembles that of Cichla soma managuense. Whenever I watched the fish, it always behaved timidly and impeccably. There were several unexplained deaths of male sunfish of other species kept with it, however.

Unfortunately, we only saw one of another species--the Golden Shiner (Notemigonus crysoleucas), a fish of elegant design. The one seen had a dime-sized fungus on its side. So much for that drainage ditch.

As we traversed the north side of the swamp, along U.S. Rt. 58 there is another drainage ditch. Where we stopped, we saw one Banded Sunfish (Enneacanthus obesus) and one Gambusia. That's the only time I've ever encountered one Gambusia. Lots of daphniae and cyclops, though.

We stopped at several creeks crossing roads into the swamp from its west side. The creeks--often with no direction of flow perceptible--generally resembled pine-barrens types in color. Some wound through cypress swamps. We caught one 3" Bluespot Sunfish (Enneacanthus gloriosus) and one Eastern Mudminnow (Umbra pygmaea). In the larger streams, there were Pumpkinseeds and probably Bluegill (Lepomis macrochirus). And lots of Chain Pickerel (Esox niger).

These furnished one interesting sight. In one slow creek was a corpse of a possum or raccoon. Around it, six pickerel were visible--a rather unusual concurrence. Theory: they were hanging around to catch the Gambusia which were nibbling on the corpse. This is only speculation, but it recalls the following passage from Modes of Reproduction in Fishes: "Shoemaker (1946, 1947) reported an interesting item concerning the ecology of L. gibbosus nests. He wrote, 'In several instances a chain pickerel, Esox niger LeSueur, shared the nest with the male sunfish.' After female sunfish had spawned in the nests, several golden shiners, Notemigonus crysoleucas (Mitchill), approached to eat the eggs. The male sunfish always drove away some of the shiners, but many more came in while the male was away. At this time the pickerel, lying in the nest or very near it in the vegetation, usually darted in and carried away a shiner, causing the rest of them to retreat. In one instance the author snared the pickerel from the nest and the number of shiners taking eggs greatly increased." This is an interesting story per se, but the point here is that pickerel hang around where the food is likely to come; that gives some credence to the Theory.

Otherwise, the Dismal Swamp lived up to its name. Nevertheless, its size and mystery make it a tempting collecting area.

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