

EARTHING AFFECTION: NATCHEZ TRACE PARKWAY

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In early May 2016, Sarah and I took a three-day weekend to explore the Natchez Trace Parkway, a noncommercial road dedicated to recreation. Every few miles there's some sort of attraction, a scenic overlook, waterfall, historic site, or hiking trail to stop along and explore. I am somewhat familiar with the region as my gazetteer is still speckled with remnant circles from fish forays of years past. With Sarah's interest in a bike/camp combo for a future adventure, we thought this would be a great way to scout out a potential route.

We started off Saturday morning in Nashville with a lovely visit with friends, Saul and Amber Solano. As luck would have it, they live just down the road from the start of the parkway. After some much-needed catching up and our bellies full of a killer brunch, we jumped on the Trace and meandered south-

ward. It took most of day one to reach Hohenwald, Tennessee, with all the fascinations to see. Tired, hungry, and with dusk upon us, it was time to find our home away from home for the weekend. Just outside Hohenwald there is a neat spot called Fall Hollow Campground. Casper Cox hosted a week-long fish foray there back in 2009, which was my introduction to this little place and to many NANFA members I consider great friends. Bill and Cathy, the adorable couple who used to run the campground, are no longer the owners. With new owners, the property looks much the same and still very reasonable. RVs dominate the property's front, with a small raised gravel lane dissecting the bottoms back to a small opening along Swan Creek. From a quick overview of the stream, the conditions seemed right to set up shop on the sandbar. This plan



Swan Creek Drainage.



Sarah at our mobile kitchen.

Photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Lance Merry is a commercial truck driver by night and conservation blogger by day, and loves ecology of native fishes, orchids, and salamanders. He is the photographer for the upcoming *Fishes of Missouri*, 3rd ed., and created the booklet *Orchids of Macon County, Illinois*. His work has been featured in many publications (and illegally poached all over the web). His dream of viable conservation employment with his degree in biology has led to a career of new careers: yard maintenance, lab technician, photographer, fermentation technician, retail vendor, truck driver. In May, the frozen snorkeler took another plunge and got married. Congratulations to Lance and Sarah!



Lance the frozen photographer. (Photo by Sarah Merry)



Tennessee Shiner aggregation atop an active Redtail Chub nest.



Tennessee Shiner: male.



Redtail Chub.

was quickly derailed once we realized the required Therm-a-Rest self-inflating mats were forgotten back in Illinois. Plan B was settling for the closest grassy patch we could find near the sandbar to where we could still fall asleep to the babbling of the stream. At that point, up went the tent and we were off to eat dinner 30 minutes away at a restaurant that Cracker Barrel could only dream of being. Racing the clock to get there before they closed, we walked through the door at Stan's Country Restaurant with just enough time to sit down, unwind, and enjoy some southern comfort food. What's in the cracklin cornbread? Cracklins!

This trip was not supposed to be an all-about-fish trip. So much so, I wasn't going to pack the underwater gear. I knew, considering the time of year, it's possible to find an active chub mound. With the car already full, the decision to lug the extra

gear or not weighed heavily. I couldn't decide. Down to the 11th hour a twinge inside went with the gamble. In the trunk went the bare minimum, an underwater housing and one snorkel mask.

Up with the birds, we embarked on a mornings' stream-side walk to start our day. It quickly turned fishy as I caught a faint glow of orange in the stream channel. Closer examination yielded a ball of orange minnows over several piles of stones. The last-minute decision to throw in the housing and a mask paid off. However, the water was unbearably cold without any form of suit but we took turns with the mask for a couple minutes at a time for an up-close glimpse of orange-pulsing congregations of Tennessee Shiners (*Notropis leuciodus*). Dr. Todd Crail's "liquid sunshine" terminology sums it up perfectly. Ah, the beauty. There is nothing



Rosyside Dace: male.



Rock Bass.

else like it. The next few hours went to capturing its magnificence and the Redtail Chub (*Nocomis effusus*) excavation team in charge of mound construction. Video of this event can be seen on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15SBKM6OIew>). Meanwhile back at camp, Sarah was busy cooking up a storm preparing meals for our day while packing up our home as we had more Trace to explore. Continuing south, we were surprised to find more active nests! This time Rosyside Dace (*Clinostomus funduloides*) were among the orange pack of Tennessee Shiners. It must have been spring break that weekend within the fish community because it turned out to be a fish party everywhere.

Armed only with a dip net, Sarah and I managed to cap-

ture several and photograph them before they lost their glow. These minnows can turn their chromatophores on and off within moments. Not having tried to photograph these within a photo-tank before, much planning on the fly took place to make this operation a success for the final results.

Not being a total fish trip...we were able to enjoy the sites of Metal Ford, Napier Mine, and concluded the adventure with a picnic at the beautiful Jack's Branch. Sarah had not seen this part of the country before and I was more than happy to spend as much time as possible in it. We meandered north taking country roads to Kentucky before jumping on I-24 and migrating home.

The entire region is gorgeous.