

# Fish in Focus: *Elassoma evergladei*

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When I was a sophomore at the College of Charleston, a friend of mine gave me a copy of Innes' *Exotic Aquarium Fishes* after I commented on it while at his house. He had no interest in fish and didn't remember why he had it, but it was a treasure chest of possibilities for me. I spent most of my free time over the next few months combing through the pages and memorizing the names of the fish that I found interesting. The fish that I kept coming back to was a tiny black fish with bright blue spangles and, according to the Innes book, I could find it right down the road from where I was in school. That fish was the Everglades Pygmy Sunfish, *Elassoma evergladei*. Thus began my search for this tiny little gem and my interest in native fishes. Check out the photos on page 19.

At the time, I had never even considered trying to catch fish out of the local creeks and streams. I had, of course, gone fishing as a kid with my dad and caught crayfish and salamanders out of creeks with my friends, but never targeted fish that I thought would work in an aquarium. I spent a lot of time searching the internet and came across a guy that had devoted an entire website to *Elassoma* and asked him if he might be able to help me find some pygmies. He was, unfortunately, in Thailand but he told me to contact Fritz Rohde, which I did, and this led to a friendship that has lasted over a decade. Fritz took me out and showed how and where to properly sample fish and from there, with the help of my other new collecting buddy, Chip Rinehart, I began sampling all over South Carolina.

As it turns out, *evergladei* wasn't the first pygmy that would end up in my net. Chip and I first targeted the two less-common species, *Elassoma boehlkei* and *okatie*. We had very little information to go on, but based off of some sites from Fishbase and Fritz and Rudy Arndt's description paper, we set out searching. We were able to find both species our first times out. Soon after, we found *evergladei* and *zonatum* in creeks and swamps closer to home.

Pygmy sunfishes are found in the slowly flowing creeks and swamps of the southeastern US.

They rarely exceed one inch, although I have seen some very large *zonatum* over the years. They tend to be annual fish in the wild with most adults dying off after spawning. In South Carolina, adults are abundant during the fall and winter and then seem to disappear in early spring. Juveniles start showing up in late spring. Collection is best done in the fall and winter with a sturdy dip net sampling in the dense submerged vegetation near shore.

Maintaining pygmies is very easy. My best setups always involved a small tank, less than ten gallons, that were packed with Java Moss or some other fine-leaved plant. Filtration requirements are minimal and I either used none at all or a slowly bubbling sponge or corner filters. I fed live blackworms, mosquito larvae, and daphnia. I also trained all of my fish to eat frozen bloodworms, but never had success with brine shrimp.

Breeding seemed to take place on its own. I never did anything special to induce spawning other than heavy feedings and water changes, but they seemed to spawn nearly continuously. I also did nothing in regards to raising the fry, but always had multiple classes growing up in the tanks. I would spend hours, in my pre-children days, staring into these tanks watching the nearly black males with what appeared to be glowing blue spots dance around and spar with other males. I have seen this behavior now in other species, including various shiner and darter species, but none have really compared to these first observations.

Since these early days, I have had the opportunity to catch and maintain all seven species of *Elassoma* but I have always found *evergladei* to be the most interesting. From the intense coloration to the beautiful spawning and sparring dance to the ease of maintaining, these fish are ideal. I have that one photograph of the Everglades Pygmy Sunfish in the Innes book to thank for all the many new and interesting people I have met and the many new areas with colorful and unique fish that I have explored. 🐟