

FINDING NATALIS

AN ADVENTURE IN GETTING SPECIMENS



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As a catfish researcher, I am constantly looking for fresh specimens. As an aquarist, those specimens must fit into specific dimensions for the size of tank that they are going to be housed in. I never imagined that I would have such an adventure in obtaining the specimens that would fit into both categories.

I lived in San Angelo, Texas at the start of my research career. As an independent researcher with only the funds that I could personally generate, I started my experiments with commonly caught specimens from the local waterways. Those specimens just happened to be the locally named Mudcat, officially known as the Yellow Bullhead (*Ameiurus natalis*) (Figure 1).

I utilized a drop net at the Concho River to catch the fish. There was a small dam across the street from San Angelo Central High School that offered an excellent opportunity (Figure 2). I assembled the net, lowered it into the water be-

low the dam, and baited it with canned dog food. Cat food worked better, but the bait would dissipate faster. After several minutes, I brought the net up with quite a number of *natalis* in it. They ranged from 0.5 inches to 2–3 inches. They would very nicely accommodate the small 20-gallon tank that I was going to put them into for study.

I did this for several years with enormous success. If I needed a larger specimen for dissection purposes then I would take my rod and reel to the same river, but to a different location (Figure 3) and I would invariably be blessed with the specimens that I needed.

This all changed in 1991.



Figure 1. *Ameiurus natalis* (Yellow Bullhead). Eassiss Creek, AR. (Photo by Uland Thomas)



Figure 2. Dam at Concho River.



Figure 3. Concho River.

Photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

James Burgess has always loved fishing and keeping the ones that he caught. He became extremely interested in the diversity of catfishes as a young high school student. Even while serving in the Army; James continued his catfish studies. He started writing articles and research papers after he retired from the Army and posting them on ResearchGate. He is a member of PlanetCatfish, Catfish Study Group, and American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists. His grandchildren help him in collecting specimens in the local creeks. He continues to keep and be amazed by *Ameiurus natalis*.

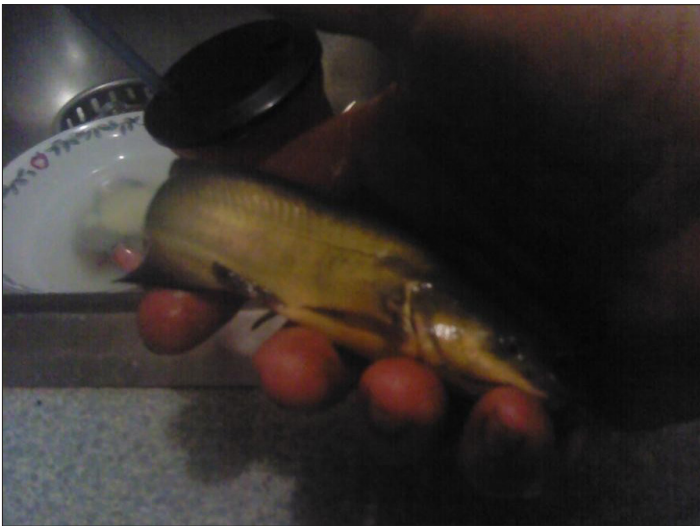


Figure 4. Small Mudcat.

In 1991 after joining the Army, I found myself residing in Kentucky. My whole research pattern changed drastically. For various reasons, my tanks always ended up in disaster. I could not keep a tank up and running for the extended periods that I needed and catching the fish became an issue as well. I could not obtain the same type of specimens that I had in the past. The problem was obvious. I could not resume my research the way that I had done in the past. Without specimens and tanks, I turned to the literature to further my research.

While I could not keep catfish, I continued to try to catch them and take whatever data that I could on their behavior. I found a small pond that was in front of my daughter's house out in the country that had small *natalis* in it that would have been the right size, but since my aquarist abilities were questionable, I never kept any that I caught.

Everything started to change in 2011. We had moved to Tennessee and my wife got me a small tank for Christmas that year when I came back from my last tour of Iraq. Now we have a reversal of the tank problem. I was able to get the chemicals to stabilize the water for the fish. Not satisfied with a small tank, I finally was able to purchase a larger 55-gallon tank. Once I set it up, I was ready to track down suitable sized specimens to continue my research.

I purchased a variety of equipment (cast nets, minnow seines, traps), but none caught the specimens that I wanted or needed. Fishing in the local waterway was unproductive even though the local experts assured me that *natalis* were quite numerous. I resorted to the local ponds. I asked several pond owners for permission to extract specimens from their waters, but even though they were willing, they had replaced the Mudcat population with Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*). It seemed as though I would have to switch my research to another type of catfish. Not willing to give up, I went on a search for ponds that had the specimens that

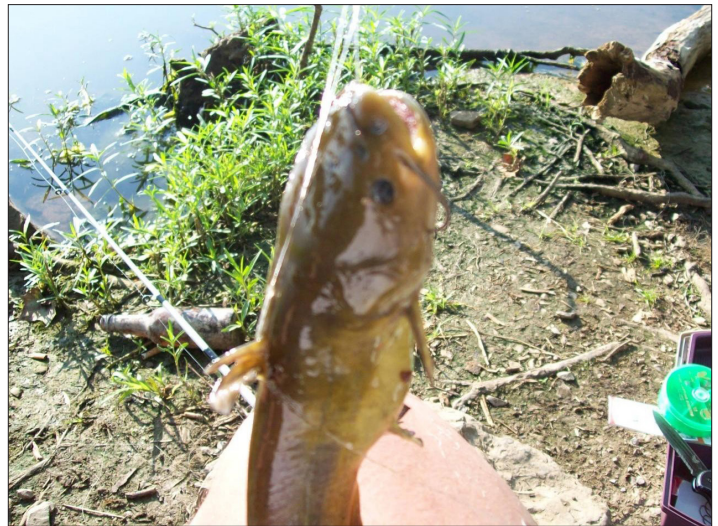


Figure 5. Yellow Bullhead that my wife caught.

I needed. I questioned a gentleman that owned a pond and I received the same response as before, but he told me to go to this certain store. The store owner was supposed to be the local expert on fish and ponds in the area. His reaction was that Mudcats were extinct and did not exist anymore. I didn't believe him anymore than anyone else would, so I was back to square one.

I had let it be known that I was searching for Mudcat specimens to fish for. An acquaintance of my son had a huge body of water on his land, but he didn't know what kind of fish were in it. I received permission to fish the pond and lo and behold I was blessed with a *natalis* specimen. It was bigger than I needed, but I figured that I could accommodate it since I was having difficulty obtaining specimens. I thought I had found a steady supply of fresh fish for my research. I was even able to obtain a small one about 4 inches in length (Figure 4).

After fishing in this pond several times and catching one or two each time, the owner drained the pond and sold it. So my search started again.

I expanded my search by fishing in areas miles away from my residence. I was successful in collecting Channel Catfish of various sizes. I did take the appropriate sized fish home, but I still was not satisfied. On one of my expeditions, I explored a new area. After several hours of fishing and catching several different types of fishes, I was unsuccessful in finding the *natalis* that I was after, so we decided to leave. As we were gathering our equipment together, my wife reeled in her line to find a fish on it that had swallowed the hook. Lo and behold we had found the fish and the size that I had been attempting to find! (Figure 5).

Now that we had found an area ripe with possibilities, we went back several times. Logically, since there was one, there would be more. I was surprised once again. Even though I employed every type of bait available to me, we were unsuc-



Figure 6. Flathead Catfish.

cessful in my quest. Determined that there should be more *natalis* in the area, my wife and I went back to the same waterway but to a different spot. I was pleased to collect two more specimens of the appropriate size, as well as a small Flathead Catfish (*Pylodictis olivaris*) (Figure 6).

The area where we found them is in Hendersonville, Tennessee. There are three different areas in Hendersonville where I have found the *natalis* that I need to fit into the tank that I have.

The area called the Hendersonville Memorial Park is really an ideal setting (Figure 7). The area is designed to be utilized by fishermen of all ages with few obstacles to get my line snagged on and I usually come away with at least one or two specimens of the appropriate size for my aquarium.



Figure 7. Hendersonville Memorial Park.

These specimens are for the most part caught after the sun goes down due to the nocturnal behaviors of these fish.

Recently I returned to the area that started my specimen collecting, San Angelo, Texas. I visited the same dam that I used to just drop my net with bait in the middle and pull up several specimens, but I was discouraged that this trip did not produce any positive results. The one area where I found my original 1–2 inch specimens was being fished by someone else by the time that I got back from getting my gear.

The hunt and collection efforts continue.

Reference:

Burgess, W.E. 1989. An atlas of freshwater and marine catfishes. 784pp.

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