

The First Texas Native Fish Weekend

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Over the weekend of June 14-16, 2002, members of NANFA and the NFC embarked on the first of what will hopefully be many native fish forays in the state. This event was held at the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge (FWNC&R), which contains a long and relatively natural stretch of the West Fork of the Trinity River. This is our story.

Friday, June 14

The event started out slowly as only Rob Denkhaus (NANFA host for the event), Charles Anderton (NFC host for the event), and Charlie Anderton (Charles' son) were in attendance at 6:30 p.m. for Steve Campbell's presentation on cottonmouth behavior and avoidance. Instead of having a regular presentation to such a small group, we chose to just sit around talking fish, snakes, and everything else while waiting for others to arrive. Steve Campbell is an Aquatic Education Specialist for Texas Parks & Wildlife (TP&W) and has an extreme interest in both herps and fish. Steve remarked many times that he was thrilled to find that there are groups of non-academics who are interested in nongame fish! The possibility of cooperative activities between TP&W, NANFA and NFC was discussed at length. Steve promised to join the organizations in the near future. While we talked, Matthew Fisher (Katy, Texas) called to say that he was sitting on I-820 with a flat tire and would be staying at a friend's house before coming out in the morning. Our group was beginning to grow!

It was well after dark when John Bongiovanni pulled into camp. He and his wife had made the long journey from Tyler, Texas, to find the original four sitting at the campfire enjoying a cold libation or six. John works in Athens, Texas, home to the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center. He and Steve

had some friends in common who work there and we discussed a group visit to the site at some future date. The calls of barred owls accompanied the crackling of the fire as we shared fish tales and discussed the next days' activities before finally turning in sometime after 2 a.m.

Saturday, June 15

The day started early for some. Charlie was first up and had the fire burning brightly since it was surprisingly cool and damp for a Texas June morning. John had to run his wife over to a relative's house in Dallas. After a bit of breakfast, we headed up to the interpretive center to meet the rest of the group that was coming in for the day.

At the interpretive center, FWNC&R staff members John Shaffer and Travis Tidwell joined us. John is a junior high school science teacher most of the time but has worked as a seasonal naturalist for many years. He runs the FWNC&R canoe program and is intimately acquainted with the local waters. Travis is a summer intern who has been on the job for a week. He was told to come prepared to get wet and really had no idea what was in store for him. Also joining us were Dan Northcut (Dallas), a new NANFA member and president of the Dallas chapter of the Texas Master Naturalist program, and Karen Green (Keller, Texas), a member of the Friends of the Nature Center who had seen an event notice posted in the interpretive center and just thought that it sounded like fun. Dan, it should be noted, is also an environmental science teacher at St. Marks School of Dallas and has several native tanks and an outdoor pond on exhibit at the school. Matthew Fisher also caught up to us and John B. got back before we left. Our group now numbered 10 as we loaded up into a caravan to head to the first site.

We started on the south end of the Refuge in an area known as Greer Island. The Greer Island area is at the head of Lake Worth, a reservoir constructed in 1914 to provide drinking water for Fort Worth. Greer Island was originally a wooded hilltop along the West Fork but is now an island that is accessible via a causeway. Our intent was to sample along both sides of the causeway and along the adjacent shoreline.

After some initial hesitation at wading into the murky waters of the West Fork and a bit of instruction (for the novices) in how to operate a seine, we plunged in. The first run with the seine pulled up a beautiful orangespotted sunfish (*Lepomis humilis*, Fig. 1) and everyone was hooked.

Other species for this area included longnose gar (*Lepisosteus osseus*), gizzard shad (*Dorosoma cepedianum*), red shiner (*Cyprinella lutrensis*), creek chub (*Semotilus atromaculatus*), carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), freckled madtom (*Noturus nocturnus*), inland silverside (*Menidia beryllina*), mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*), bigscale logperch (*Percina macrolepida*), redear sunfish (*Lepomis microlophus*), longear sunfish (*L. megalotis*), bluegill (*L. macrochirus*), and largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*).

Non-fish fauna observed or encountered included glass shrimp, dragonfly and damselfly nymphs, various crayfishes, water scorpions, various diving beetles including belostomatids, and one unidentified water snake which Charlie wisely did not scoop up into his net.

One of the highlights of our time at Greer Island was the presence of a news crew from a Fort Worth cable channel. They interviewed Rob Denkhaus about why the event was being held and what we hoped to find. They asked John B. why someone would drive so far to look at fish. They promised to give the nature center a copy of the finished feature.

By chance, while the camera was rolling, Charles and John B. were making a run with a seine through water that suddenly became deeper than they were tall. As Charles tried to save his cigarettes from floating away, they managed to hang onto the seine and regain their footing. When they brought the seine up they had caught a beautiful longear and the first redear sunfish recorded from the Refuge. The camera was able to capture the vivid colors of the fish and the excited reactions of the participants. In addition, Dan had managed to catch an eight-inch gar complete with all the frills on the fins.

Before leaving Greer Island, Karen, who had come along because she thought that it might be fun, had learned how much fun it really is and Travis, who was told to be prepared to get wet and so had brought waders, had experienced the joy of not being able to stop sinking into the muck bottom as the water reached up and over the top of his waders.



Fig. 1.
Orangespotted sunfish, *Lepomis humilis*.
Photograph by Charles Anderton.

Next, we moved up river to another causeway which divides the West Fork from an area known as Lotus Marsh. This site offers easy access to two very different habitats. Now that everyone was experienced in seine operation, we spread out more and worked both sides of the causeway.

The species list for this area included mosquitofish, blackspotted topminnow (*Fundulus olivaceus*), blackstripe topminnow (*F. notatus*), bigscale logperch, bluegill, longear sunfish, orangespotted sunfish, largemouth bass, and black crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*).

Non-fish fauna collected in the area included damselfly and dragonfly nymphs, dobsonfly larvae, various crayfish, and glass shrimp.

One of the highlights of the area was watching a large clubtailed dragonfly nymph catch and consume young *Gambusia*. Dan wanted to keep the invertebrate predator for his classroom tank, but when it went after one of Charles' topminnows he wisely released it.

The news crew followed us to the site to finish their taping. Proving that they were not true outdoors people, the reporter tried to tape his intro and conclusion while standing on a fire ant mound. Since he was wearing sandals, we recommended that he wade into the water to rid himself of the biting pests, but he refused saying that he didn't know what might be in the water.

Young Travis also encountered a biting pest as he learned how not to pick up a dobsonfly larva. When Dan pulled the invertebrate from the net and asked what it was, Travis offered to take a look and received a painful slit in his finger for his trouble. The offending larva later became food for a hungry fish.

Also in this area, Karen showed that she has the right stuff to be a true native fish conservationist as she single handedly cleaned up a huge pile of beer cans that some [expletive deleted] had left along the shore.

Before finishing up in the area, Rob challenged anyone to seine a thickly vegetated backwater slough on the river side of the causeway. The vegetation, primarily hornwort, makes seining difficult but provides plenty of cover for fish and invertebrates. Not wanting to pass up a challenge, Dan and Charles waded in. The area proved to be full of crappie and other sunfishes. Keeping any of these fishes required a gallant effort on the part of Karen who fought her way through shoreline brush and an aquatic jungle in order to get a bucket to the intrepid fish collectors.

After Dan and Charles had climbed out of the slough, we headed up to the interpretive center to sort the catch and have some lunch. Charlie A. and Steve C. had to say goodbye because of other commitments, but Dr. Lou Verner, Urban Wildlife Biologist for TP&W, then joined us. Lou had recently removed the tropicals from his 125 gallon tank in preparation for going native!

We then moved northward into an area that lies below Eagle Mountain Dam. Here is where alligators are most commonly seen on the Refuge. Rather than walk the two miles to the site, we all loaded into a 4WD S10 pickup (yes, 10 of us) and made the long journey, stopping once to move trees out of the way, and using the 4WD to get through mud holes and over rock piles.

We didn't see any alligators, but the fish were plentiful. The area's species list included: longnose gar, gizzard shad, red shiner, blacktail shiner (*Cyprinella venusta*, Fig. 2), black buffalo (*Ictiobus niger*), mosquitofish, blackstripe topminnow, blackspot topminnow, inland silverside, bluegill, orangespotted sunfish, warmouth (*Lepomis gulosus*), redear sunfish, largemouth bass, bluntnose darter (*Etheostoma chlorosoma*), and bigscale logperch. Nonfish fauna included glass shrimp, dragonfly and damselfly nymphs, water scorpions, and crayfish.

Highlights at this area were catching a two-foot longnose gar and an approximately two-pound black buffalo while seining. Seeing a big fish in the net was quite a thrill for those who have never before experienced it. Another highlight was finding the blacktail shiners, which had not been previously recorded from this area.

After returning to camp for a quick and refreshing cold drink, we reconvened at the interpretive center to sort the new catch. Lou claimed a number of fish to stock his 125-gallon tank. Dan claimed one of the gars, the black buffalo, and others

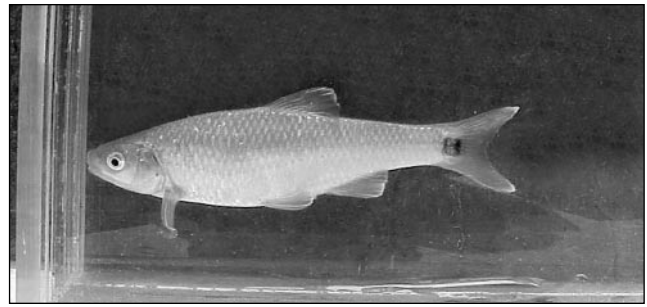


Fig. 2.
Blacktail shiner, *Cyprinella venusta*.
Photograph by Charles Anderton.

to put in a 240-gallon tank at school. Karen chose not to take any fish . . . yet. Matthew had to go but promised to return in the morning. John S. and Travis, having put in a full day's work, left for home. Our group was down to Rob D., Charles A. and John B., and we still had our speakers for the night!

Once again, because of the small group, the presentations were more like conversations. Dr. Tom Hellier, University of Texas-Arlington, spoke about the impact of exotic introductions on natural systems and a variety of other interesting topics. One unrelated, yet fascinating, story that Dr. Hellier related was that he was the person who first introduced Archie Carr to sea turtles. Dr. Carr then went on to become the foremost authority on sea turtles.

Our second speaker was Armin Karbach, former curator of fishes at the Fort Worth Zoo. Armin discussed some of the history behind the now-defunct zoo-aquarium and how it operated. He also discussed some of the projects with which he had been involved in the U.S. and México.

After the speakers we retired to camp. Shortly after we had retreated to our tents, a mighty storm blew in. Rob's tent was lifted and twisted and finally demolished by winds, which were reported to have reached 80 mph. Rain fell and lightning flashed as the intrepid fish enthusiasts cowered in their tents.

Sunday, June 16

When morning finally dawned, it was as if nothing had ever happened during the night. Deer were wandering around the edges of camp. A Carolina wren was busily working on a nest under the cover of the picnic shelter. Barred owls continued to call throughout the morning.

Worn out from the previous day's activities and a restless night, the remaining three, Rob, Charles and John B., decided to call it a weekend and returned home, but not before making tentative plans to do it all again. 🐸