

Fish Collecting Tips

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Last year I traveled to southwest Arkansas to visit friends and collect a few fish. My holy grail for the past few years has been dollar sunfish (*Lepomis marginatus*). And not just any dollar sunfish, but the Mississippi River Valley, or “western” dollars, as Ray Wolff pointed out to me as there are three types with noticeable color differences. Before I netted my first dollar sunfish while collecting with B.G. Granier in the Saline Lake area of Louisiana in March 1999, I hadn’t even *known* about the species. But that first dollar was a brightly colored male in full breeding regalia—bright reds, dark greens and purples, pinks and burnt orange with almost neon blue face streaks. After netting that flashy sunfish, I hollered at B.G. for an I.D. and was informed that I was looking at my first spawning dollar sunfish. From that point on, I was hooked on this species.

Unfortunately, that beautiful fish died not long after I returned home from that great collecting/fishing/exploring trip. It came down with a fatal case of ich. Which gets back to my June 2003 collecting trip in southwest Arkansas. My 12- and 14-year-old sons were with me and we collected eight adult dollar sunfish on our third day in that state. I placed the fish in two five-gallon buckets that evening after filling the buckets with water from a friend’s well. The following morning all eight fish were dead! I wanted these fish for going on three years, so to say I was upset would be an understatement. The low temperature that night was only 79°F—evidently far too warm for that many fish in each bucket.

I got lucky and caught nine more adults in the southeast corner of Arkansas and half a dozen juveniles. I shipped the juveniles to my home in Idaho and kept the adults with me for the drive home via Missouri and Iowa before heading for Idaho. Over the next five days of travel I kept the fish in a bucket and a cooler. I changed the water with fresh stream

water a couple of times and placed a new bag of ice in the cooler and jars filled with ice in the bucket. The low temperatures were in the high 70s to low 80s and the highs were in the high 80s to low 90s.

I lost two of the nine adults while driving home and four of the six juveniles I had shipped. The other two juveniles died within the first week and a half of my arrival home. I had also collected some bantam sunfish and some warmouth. All in all, I lost roughly 50% of the fish I shipped and 33% of the fish kept with me during my drive home.

I was so disgusted with my failures that I described my disappointment and results to the NANFA e-mail list and got quite a few tips for successful collecting and shipping of fish. I will list these tips in order of importance (as I see it). I’m sure I won’t give credit to everyone who gave advice, but to all who contributed, thank you.

#1. Keep Them Cool

By far, the advice most often given was to collect during cool weather or ensure that the fish are kept cool.

- Try not to collect or ship during hot weather.
- Use Styrofoam boxes or coolers to insulate against temperature extremes.
- Float Ziploc® bags of ice, or use ice gel packs, to keep the water cool.
- Do not place bagged fish on a bag of ice as the cold could kill them.

#2. Minimize Stress

- Be gentle when removing fish from nets or seines.
- Don’t overstock collection buckets or shipping bags.

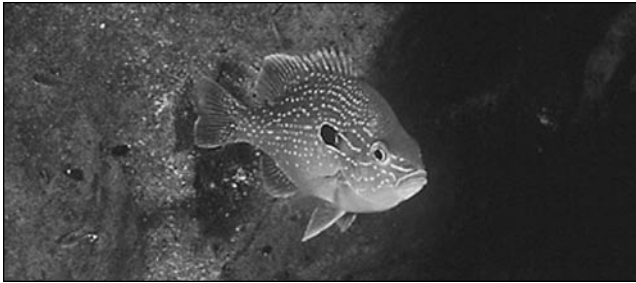


Fig. 1.
Dollar sunfish (*Lepomis marginatus*).
Photograph © Garold Sneegas.

- Once bagged, minimize handling.
- Place soft plastic plants in collection buckets to provide hiding spots (as opposed to live plants that would consume oxygen during shipping or night travel).
- When shipping, double-bag fish to minimize leakage.
- Partial water changes using water from the collection site may benefit sensitive fishes.

#3. Provide Aeration

- Use a small battery operated pump to aerate water, preferably in an insulated bucket or cooler.
- Use a 12 volt to 110 volt inverter (around \$25) in order to power a regular, low amp 110-volt air pump through a vehicle's cigarette lighter.

- Use charcoal and/or ammonia cartridges along with aeration.

#4. Chemicals

- Amquel® or NovAqua™ eliminate ammonia
- Tetracycline helps prevent fungus (a latent killer that has taken many of my sunfish weeks after I collected them).
- Stress Coat® minimizes slime loss
- Salt baths or adding a small amount of sea salt also lessens the likelihood of disease.
- Wear thin latex gloves while collecting; this retains tactile sensitivity while minimizing chances of spreading disease from human to fish. Replace gloves when collecting fish from different locations.

Acknowledgments

A partial list of those whose advice I used to compile these tips include: B.G. Granier, Casper Cox, Chris Scharpf, Dustin Smith, Leo Long, Ray Wolff, Robert Sinclair, and Sajjad Lateef.

Thanks again to everyone who gave advice, and to those who I failed to mention. I'm sure if fish collectors use these ideas, their collecting and/or shipping survival rates will dramatically improve. 🐟

A letter to the editor

I'm writing to help add to our knowledge of raising fish food (see, for example, the recent article about safely raising of mosquito larvae [Summer 2003 *AC*, p. 24]).

Infusoria Over the years I've discovered a couple a ways to raise infusoria for baby fish. One method raises one-celled organisms that can be seen by the naked eye (or someone with good eyesight). The other method raises organisms that are too small to be individually ascertained.

To raise the larger organisms, put some aquarium water into a clean quart-size mayonnaise jar and add three Cheerios.® In a few days the jar should be filled with little organisms.

To raise the smaller organisms, fill the same type of jar with aquarium water and add a few small pieces of banana peel.

Both cultures should be aerated occasionally, espe-

cially the banana peel concoction, which is decidedly more pungent than the one with Cheerios.® Not recommended for when the spouse is at home!

Mosquito larvae Years ago, there was an open container in my yard that collected rain water. It was full of dead leaves and attracted mosquitoes to lay their eggs.

Instead of netting the larvae out of the dirty water, I collected the egg rafts with my fingers and brought them indoors, floating them in a "flat" type of fish bowl. (A five-gallon container would serve just as well.) When they hatched I fed the larvae dried fish food and they grew rapidly.

The advantage of this set up is that the larvae can grow in a clean environment that minimizes the chances of infecting the fish with harmful microorganisms.

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