

# FISH IN FOCUS: ORANGEFIN DARTER

## Jake Wade

Charleston, South Carolina

The Orangefin Darter *Nothonotus bellus* or *Etheostoma bellum* is endemic to the Barren River and Green River systems of southern Kentucky and northern Tennessee (Figure 1). Like many darters, it gets its name from its coloration. Males have bright orange fins throughout most of the year, and during breeding season males gain orange spots along their sides. Female Orangefins are duller in color but do sport some orange. A notable feature of both males and females is the dark teardrop under the eye. Orangefin ID is easy, as no other darters in the local waters look similar.

I have had luck finding these beautiful darters in the headwaters of the Barren River system. I collected several of them out of West Fork Drake Creek (Summer County, TN). Like many of the streams in the area, it is crystal clear. This clear water results from the waters being spring fed, and having spring sources is one of the reasons that the creeks in the Portland, TN area are so beautiful. I usually have had success finding this darter in a series of rocky, shallow riffles using a small seine. During the hotter times of the summer months, I have found them in somewhat deeper riffles. When collecting Orangefin Darters I have also collected Fantail Darter *E. flabellare* as well as Highland Rim Darter *E. kantuckeense* (formerly Orangethroat Darter *E. spectabile*)

Orangefins spawn from late April until late June. When a female selects her male, she buries herself in the rocky substrate. The male darter lays beside her and deposits his sperm in the rocks while the female does the same with her eggs. Eggs hatch in 7–9 days. Fish mature in 1–2 years and are thought to live up to five years.



Male Orangefin Darters. Top: West Fork Drake Creek (photo by Jake Wade). (Bottom photo by Josh Blaylock.)



Orangefin Darters (Photos by David Cravens)

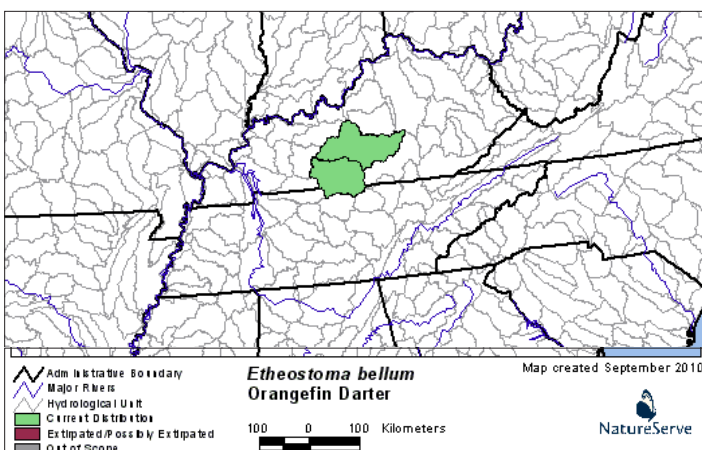


Figure 1. Distribution of the Orangefin Darter.

Jake Wade works for the Charleston, South Carolina, police department. He has a BS in wildlife and fisheries from the University of Tennessee but took a different route in life. When not patrolling the streets, he's often found patrolling local streams and rivers searching for fish and other aquatic critters. He enjoys photographing his adventures and teaching people about the wonderful wildlife that can be found in their backyards.