

### FISH VIDEOS

by Konrad Schmidt, St. Paul, Minnesota

Camcorders have been around for some time, but how many of us really use them for anything else than filming the family and relatives on holidays and special occasions? I am no exception, but as I became more familiar with the features and capabilities, I thought there might be some other applications.

I have struggled with 35mm macro photography for years, and can now finally shoot native fishes and get consistently good slides with a minimal amount of film expended. Unfortunately, it's still a struggle! The subjects, especially minnows, are always in a frantic mode. I feel as though I'm pass-shooting at ducks.

Camcorders offer several advantages over still photography that deserve consideration. The major plus is you can shoot with existing light. In my aquariums, I have ample illumination from just a fluorescent strip. Among other nice features, the date and time can be "burned" into the tape with the touch of a couple of buttons. Also, audio can be added either as narration or background music. Yes, I know we all hate to hear our own voices, but this easily documents where the fish was found, summarizes highlights of a collecting trip, and any other serious and silly comments I care to make. I have also made some rather relaxing pieces where I put the camcorder on a tripod, zoomed either in or out for the desired effect, lightly fed the fish to get them excited, and played soft, soothing music in the background. These are easy things to do. With the macro-photography feature, you can literally fill up the viewfinder with the whole body of a single fish. That includes little ones like least darters.

I use a camcorder which is only a few years old but is already obsolete. I have to manually focus while in the macro mode. It was difficult at first keeping a fish in focus and also centered in the viewfinder, but now it's second nature. I have found the camcorder gives me a greater depth-of-field to play with than my 35mm camera and can quickly compensate with very minor adjustments by zooming in or out to always have a clear, crisp picture.

#### On Collecting Trips

Filming does not have to be restricted to indoors. I frequently bring my camcorder on collecting trips to film fish in their peak colors, and sometimes will actually shoot people catching the fish; at least they are doing something more interesting than sitting around a Christmas tree. I also take it along in the canoe or boat, but use a waterproof bag when I'm not actually operating it. The only problem I have ever encountered outside is high humidity, which automatically shuts the camcorder down. Never resulted in permanent damage and it's only happened twice in four years.

### What Fits What

There is a large selection to choose from in camcorders and accessories. There are basically three formats that take three different kinds of video tapes: VHS, VHS-C, and 8mm. VHS is the largest of the bunch and uses the standard VHS tape which pops directly into any VCR. The other two are significantly smaller, and neither tape will work in a VCR. VCR adapter cartridges are available for VHS-C tapes. They work very much like the old 8-track stereo adapters for cassette tapes. The remaining 8mm must be transferred to a VHS format, which is not difficult to do. Simply plug it into the back of the VCR and record it like a TV program. I prefer this last format because I usually end up making several copies.

The only accessories I have needed are a shoulder strap, tripod, auxiliary microphone, and extra batteries. The shoulder strap will give your arm a break when not filming. The tripod eliminates unwanted motion and permits me to get into the picture when I'm out alone. Finally the auxiliary microphone has a 25' cord and makes an incredible difference when there is background noise (e.g., song birds) that drowns out the subject's voice. Extra batteries are a must because all automatic features really create a power drain. I use rechargeable Ni-Cad's, but the good ones are expensive.

Just a few parting tips. I started out being pretty cheap with the video tapes. Once I transferred them to VHS, I would retape over the old 8 mm stuff, but I would always get "ghosts" showing through. This would only last for a second, but happened through the entire tape and I found it annoying. Now I always film on fresh tape. Besides, I get two hours at a price cheaper than a roll 35 mm slide film. Here it doesn't pay to recycle. Also, skip past the first and last couple minutes on the video tape, where I usually get blurred lines that streak across the picture. When transferring to a VHS tape, I use the slow-play (SP) record position on the VCR because the picture will be noticeably sharper. Avoid intensely bright colors, like red. It "bleeds" on film. Finally, simply enjoy the new toy.