

FISH-WATCHING AT HUNTER'S SPRING  
by David Arbour, DeQueen, Arkansas

Recently, while traveling thorough west-central Florida, I had the chance to stop and go snorkeling at Hunter's Spring. The spring is accessed at Hunter's Spring Park, located in the Crystal River as it flows through the town of Crystal River.

A section of the river is roped off at the park for swimmers. Toward the back side of this roped off area, the sandy bottom drops off sharply into a large hole which is Hunter's Spring. At the bottom of the spring, a section of limestone is exposed with a large crevice from which the spring water emerges.

As I entered the water and submerged, the first fishes I noticed were small schools of Spotfin Mojarra (Eucinostomus argenteus) swimming close to the sandy bottom in shallow water. This species is normally a saltwater species that occasionally enters fresh water. I noticed that if I stirred up the bottom with my hands, the mojarra would rush in and feed intensely in the disturbed area on exposed insect larvae.

Moving into deeper water, I saw schools of Striped Mullet (Mugil cephalus), approximately two feet in length, feeding on algae growing on the bottom. Occasionally one would dart to the surface and leap a couple feet into the air and then would rejoin the school. I heard somewhere that this jumping behavior aids digestion.

As I continued swimming, and soon was over the spring, I was amazed at the clarity of the water and could easily see how the Crystal River got its name. Below me in the deeper part of the spring swam numerous Bluegill (Lepomis macrochirus), Redear Sunfish (L. microlophus), and Florida Largemouth Bass (Micropterus salmoides floridanus). Bordering the swimming area and the back side of the the spring were thick mats of vegetation (Elodea), much of it reaching to the surface. As I explored the edges of this vegetation, I observed numerous Spotted Sunfish (Lepomis punctatus) and small bass darting in and out of the vegetation.

Once, while exploring a patch of Elodea that was growing about halfway to the surface, I noticed a movement out of the corner of my eye and turned my head just in time to see a large Two-toed Amphiuma (Amphiuma means) disappear into the dense vegetation after having darted to the surface for a breath of air. Amphiumas are aquatic, air-breathing, eel-like salamanders with toothpick-thin legs and a nasty bite. Besides their grotesque appearance, they make interesting pets for the aquarium.

\*See "Snorkeling in the Ocala Natl. Forest of Northern Florida," by Konrad Schmidt, AC Oct 85, p. 6.

Exploring on, I found a loose school of very small fish foraging among some vegetation. Closer examination revealed the identity of these fishes to be Bluefin Killifish (Lucania goodei). They were a golden color with a dark stripe down the side and clear fins. I looked hard to find an individual with color in the fins, but without success.

Continuing along the edge of the vegetation toward shallow water, I encountered a small school of Atlantic Needlefish (Strongylura marina) swimming at the surface. This is another saltwater species that enters fresh waters and is believed even to breed there. These fish are really interesting; they look like a cross between a silverside and a gar.

Also in this shallower water, I encountered a large school of killies swimming near the sandy bottom. A couple individuals looked nine to ten inches in length; they were the largest killies I had ever seen. At first, I wasn't sure if I was looking at the Gulf Killifish (Fundulus grandis) or the Seminole Killifish (F. seminolis). They were whitish with silvery sides and no pronounced markings. A few of the males had a yellowish tinge to their dorsal and caudal fins. Due to their large size and lack of dark bars on the sides of the males, I decided that they must be Seminole Killifish.

The extremely clear water of the river and spring made fish watching very enjoyable and made me wish I had an underwater camera. Besides the fish and Amphiuma, it was very interesting to watch Double-crested Cormorants swimming underwater at close range as they searched for a meal of fish.

The Crystal River is also the home of the Manatee, and several dive shops in the area offer snorkeling and scuba-diving trips to see them as well as the numerous fishes that inhabit this river. In talking to the trip-leaders at one of the dive shops, I found out that several other species of saltwater fishes inhabit the Crystal River, such as Pinfish (Lagodon rhomboides), Crevalle Jacks (Caranx hippos), and Tarpon (Megalops atlanticus).

Anyone traveling through this area of Florida shouldn't miss the chance to stop and see this crystal-clear water and the interesting fishes that live there.