

FLOAT TRIP COLLECTING
by Konrad Schmidt, Cottage Grove, Minnesota

When it comes to selecting sites for collecting trips, I usually don't have much choice. I have to take what is offered at bridges, boat accesses, and parks. Many of these sites are very productive, but even at their best, they only provide a very small slice of the habitats available in a stream. For several years, I have used boats and canoes to reach normally inaccessible sites which frequently contain some very interesting surprises.

The first float trip site I ever tried was a dam on the Mississippi River in St. Paul. A large island below the dam had always been a productive area for Trout-perch, Stonecat, and several species of darters. It also doubled as a great fishing hole where large schools of game and rough fishes congregated by the hundreds at the base of the spillway. One one occasion, however, the river abruptly ceased flowing over the dam, and the depth below the spillway dropped by three feet in seconds. Riffles between pools disappeared, leaving darters and Stonecats trapped in isolated puddles or flopping helplessly on the rubble.

At first we were all satisfied to marvel at this draining-bathtub phenomenon, but then one member of our party noticed a more interesting quarry on the spillway and began wading toward his goal through the shallow pool which now barely separated the dam from the island. He hoisted himself up on the spillway and proudly displayed his first two trophies - a Carp and a catfish, both weighing 10 to 15 pounds. Temptation of greener pastures vaporized any common sense the two of us still possessed, and we paddled the canoe over to the spillway.

We swiftly spread out to scout different parts of the spillway. We found gar, buffalo, Mooneye, Freshwater Drum, White Bass, Walleye, Sauger, Northern Pike, and Smallmouth Bass. Most had borrowed into the thick, green carpet of algae coating the spillway where they were finding some protection from the heat and enough water to last a short time.

We regrouped at the far end of the spillway, exchanged some fish stories, and started back for the canoe. Thinking the dam could offer no more surprises for one day, we all started at what appeared to be snakes springing from cracks in the spillway. Someone yelled, "Eels!" and the chase was on. They were all 14 to 18 inches long, and we felt they would make perfect additions to our aquariums. Overwhelmed by their numbers, we resorted to the two-fisted approach, but they were like trying to restrain squirming bars of soap. We then tried dipnets, but they kept escaping as fast as we scooped them up. I went for the canoe and filled it with about three inches of water. We herded the Eels toward the canoe and launched them

into the air with our hands, hoping they would not miss the target. We managed to get seven in the canoe before we noticed that water was trickling across the spillway. Anticipating a wall of water to hit at any time, we hastily but reluctantly launched the canoe and headed for home.

Most of the float trips I've been on consisted of one-day affairs which do not require camping equipment or menu-planning. On the other hand, overnight trips provide the opportunity to explore longer stretches of stream and also try some nocturnal collecting at campsites. It's frequently more productive than collecting during the day. Last August, I canoed about 30 miles of the Root River in southeastern Minnesota. Although I passed up countless intriguing habitats along the way, I still had a rather impressive catch. Some of the most productive sites were riffles, tributary mouths, backwater pools, island pools, undercut banks, eddies, and edges of aquatic vegetation. The results of that weekend trip are listed below:

1. Central Stoneroller (*Campostoma anomalum*)
2. Common Carp (*Cyprinus carpio*)
3. Gravel Chub (*Hybopsis x-punctata*)
4. Emerald Shiner (*Notropis atherinoides*)
5. Common Shiner (*Notropis cornutus*)
6. Bigmouth Shiner (*Notropis dorsalis*)
7. Spotfin Shiner (*Notropis spilopterus*)
8. Suckermouth Minnow (*Phenacobius mirabilis*)
9. Bluntnose Minnow (*Pimephales notatus*)
10. Longnose Dace (*Rhinichthys cataractae*)
11. Creek Chub (*Semotilus atromaculatus*)
12. White Sucker (*Catostomus commersoni*)
13. Quillback (*Carpiodes cyprinus*)
14. Northern Hogsucker (*Hypentelium nigricans*)
15. Redhorse (*Moxostoma* sp.)
16. Stonecat (*Noturus flavus*)
17. Brook Stickleback (*Culaea inconstans*)
18. Rock Bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*)
19. Smallmouth Bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*)
20. Fantail Darter (*Etheostoma flabellare*)
21. Johnny Darter (*Etheostoma nigrum*)
22. Blackside Darter (*Percina maculata*)
23. Slenderhead Darter (*Percina phoxocephala*).

When traveling upstream, I often sacrifice my ideals and use a 12-foot johnboat with 4-h.p. outboard. It can be maneuvered into some rather tight and shallow habitats. I sometimes further compromise myself when collecting with a friend who is also an avid angler. His boat has overkill features--aerated bait well, electronic depth-finder, and 50-h.p. outboard, which are all extremely nice to have on a collecting trip, but are in no way necessary for successful results.

Finally, anyone planning a float trip will need river maps listing public accesses and campsites. Most maps also depict dams, rapids, riffles, and alternate routes through side channels. A few sources for river maps in the upper midwest have been listed below.

Iowa Float Trips

Iowa Conservation Commission
Wallace State Office Bldg.
Des Moines, IA 50319-0034

Canoe Routes of Ontario

Public Information Center, Rm. 1640
99 Wellesley St. W.
Toronto, Ontario, CANADA M7A 1W3

A Gathering of Waters

Minnesota State Documents Center
117 University Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Missouri Ozark Waterways

Outdoor Library--Dept. of Conservation
PO Box 180
Jefferson City, MO 65102

Best Canoe Trails of Southern Wisconsin

Wisconsin Trails
PO Box 5650
6225 University Ave.
Madison, WI 53705