

GRAND ISLAND, GRAND TIME

by Michael J. Lucas, East Rochester, New York

At 1:00 p.m. Wednesday, July 1, 1987, I called NANFA member Norman Meredith, Buffalo, N.Y. Due to poor weather forecasts, I canceled our prepared collecting trip to northwest Pennsylvania. Norman sounded disappointed, as was I, since, due to job responsibilities, I'd done little collecting that season. So, as an afterthought, I asked Norman, with a hope and a prayer, how the weather looked over his way.

"Overcast but no rain!" was his anxious reply. I told him I'd get back to him and quickly called my wife at work to see when she would be home to watch our young son.

"About 2:00 p.m.," she reported. All right! Maybe there really is a silver lining to every gray cloud. I called Norman back for direction to his home and told him I'd be there by 3:30 or 4:00 p.m.

While I waited for my wife, I threw some styros in my car (nets, buckets, and such are always there), and bagged a pair of Red Shiners (Notropis lutrensis) and Banded Topminnows (Fundulus diaphanus) which I thought Norman might appreciate. In the midst of bagging, my wife showed up early! This was certainly a good omen. Before you could say "Oncorhynchus tshawytscha," I was at Norman's doorstep. After quick introductions, we left the fish I'd brought floating in his near-empty-community tank. Norman, his son Christopher, his brother-in-law Tom Caldarelli, and myself set off for nearby Grand Island.

Grand Island is surrounded by the Niagara River, which runs between the Great Lakes Erie and Ontario. The island is only about five miles in diameter, so you can drive completely around it in a short time, yet there are plenty of good collecting sites. The waters of the area can yield quite an array of fish, from the little Brook Stickleback (Culaea inconstans) to the huge Muskellunge (Esox masquinongy).

Our first stop was a a tiny, weedy, mud-bottomed stream near a park on the far side of the island. Here we caught Brook Sticklebacks, Central Mudminnows (Umbra limi), bullhead catfish (didn't think to identify as to species), Common or White Suckers (Catostomus commersoni), and one lone wild Goldfish (Carassius auratus). This site was literally crawling with Mudminnows; each scoop of my 3' seine yielded between 10 and 50! Sticklebacks were also abundant, though not quite approaching the number of mudminnows. Norman's ability to handle stress was tested here, as his son kept throwing large crayfish in with Norman's treasured Sticklebacks, and his brother-in-law threatened to add a few of the nasty-looking bugs we netted from the ooze. Tiring of Mudminnows and wanting to lower Norman's pulse rate, I suggested moving on.

The next site was a large stream with wide swampy sections. Here we found Largemouth Bass (Micropterus salmoides), Pumpkinseed Sunfish (Lepomis gibbosus), Bluegills (L. macrochirus), baby Carp (Cyprinus carpio), Tadpole Madtoms (Noturus gyrinus), and schools of baby bullheads. I grabbed some plants for my turtles back home and we continued around the island.

Our third stop, next to a graveyard, was a medium-sized silty stream with patches of a vallisneria-like plant along the shallows of one side. My first run with the 3' seine produced a young, 2" Longnose Gar (Lepisosteus osseus). At first I didn't realize I'd even caught a fish; it looked like a twig as it lay perfectly still in the net. It was so thin and needle-like, it could easily have slipped through the mesh had it tried. Despite much effort, we could only find one more young Gar and no adults. Back home in a ten-gallon tank, they provided hours of entertainment as they'd patiently stalk baby feeder guppies. I even got one of them to accept freeze-dried plankton before I made the mistake of adding some small female guppies to provide a regular source of live food. Unfortunately, even though many smaller guppies were available, the young gars were both tempted by the fat females and ended up dead with partially swallowed fish in their mouths.

We also caught a couple baby Muskellunge about the same size, though a bit more robust than the Gars. With all the toothy predators, the poor minnows must have had some pretty horrifying nightmares.

Other fish found here were Rock Bass (Ambloplites rupestris), White Crappies (Pomoxis annularis), Pumpkinseed Sunfish, Largemouth Bass, Tadpole Madtoms, a type of redhorse sucker (Moxostoma spp.), and the ever-present bullheads.

The last stop was at the end of Six-Mile Creek Marine, where the water narrowed to a tiny creek with sections of very short riffles and occasional deep pockets up to 2½' deep. Here we found more wild Goldfish, bullheads, Rock Bass, Muskies, and some tiny Johnny Darters (Etheostoma nigrum). By this time it was 8:30 p.m., time to return home.

An area we missed is in Beaver State Park, which has some different darters and shiners among other fish. Since it is a national park, you should have a permit. For more on this site, see Peter Mang's November 1984 AMERICAN CURRENTS article "Who's Afraid of Spiders?"

It turned out to be a good trip. I got to meet another NANFA member and went home with a couple interesting species I hadn't collected in my area, wild Goldfish and Longnose Gars. Plus, Norman's once near-empty tank was virtually a slice of Grand Island's aquatic community. What a relief. I hate seeing an empty aquarium!