

Gregarious Gators

By Konrad Schmidt

For more than two decades, I have collected, surveyed, and simply watched fish from Alaska to Florida. In all those years and all those places, I have had a few memorable experiences which really stand out. Some directly involve fish while others are encounters with wildlife and people.

... The Everglades in Southern Florida is a "river of grass," up to 50 miles wide during the wet season. In the winter, large expanses of this sawgrass prairie are dry except for scattered "gator holes" which serve as an oasis to both fish and wildlife. In 1991, I got a one-day "vacation" from my national park service job killing exotic *Melaleuca* trees to accompany the fish biologist on a gator hole fish survey.

We had to travel in a helicopter, because the site was deep in the back country. As we landed, there was no sign of the landlord, whom we all knew was about somewhere--probably "collecting rent from the tenants." I put on my chest waders, harnessed the back pack shocker, and paused at the water's edge. I turned to the fish biologist and said with doubt, "Are you really sure about this?" He smiled back with a reassuring reply, "I've studied these gator hole fish communities for years and never had a bad experience." Without hesitation, he jumped in.

I literally followed in his foot steps, but soon became almost bold about the whole affair, until we came around a point and heard a croaking sound. I asked, "What kind of frogs do you find in these holes?" Trying not to worry me, he kept it short. "Ah, that's not a frog," he said, "turn off the shocker for a minute." He went ahead and carefully prodded a little alligator about 14 inches long well out of the area where our electric field would cover. I realized mom was definitely in the pool with us and we were heading into a narrow neck, which was the only part that hadn't been surveyed. We proceeded and got within 15 feet of our goal when bubbles erupted from every where and small waves appeared on the surface. I felt a hand firmly grip my shoulder and glanced over at the biologist whose eyes were as big as saucers as he coldly instructed, "That's far enough, let's back out very slowly!" I heeded his advice and made a hasty, but "controlled" retreat.

Before leaving the Everglades, I also wanted to collect and photograph the Seminole Killifish (*Fundulus seminolis*). The fish biologist offered a place to try and guaranteed my success. This was a much more accessible site which was a parking lot along side an old barrow pit that had filled with water. Again, I was slightly uneasy as I pulled into the lot, because there were six "beach masters" patrolling the shallows, but all of them headed out when I slammed my car door. I could see large Killifish, which I assumed were Seminoles, schooling just past the drop off, but they would never venture in over the shallow shelf that I could work.

Elsewhere, I had been very effective collecting fish at night and believed Killifish would also be good candidates. I waited till dark, hit the shelf again, and started getting Seminoles. I had completely forgotten about the gators because they had been absent since my arrival. It was still slow going and I was really focused on the task at hand. I had almost completed the length of the parking lot when I heard a "SWOOSH" in the water.

I turned my headlamp and the beam swept a two-inch eyeball shining back at me barely four feet away. Instantly, I jumped, tripped, and stumbled for shore. I heard a corresponding splash heading the other direction. Once safe on land, I quickly swept around again with my light and there were all my buddies, which I would like to think were only curious (but they weren't going to get a second chance).

