

GREETINGS FROM AN OLYMPIC SWAMP
by Joe Middleton, Portland, Oregon

One day last fall, I was talking with fellow fish-fancier, supporting member of the North American Native Fish Association, occasional contributor to Freshwater and Marine Aquarium Magazine, and generally okay guy Ray Katula about local endemic species of freshwater fish. Our conversation (like this article) meandered quite a bit until he hit upon an interesting subject. He was talking about the western United States' only representative of the family Umbridae, a group of fishes commonly known as the "Mudminnows." The species in question is Novumbra hubbsi, the Olympic Mudminnow, a protected species endemic to only a few isolated drainages in western Washington State.

Then the plot thickened. Ray successfully filed for permits to obtain a few adults to breed the fish and write a report on a captive spawning of this rare fish for NANFA.

His involvement with that society and personal clout were sufficient to secure legal permission to obtain a handful-- just 16 fish. As the year 1990 drew closer to its end, Ray was hoping to obtain his quota before weather turned worse and his permit expired. Also, he read in a number of sources that ripe females could be found as early as the beginning of November. Therefore, he very graciously invited me to join him for his trip, maybe do some photography for him, write up a report on the collection of the species (secretly, he wanted me to hold the other end of the seine!), and generally have a good time discovering a new fish. When asked, I said, "Yeah, I'll do it," and then asked Ray the fateful question (though I would have found out eventually):

Me: "Where does the Olympic Mudminnow live?"

Ray: "Uhhh (pause, then sigh), swamps."

O boy! I started to have second thoughts about the expedition as Ray tried to convince me that everything would work out: "I wouldn't worry too much, Joe. If the weather holds, you probably won't get your feet wet, and I've only known one collector who has died from any sort of collecting-related incident."

Oh, what the heck, I thought, at least I could write about the experience and I'll know better next time when Ray and I start talking. I let the situation stand--I accepted the invitation.

Now before I trail off on our collecting misadventures, let me offer a bit of information on our quarry, the Olympic Mudminnow. Isn't that an odd name for a fish?

Mudminnows, or Umbridae, are small (no more than 5"), delicately colored, secretive fishes that strongly resemble native killifish in overall appearance. Novumbra hubbsi is a very curious species because it appears to have no close relatives anywhere in the western U.S. Other species are found in the eastern and midwestern United States, and one species, the Alaskan Blackfish (Dallia pectoralis), occurs in the Alaskan tundra.

Novumbra hubbsi is typical of mudminnows in its secretive habits and preference for living near or in detritus atop the substrate. They can, and will, as Ray has observed, remain in the exact same spot in midwater for hours on end, provided that they are not disturbed, with the only movement the undulation of their pectoral fins. Despite its deceptively lazy habits, the Olympic Mudminnow is quite capable of launching its torpedo-like body off through the water or substrate with bullet-like speed, darting for cover or pursuing food, happiness, and the Umbridae way. A somewhat attractive fish, male Olympic Mudminnows have a basic purplish-brown base coloration crossed by many reflective blue vertical lines, while the females are a much plainer marbled brown and olive.

During one late October weekend, Ray and I set off early in the morning for the adventure of a lifetime--that is, if you just go down to the local Motel 6 for your "vacation." Ray knew a popular site visited by Olympic Mudminnow keepers from all over the world in search of this exotic, much treasured species (just kidding). We left the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area that morning with the windows on Ray's Volkswagen rolled down ever so slightly to keep them from frosting over completely. Of course the weather decided to cooperate to the fullest extent--pouring rain, dark, stormy skies, and temperatures in the upper 40's.

Ray decided it was time to humor me: "And of course we shouldn't have any problem in a thunderstorm, as the dowels in the minnow seine should act as good lightning rods," he remarked, with a straight face, before emitting a slight chuckle. Ha ha ha.

Ray knew fully well where he was going and pressed onwards. Soon, the road became nothing more than a series of gravelly ruts as it passed through an eerie place called the "Stump Lake Project," which featured hill after hill of rotting stumps where a forest once stood. A couple of more turns on some really rough roads and we finally made it.

The roadside stream eventually slowed down from a fast-moving rivulet before flattening out into a series of slow-moving channels and still pools separated by grassy

islands. The elevation here is probably about 750 to 1000 feet above sea level at most.

Aquatic vegetation was rather common, but mostly around the shore or along the bottom, so the water wasn't "choked" with weeds. The water was murky brown, so we were unable to see fish in their natural surroundings. It was actually a rather interesting place to visit, with Great Blue Herons quietly stalking the shallows towards the far end of the marsh just next to the clearcut hills that surrounded the wetland on all sides. Ray and I unpacked the nets, buckets, and an array of junk that made walking cumbersome, and a royal pain in the you-know-what. Ray went ahead to show me the way out to the center where the water was the most accessible. I struggled to keep up with him as he forged ahead, eager to try his luck finding the fish he wanted. My size 16 tennis shoes offered little traction or solid footing over the wet grass and slippery ground.

"Watch out," Ray called back jokingly, "for the hornets' nest on the other side of the dead tree you're leaning against...and be careful about that log you're about to cross-- one slip and you're bound to feel some intense pain in a certain part of your anatomy...." Ha ha. Closing in on Ray, I stepped on what I thought to be a solid piece of grassy bank and sank down to my knees in a mass of putrid mud. After I stepped out onto a piece of bogwood, I set my gear down and crammed my net around logs and reeds along the shore with a small net and found nothing but numerous water insects, a stickleback, and lots more of the aforementioned detritus.

Ray raised a fist and shouted, "I got one!" and leaned over for a closer look. This three-inch male was attractively patterned with the color scheme mentioned earlier. After a while, I stood there warily while Ray slowly caught a few more specimens--about every tenth scoop of the net he would find a single specimen. Ankle-deep in the mess, I began to have second thoughts about wearing my socks into this wetland, as I knew fully well that once they were allowed to dry a little it would be awfully hard keeping them from walking away by themselves. Ray soon worked his way back from the other side to where I was, and we both went back to his car with only three specimens in his bucket. Deciding that scooping up loads of gooey, syrupy mud with his dipnet was certainly not the way to go if one was looking for the fish in question, he pulled out his 25' minnow seine and we untangled it on our way down to a spot by the water's edge close to the roadside.

We proceeded down to the water's edge where, no more than a couple of inches from the shore, I stood in hip-deep water and shin-deep mud. I knew a change of clothes was in order

before the end of the trip, as I looked enviously at Ray, who proudly donned his chest waders. Ray took one end of the net and headed straight out to the deepest part of the pool while I stood close to shore, anchoring my end of the net firmly in the mud. Slowly Ray worked his way back to shore, keeping the seine almost fully extended while making sure he raked the mud on the bottom. This worked. Not only did it work, but it worked well. We were both smiling as Ray proudly fumbled about in the net, scooping up several more specimens from that single seine haul.

We also caught a lot of weird things, like the abundant Threespine Sticklebacks (Gasterosteus aculeatus), California Newts, "mud puppies" (salamander-like amphibians with feathery external gills on the head), juvenile lampreys (yeecch!), numerous small crayfish, lots of insect larvae, and a big, scary-looking critter that Ray and I lovingly christened "the bug."

Ray eventually collected the permissible quota after a few more sweeps of the seine and an equal number of encounters with "the bug." So we decided to leave this wonderful, scenic, disgusting, and muddy hole for another location further upstream. Passing a few more clearcuts, we wondered if Novumbra hubbsi could be found in other habitats on the water system. We found a gently-moving, clear rivulet and tried to find the Olympic Mudminnow there. Ray parked across the road and we once again stumbled and slipped down to the water's edge with a lot of gear in our hands that we never even used. Guess we never learn, do we? Ray headed upstream while I prodded my net around the rocks by the road, accomplishing nothing besides rinsing the mud out of shoes and socks and replacing it with a lot of gravel and small rocks. We messed around for another fifteen minutes or so and then decided to call it a day, finding nothing but water and a few small sculpins (Cottus sp.).

We headed back to the car and I changed while Ray prepared his fish for the long trip home. Shorn of all dignity, I stripped off my pants and shoes and thought, "What a great idea I have! I'll point my camera downwards and take a few photos of my once white, now olive-green socks, with strands of hair algae, reeds, and unknown objects clinging to them..." and went at it with my camera. I forgot about this incident on the way home, so I nearly retched when I looked through my slides after having them developed a month later.

While getting ready to put my clean clothes on, I asked, "Don't these plants I am standing barefoot in look like stinging nettles?" Ray replied, "Yeah, they sure do...." Oh boy. Ready for the return trip, Ray started up the engine and we went back down the way we came, eventually reaching civilization late that afternoon. It was good to be home again.

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