

# Have Snorkel, Will Travel

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After spending a lot of time and energy helping with the 2003 NANFA Convention in Huntsville I was eager to settle into some calming water. I enjoyed the convention—meeting new folks and old friends and hearing the lectures and splashing in the water. But my primary motivation during travel is to snorkel with native fish and enjoy the peace and adventure of exploring clear water. Here's an account of my three-day post-Huntsville snorkel wander.

## The Water of Reverence

I had urged convention host Bruce Stallsmith to scout the Shoal Creek area near Florence in consideration of a NANFA trip. Bruce did so, but reported washed-out bridges and stripped river bottoms caused by recent storms and the subsequent flooding. Still, I was eager to see the area and planned to visit the site on my way home from the convention. Twice before I had visited Shoal Creek at the Goose Shoals bridge and tried to snorkel it, but to no avail. This would be my third attempt. Once again the visibility was marginal at best, so I headed upstream to check out a site that had pleased me during my previous two trips. Scott Mettee (author of *Fishes of Alabama and the Mobile Basin*) had led me to this stream years before on a return trip from Memphis. A nearby wooden railway trestle serves as the backdrop for Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Nuthin' Fancy* album. Since I didn't see any candles I presumed the coast was clear to enter the water of reverence.

It was early morning when I donned my gear along the side of the stream. I've taken to wearing a full body suit with a fleece liner, a beanie hood that also helps seal my mask and keep cold water out of my ears, Neoprene socks in felt-soled boots, and webbed gloves to swim better and protect my

hands. This keeps me comfortable and snag-, stab- and leech-free. And to think that I used to snorkel in nothing but shorts and tennis shoes! (My initial excitement and adrenaline always gave way to shaking chills that required stretched-out lizard behavior on nearby sunny rocks.)

I eased into the clear water and immediately saw old acquaintances—streamline or blotchside chubs; gilt, redline, Tennessee snubnose, and rainbow darters; and logperch. After dragging a seine during the previous two days on the Flint River, it was joyfully relaxing to lay in the water and see hundreds of fish at complete ease with my presence. Seining is hard work and demands skill to be successful. Trying to keep a lightly weighted line on the bottom and maneuvering through all kinds of torrents and boulders and snags without tripping or twisting your knees is outright work. By comparison, snorkeling is sheer pleasure.

The creek was perfect. Tennessee shiners in a variety of orange hues danced about my hands as I swirled up the substrate. I let the water carry me through eddies and down long flows to calm pools. I passed over a school of striped bass resting in a deep pool along with redhorse suckers and a massive carp. Not floundering about, I just slowly drifted downstream and let life pass by. In a few spots the water was so shallow I had to get out and carefully walk in order not to disturb the substrate. Sometimes I would walk back upstream to resnorkel an area of interest or to explore an area I had missed on the first pass.

## Eye-to-Eye with a Gar

In a shadowed cove, a small spring flowed and dripped from a layered bluff wall covered with ferns and moss. The water was cooler but lush with many species of fish. Rosefin,



*Fig. 1.*  
Spotted gar  
(*Lepisosteus oculatus*).  
Photograph ©  
Garold A. Sneegas.

striped and mountain shiners rested in the quiet flow. A tuberculate bullhead-type minnow slid by me through the reeds, his mini-horns pointed straight ahead. Craning my neck, I saw black-spotted topminnows lounging just below the surface. I eased out of the flow and into the warmer water, letting it wash me downstream into a deep flowing pool.

I imagined that a gar would feel right at home in this pool, and sure enough there was one—a two-foot spotted gar (Fig. 1) lurking in the reedy vegetation off to the side. I could tell from the spotted markings on his head and snout what species he was. With minimal motion I worked up to within a foot or two of him. He eased his way upstream and I gently followed. Then he abruptly turned and swam back to his site, allowing me an even closer inspection this time. I studied how the pattern in his eye matched the stripe that ran the length of his body. He eventually tired of my cautious attempts to touch him and he swam off into the deep and distant pool.

This is one of my few times I've gotten this close to a gar while snorkeling. I had seen some massive ones in the Little River, but they stayed at least six feet away. And to be honest, their five- or six-foot length made me somewhat uneasy. I had also seen gar while snorkeling in a small sinkhole in Florida. The water in the sinkhole was dropping due to a severe drought and the gar were trapped.

#### **Darters, Blotched and Gilded**

I continued downstream and began to study a vegetated area along the bank. Lots of sunfish, musk turtles and baby sliders. Beautiful longear sunnies dashed in and out of the cover, both curious and evasive to my attempts to get a closer look. They are such a beautiful sunfish. I never tire of seeing a male in all his glory. I drifted downstream a little more and

a blur of spotted movement caught my attention.

I slowly worked my way through the reeds and saw an unusually patterned darter, the blotchside logperch. This was not the typical habitat I had seen blotchsides in before, but sure enough he was flipping small pieces of wooden debris with his well-worn nose and catching the food items he dislodged. Blotchsides are alert and quick to dart off if the snorkeler makes any sudden movement. It's best to slowly drift alongside them, dragging a toe or touching a branch to slow your movement or to reorient your position. Using this technique I was able to get a full broadside and close-up view of the blotched beastie. The photo in Scott Mettee's book shows a cute puppy of a juvenile and is a bit misleading. The adults develop more spots, have intricate patterns lacing their back, and are much longer in form. It is always a treat to see this rare logperch.

Farther downstream I fixed myself into a shallow riffle. Dozens of intensely orange-throated gilt darters swarmed about my hands. Delicate markings adorned their gold-trimmed and gilded bodies. I stayed with them until I decided I had ventured far enough downstream.

#### **Skipjack!**

Working my way back upstream I found a deeper section I had missed on the way down. I eased into it and a silver flash went by and then returned rapidly from downstream. Back and forth the large fish raced, getting closer with every pass. It was sleek, fast, and silver, sporting a forked tail trimmed in black and an odd up-turned mouth. I had never seen anything like it before and its racing behavior intrigued me. I tried, as usual, to burn their image into my memory so I could look it up in a book that evening. My first thought was that it was a mooneye, but now I believe it was a skipjack herring. A talk with Scott Mettee a few days later nearly confirmed this conclusion. This was a species I had never seen before.

### Unseen Rhythms and Reasons

I worked my way upstream back to the bridge and then a few hundred yards beyond. I returned by “speed snorkeling” past barking dogs and locals on four-wheelers next to a swimming hole. I had had enough chilly water by now, and the sun was getting low, so I stripped to my swim shorts, rinsed my gear, and dried them in the sun’s last rays. Poking around a gravel bar, I rescued a few northern studfish fry from a pool beneath the bridge that was probably going to dry up. Do isolated pools like this one serve as a refuge for fish fry? Was I helping or interfering with the course of nature by netting them out? Yes, nature can be cruel, but has many unseen rhythms and reasons that are beyond our knowledge.

All together I counted 36 species during this trip to Shoal Creek. Along with a few unidentified species and dusky darters I had seen on previous trip, this site—just a half-mile in length—has well over 40 species of fishes. An impressive diversity indeed!

I loaded my gear and studied the map. As I moved from my Alabama to my Tennessee gazetteer, I noticed some Post-it® notes I had made after a conversation with Dave Neely. They marked a site Dave had called “legendary,” with rainbow shiners well out of their range. A bait bucket introduction? Intrigued, I headed north and spent the night in a nice town called Waynesboro, where I found a clean motel, a subpar Chinese restaurant, and a convergence of several clear and riffled streams.

### Like a Magnifying Glass Strapped to Your Head

The streams in Waynesboro were certainly inviting, and almost had me suiting up first thing in the morning, but I decided to head to the sites that Dave had suggested. Scouting suitable sites can be a chore, what with studying maps, getting lost, and encountering “NO TRESPASSING” signs along the way. I had had enough of that scouting the previous weeks for the convention. Fortunately, I found a nice snorkeling site pretty quickly.

I stood on the bridge, feeling the morning sun and peering into the beckoning clear water below, and mesmerized by a swirling flock of chirping birds. They were some type of bridge swallow, I reckon. As they raced around me I could focus on individuals and make out markings and unique characteristics and behavior. I thought about how some of my fish buddies are also avid birders. The same observational skills you develop while watching fish under water can also be

used to help discern the fast, flighted movement of birds. The big difference, though, is the equipment. Birders need binoculars to see birds perched in the distance. But when you snorkel, it’s as if you have a big magnifying glass is strapped to your head.

A farmer limped out of his home across the way and I greeted him. He was friendly and gave me permission to park along the side of the road in a stretch of soft grass on his property. I quizzed him about his youthful fishing days and the recent ravaging floods of this region. He pointed to a flat area across the creek that he had just leveled with a bulldozer. The recent flooding had eroded away large portions of the bank and field. I’m always concerned when I see heavy equipment next to a stream, but it looked to me like he had done an acceptable job. It seems like we are always trying to keep a river or stream where we want it, as opposed to where the river desires to be. I despise the straight line channeling and deep ditching I often come across in my wanders.

I put my gear on, which seems to take longer each time I do it. First the liner. Then the suit. Oops, forgot the socks. Back to the van for my gloves. Oh no, I forgot to take a whiz. Finally, as I head to the stream, I ask the farmer how I look. He smiles and asks if I will get wet. I must be a sight. In fact, I get all kinds of comments when I emerge from the water, trailing green vegetation, and slosh through a campsite full of little children.

### Surrounded by Shiners

Into the water I go, catching my breath as the cold water races down my spine. *Brrrrr!* Again I’m surrounded by shiners. Rosefin shiner. Tennessee shiner. Striped shiner. Mountain shiner. I drift into shallow water along the stream’s edge and a shoal of southern redbelly dace greet me—a welcome site since I usually do not see this species near my home in Chattanooga. I drift downstream. Lots of rosy side dace appear, another uncommon and welcome site. The substrate yields up little silt or debris as I touch and walk through it, so the water is crystal clear—a nice change from the Flint River where every step released a red cloud of drifting silt. I suspect this gravel had been washed clean by the recent floods. Cobbled and sandy substrates stretch out before me in both directions, making for a beautiful sight.

I kept my eye out for rainbow shiners and wondered if there was an isolated population in the stream. Would it be in a small stretch or near a spring? I should have gotten more explicit directions from Dave as to the exact location. It would



*Fig. 2.*  
Tennessee shiners  
(*Notropis leuciodus*).  
Photograph ©  
William Roston.

be interesting to find an isolated population of rainbow shiners outside of their known range. There are already two such sites in the Tennessee drainage as noted by David Etnier.

I watched the Tennessee shiners (Fig. 2) some more and noticed how much they resemble rainbow shiners in shape and in their enhanced breeding colors—a medley of red, orange and translucent gold-specked hues. Very beautiful. I had never seen such colorful Tennessee shiners before. Usually the sole identifying mark on this normally silver shiner is a rectangle at the base of the caudal fin. Now they seemed to resemble rainbow shiners. I thought about this for the next two days. I remembered Steven Ellis saying something about finding rainbow shiners in Paint Rock River, which is well out of their range. Could they have been Tennessee shiners in full spawning color?

Downstream a ways I worked my way up a raging chute flow and glimpsed an unusual darter—a blenny darter, another first for me. It reminded me of variegated darters I had seen in Ohio and Kentucky, kind of like a deeper-bodied snubnose darter with the markings of a sculpin. They were difficult to approach and I got only a fleeting glimpse of a large male. Later I read how beautiful the large breeding males can be and now wish I had pursued him to see his distinct markings up close.

The water was strong and fast and it was difficult to position myself without flailing about. So I just let the current

have its way with me and carry me downstream. More Tennessee shiners greeted me as I settled in a shallow riffle. The shiners once again surrounded me, going after items I released as I disturbed the substrate.

### Petting the Snapper

I walked back upstream beyond the bridge and stumbled down a cobbled bank and fell into the water. As I regained my composure and my mask I peered at an object, thinking it was part of a sturgeon's body. A sturgeon? Here? I directed my gaze upward and now saw that the object was firmly attached to the shelled body of a snapping turtle, a big one, looking right back at me. Slowly, he began to crawl away from me, then gained speed as he approached a slab crevasse. I grabbed his tail and pulled him back gently. He peered back at me with no ill will and allowed me to ease him (and myself) into a better viewing position. I looked him straight in the eye and touched his shell, his legs, his toes, and the top of his head. Snappers can be mighty vicious and snappy on land, but they're often docile in the water. Still, I exercised caution as I released his tail and let him drift away beneath my body.

Back at the bridge I again saw redbelly dace; indeed, this was the only section of the stream in which I had seen them. Drifting out to the bridge's foundation I saw some large rock bass, a handsome fish, boldly patterned with an intense red eye. Along the buttress a swarm of mountain shiners with blue heads danced in the flow, fleeing every time a bass



*Fig. 3.*  
Northern studfish  
(*Fundulus catenatus*).  
Photograph ©  
John Brill.

lunged out from the shadowy overhang and then quickly returning. I have no idea why the shiners kept returning considering the constant danger posed by the bass.

When I started snorkeling I enjoyed watching darters, which more or less rest in place. Now I'm fascinated by shiners and the fast eye you need to identify repeating behaviors.

I did not count how many species I saw this day. I opted to just observe and passively enjoy what was offered. I returned to my van and continued on my way seeking other sites Dave had mentioned.

### Dance of the Studfish

After getting lost, driving in circles, and seeing more than my fair share of "NO TRESPASSING" signs, I finally found a way to access the very green Buffalo River. Unfortunately, visibility in the water—where a family was swimming near the wreckage of an old bridge—was less than three feet. A nearby tributary seemed more promising. I drove up a side road a ways and introduced myself to a man tending his garden. He allowed me to park on his property, warned me about snakes, and told me there weren't many fish in the stream. People are always warning me about snakes. Is this just a friendly way of trying to get me to move on or are they showing real concern? I climbed down to the water and settled in. Again Tennessee shiners, similar in color and behavior to the ones I saw before, swarmed around me. And again I considered how easily one could mistake them for rainbow shiners.

I followed the tributary down to the Buffalo hoping to be able to snorkel where the waters of the two streams are mixed.

The green water of the Buffalo, however, quickly obscured the clear water of the creek. So I made my way back upstream and eased myself into the first deep flowing pool I came to. Before me were two of the biggest northern studfish (Fig. 3) I have ever seen, both in full display mode. The pool was about two-feet deep and they were at the bottom, stirring up the silt. Fins displayed, they circled each other, their bodies arched inward, dancing a mighty dance. The bigger male flushed out the area below his throat and struck an impressive figure. So intent were they in each other that they paid no attention to me. Females hung out higher in the water column, caught up in the spectacle just like I was, I presume. What a show! When the males finally did catch on to my presence, the larger male continued to taunt his smaller yet equally impressive rival, eventually forcing him away. A year or two ago in the Little River, I was fortunate to have seen southern studfish spawning just inches from my mask. But this display of male studfish studmanship really stole the show. Just imagine what else is going on in our native waters when no one is looking!

### Underwater Orgy

Ten minutes later, a little farther upstream, a flash of red whizzed by my eyes, followed by another—Tennessee shiners, again, the brightest yet. What is going on here? I looked upstream and at the crest of a riffle outflow I saw a swirling mass of pulsing orange and red, glowing as if illuminated from within. In the middle a large and fully pearlescent



striped shiner (Fig. 4) swished and swaggered over a pebbled nest. He ignored the other shiners. Instead, he focused his full attention on subordinate males of his own species, which he chased away, and on females, which he quickly clasped with his arched body when they swam over the nest. Beautifully marked crayfish dug through the nest, seeking a delicious meal of shiner eggs, I presume. Other shiners used the nest, too. Mountain shiners hovered above it and intermittently dashed down. Rosefin shiner males raced into the middle of the nest and pressed their bodies against females with breakneck speed. I can't imagine what a person standing on the bank must think looking down on this riotous orgy of orange and red just below the water's surface!

Eventually I moved upstream, where I caught a fleeting glimpse of another blotchside logperch. I marveled at the jutting layered rock formations along the steep banked side. The road was high above and I could hear the crunching gravel as cars passed. This was turning out to be a fine site—

*Fig. 4.*  
Striped shiner  
(*Luxilus chrysocephalus*).  
Photograph ©  
John Brill.

no, make that a *legendary* site, seeing as how I got to witness the long-sought spectacle of Tennessee shiners spawning.

Lightning and dark clouds began to sweep overhead. Rain pelted the water's surface, and milky, silted waterfalls began to drop from the road above. I took this as an opportunity to rinse my gear and rest under the bridge until the storm passed. Another full day of snorkeling still lay before me, so I headed north to another small town, found a Chinese restaurant to make up for the previous town's lack of quality Chinese cuisine, and reviewed my books, notes and gazetteer.

I drove north to Bucksnot (cool name!) and I-40. I got a room at a motel but had to demand the advertised \$26.95 rate. A little daylight remained so I began to do a quick scout for tomorrow. I lost my whereabouts after getting directions from a husband and wife, which resulted in a long 10- or 15-mile wander. It was getting dark and I was stopped at an unmarked intersection with no idea which way to go when a woman in a Jeep drove up beside me. She let me follow her out to the freeway. It was nice to get back to the motel and to end the day with a bowl of Rudy's homemade banana pudding.

### Lair of the Sunken Car

Studying the map I found my error: What I thought was an interstate exit wasn't. Once I got my bearings I returned to a site I had visited several years prior. As I parked on the bridge and made a faltering mobile phone call, an overall-clad fellow walked out to me along with his dogs. He began telling me how everything was posted, and about snakes, and about a boy dying in a diving accident off some bluffs just downstream. He seem a bit "touched," as they say in these parts, nice enough but a wee bit unsettling in his manner and the odd personal questions he asked. He gave me permission to park but at the same time warned me of his ornery brother and the guy down the way who owned the property where the boy had died. I knew there were additional crossings upstream, so I told the man I would scout ahead and likely return later.

Sure enough, a crossing a short distance upstream offered a more inviting and pleasant opportunity. I parked and jumped into clear water. I worked my way up and down the stream checking out pools and deep flows. A submerged car filled with silt—a rather eerie sight—rested in an upper bend.

Nearby I clasped the large branches of a submerged tree and peered 10 or 12 feet down into the slabbed depths. I hoped to see a hellbender searching out crayfish, but didn't. Rainbow trout and redhorse suckers filled the deep water.

Downstream I found a creeping outflow strewn with clumps of a tight *Anacharis*-like plant and eased into it. The water was cool and calm. I pulled myself just inches above the fine silty substrate being very careful not to disturb it. The habitat felt leechy and snaky. A seven-inch pickerel raced by.

I kept my eyes alert as increasingly dense clumps of the *Anacharis*-like plant gave way to growths of it obscuring the bottom. A few snubnose darters scampered about and very quick newts dashed by. The newts did not allow me to get close. I think they were redspotted newts, which I often see at other sites to the east. I worked my way back out to the main stream and noticed a different species of fish. I think they were juvenile creek chubsuckers, about a dozen of them. The black front rays on their dorsal fin point straight up, and their body is short and stubby. I would have watched them longer, but something about this site gave me the heebie-jeebies.

### Full-Tilt Fantail

I jumped back into the van and decided to visit where Duck River and Tumbling Creek converge. "NO TRESPASSING" signs and the Duck's wide flow kept me from entering

the water. I then returned to a site I had passed the night before during my scout run. It was a pretty sight but it didn't offer anything new in the way species. However, I did note that what I initially thought were river chub were actually redbtail chub. The tails and fins of smaller specimens were very red.

I loaded up and headed to a smaller tributary named Sugar Creek. It flowed just under the freeway and is home to a trout farm and a spring. It doesn't have a lot of species, but it does have a lot of greenside, snubnose and rainbow darters, rosieside dace, and striped shiner. I collected a couple of rosiesides to look at when a gentleman from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation drove up. We talked about fish, the health of the stream, and about a proposed landfill upstream. I had read about it in the local paper the night before and how the community was against it. Folks claimed that the project was going ahead without the proper authorization. The TDEC gentleman assured me that the landfill had not yet begun and would not likely see the light of day. I certainly hope so because of its proposed location in the headwaters of this beautiful stream.

The day was wrapping up and I wanted to be home and in my bed by midnight. I stopped at Rudy's Restaurant and had one of the finest catfish dinners I've ever sat down to. These three days provided some of the best snorkeling I've ever had. I wish I could strap on a "snorkel-cam"—with a flexi-cabled zoom switch and a small flip down monitor beside my mask—in order to record and share the things I saw.

One image immediately comes to mind. A few streams back I saw a male fantail darter in full-tilt spawning color. The patterns on his side were so intricate and delicate it looked like they were done by a miniature tattoo artist. His head was jet-black and his dorsal fin was tipped with egg mimics. When I first spotted him he was darting around a beautifully patterned crayfish and nipping at it repeatedly. The crayfish backed into a small crevasse. The darter plunged in after it. In the shadow of the crevasse I could see the crayfish jerk and twitch. After several minutes of tussling, the fantail finally forced the crayfish out of the crevasse and chased it away. I carefully lifted a rock and saw why. Attached to the rock's underside were neat clustered rows of egg. The fantail was simply defending his nest. Once the crayfish was evicted the fantail's head faded from black to the color of straw.

It was an impressive sight that would have made for a cool video. I've got to work on that snorkel cam!

*Ed. note: A report from the 2003 NANFA Convention in Huntsville is scheduled to appear in the next issue. 🐟*