

CHASING SPECIES IN THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIANS: A 2018 NANFA CONVENTION REPORT



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I tend to pack my vacations so full that by the time I'm through with them I feel like I need a vacation. That doesn't sound very relaxing. It's not. But hey, you only live once. My June 2018 road-trip, planned around the NANFA Convention in northeast Georgia, took me through nine states and featured copious amounts of fishing, running, sight seeing, visiting old friends, and making new ones.

I hit the road early on June 6 and drove from northern Michigan to southeastern Kentucky. By mid-afternoon I reached Natural Bridge State Resort Park and found a place to park along the Red River. It looked like a good spot for microfishing so I set up with a snelled tanago hook baited with a fleck of worm and weighted with a small split shot. I waded the shallow stream for a few hours and tallied up eight species: Emerald Shiner (*Notropis atherinoides*), Mimic Shiner (*Notropis volucellus*), Bluntnose Minnow (*Pimephales notatus*), Longear Sunfish (*Lepomis megalotis*), Green Sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*), Blackside Darter (*Percina maculata*), Rainbow Darter (*Etheostoma caeruleum*), and even a surprise ten-inch Rainbow Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) from under the bridge that I was lucky to land on the tanago rig. I

enjoyed the afternoon as it was a beautiful day and a nice location, but I failed to add a new species to my angling lifelist.

At dusk I drove to the Carr Creek State Park Campground and set up my tent for the night. The camp host said the catfish bite was hot, so I did some night fishing and managed a small Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*) and one Bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*). To cap off my night I squeezed in a 2-mile run along the campground loops—a small contribution toward my goal of running 1,000 miles in 2018.

I devoted June 7 to fishing the far northwestern corner of North Carolina. Ben Cantrell tipped me off to a couple nice spots he'd fished during his trip to the 2014 NANFA Convention. The first was an icy cold stream in the upper New River watershed that numbed my legs as I waded. It had rained a lot in the region in previous weeks, so the water was a little high and cloudy but fishable. I caught a mix of new species with micro tackle, including Kanawha Rosyface Shiner (*Notropis cf. rubellus*), Mountain Redbelly Dace (*Chrosomus oreas*), Bigmouth Chub (*Nocomis platyrhynchus*), New River Shiner (*Notropis scabriceps*), and Tonguetied Minnow (*Exoglossum laurae*). I also caught some Rosyside Dace (*Clinos-*

Photos by the author .

Josh Leisen grew up hiking limestone bluffs and fishing the big rivers, backwater sloughs and trout streams surrounding his Upper Mississippi River Valley hometown of Red Wing, Minnesota. He became seriously interested in lifelist fishing (the pursuit of new fish species via hook-and-line angling) while working towards his B.A. in Geography at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. In 2010 he moved to Columbia, SC, and completed his master's in Geography from the University of South Carolina in 2012. Then, after taking a few months to volunteer, travel and fish in Central America, he returned to the Midwest. He currently lives in Gaylord, Michigan, where he works as a watershed project manager at the nonprofit conservation organization Huron Pines. Josh has traveled extensively in search of new fish species in the company of like-minded anglers from around the world. Check out his adventure angling blog, fish photo galleries, personal lifelist and more at lifelistfishing.com.



Micro-fishing kit.



Tonguetied Minnow.

tomus funduloides) and a Western Blacknose Dace (*Rhinichthys obtusus*).

I threw my wet socks and shoes on the roof of my car to bake in the sweltering sun while I ate a lunch of crackers, pudding, canned tuna, and granola bars. I jotted my catches in my field log, flipping between photos on my camera screen and my copy of the *Peterson Field Guide to Freshwater Fishes* to double check my identifications. Then I drove about an hour west to another of Ben's spots and added Redlip Shiner (*Notropis chiliticus*) and Highback Chub (*Hybopsis hypsinotus*) to my lifelist. I also found Mountain Redbelly Dace, Creek Chub (*Semotilus atromaculatus*), and Bluehead Chub (*Nocomis leptocephalus*) there. I had about a four-hour drive to the convention at Young Harris College, so I packed it up around 5pm and hit the road. I stopped for dinner in Asheville and enjoyed the mountain scenery, radio blasting tunes, en route to northern Georgia. Thanks to Michael Wolfe for accommodating my late arrival, and thank you to everyone involved with helping coordinate the convention logistics and activities!

The NANFA field trips were scheduled for the morning of Friday, June 8. I signed up for the Etowah River watershed trip, led by Georgia Department of Natural Resources staff. The Etowah River had a lot of potential species that would be new for me. I rode along with fellow lifelist anglers Tim Aldridge and Casey Elam, who had signed up for the same trip. We'd chatted online about fishing over the past year or so, and it was great to finally meet them in person. Daniel Folds rode along with us as well. The first stop on the Etowah yielded some Red-



Rosyside Dace.

breast Sunfish (*Lepomis auritus*), Alabama Shiner (*Cyprinella callistia*), and Bluehead Chub. I also got my first Silverstripe Shiner (*Notropis stilbius*). The seining folks netted Bronze Darter (*Percina palmaris*) and several other species.

Our second stop was a small tributary stream full of Tricolor Shiner (*Cyprinella trichroistia*), which was another new species for me. I also caught a Coosa Shiner (*Notropis xenocephalus*) there but the diversity wasn't quite what we had hoped for at that site. We were a bit behind schedule, and the main group headed back to campus after the second stream. So Tim, Casey, Daniel, and I checked out the third and fourth stops on the Etowah itinerary on our own. The third stop was a larger stream, and we saw several Longnose Gar (*Lepisosteus osseus*) when we scoped the river out from the bridge. We caught Alabama Shiners and Casey got a Southern Studfish (*Fundulus stellifer*), but I failed to hook any new species at that spot. At the final stop I was rewarded with my favorite catch of the day—a fabulous Southern Studfish. We also caught Coosa Shiner, and Casey and Tim got Bandfin Shiner (*Luxilus zonistius*), which I failed to collect.

Tim, Casey, and I enjoyed our successful fishing day over Mexican food and drinks at El Cancun with Fritz Rohde, Scott Smith, David Smith, and Kelly McDonald. Later, at the campus housing, Scott and Kelly photographed some of the fishes that had been collected from the various field trip locations and kept alive in aerated coolers of water. I've admired Scott's printed photos in past issues of *American Currents*, and it was neat getting a behind-the-scenes look at



Highback Chub.



Redlip Shiner.



NANFA members at the Etowah River.



Alabama Shiner.



Tricolor Shiner.



Hiwassee Dace.

his fish photography setup and process.

I wish I'd had time for both the NANFA conference presentations and more fishing, but with limited time Saturday, June 9 was my one shot at fishing the Conasauga River and I didn't want to miss out on that. After picking up a couple beautiful Hiwassee Dace (*Clinostomus cf. funduloides*) on the campus, I followed Tim and Casey along a scenic mountain route through North Carolina and Tennessee to the "Snorkel Hole." We also met Mike Channing (who I've known from roughfish.com for a long time and met at the 2015 NANFA Convention in Tahlequah, OK) and his father there for the day. Tim had fished this location before and gave me and Casey pointers on getting our first Rainbow Shiner (*Notropis chrosomus*), which proved easy although they were not quite as colored-up as we were hoping.

I started with standard fishing gear in the Conasauga River, hoping for Redeye Bass (*Micropterus coosae*) and Black Redhorse (*Moxostoma duquesnei*). I watched Mike pull in several Redeyes and Alabama Bass (*Micropterus henshalli*) before I finally got my Redeye Bass. I switched to microfishing gear and caught some very attractive Alabama Shiner. Meanwhile, Tim and Casey tried snorkel fishing, with some success. They got Mobile Logperch (*Percina kathae*) and several shiners. Mike got an Alabama Hog Sucker (*Hypentelium etowanum*). I (completely accidentally) caught a federally listed Blue Shiner (*Cyprinella caerulea*), which was released immediately and later caught and released a second one. Later in the afternoon I decided to focus on larger species, and I got a surprise Freshwater Drum (*Aplodinotus grunniens*), a Shadow Bass (*Amblop-*

lites ariommus), and my first Alabama Bass. The Black Redhorse continues to elude me.

Tim and Casey hit the road and I stayed a while longer to fish with Mike, who guided me to my first Alabama Hog Sucker on hook-and-line. It was a small specimen caught on a micro-hook. They're actually fairly aggressive once you located one and place a small piece of bait in their path. Eventually I bid farewell to Mike and hit the road for Atlanta. I ran the Hotlanta Half-marathon the next morning. An extended version of this trip report, covering my time visiting friends in Atlanta, South Carolina, and North Carolina, and fishing the Outer Banks and more, can be found on my blog at lifelistfishing.com.



Alabama Bass.