

MISSOURI MADNESS

by Michael J. Lucas, E. Rochester, N.Y.

I planned to be in Missouri again on April 18, 1986 to visit my sister-in-law, Cindy, her husband, Gene Fletcher, and my youngest brother-in-law, Dave Littlefield. Gene is a new NANFA member, a situation for which Cindy holds me responsible. In 1984 I got him hooked while visiting them in Jacksonville, Florida, where they were based in the Navy. I reinforced the addiction in July, 1985 when we visited them for the first time in Gene's home state of Missouri.

The collecting on my first visit to Missouri was fantastic. The fishes' survival rate, however, was terrible, due to an outbreak of parasites, hot weather, and overcrowding. By the time I found a medication that worked, I'd already lost most of my Missouri natives. The casualties included: Orangespotted Sunfish (Lepomis humilis), Longear Sunfish (L. megalotis), Northern Studfish (Fundulus catenatus), Plains Topminnows (F. sciadicus), Blackspotted Topminnows (F. olivaceus), Red Shiners (Notropis lutrensis), Bleeding Shiners (N. zonatus), Ozark Minnows (Dionda nubila), Southern Redbelly Dace (Phoxinus erythrogaster), Suckermouth Minnows (Phenacobius mirabilis), and Missouri Saddled Darters (Etheostoma tetrazonum).

If any of you other addicts out there have had a similar experience, you understand the urgency felt for a return trip. It was almost unbearable! I found myself regularly checking airline specials and figuring driving costs. Late night hours were spent reading about the lost species. I even tried substituting shorter collecting trips to Pennsylvania, New Jersey, West Virginia, and Kentucky. These helped for short periods, but those Missouri natives kept haunting me.

When my wife, Kathy, expressed a desire to visit her sister in midwinter, my heart sank, while I visualized myself, parka-clad, cutting holes in the ice to lower fish traps. Thank goodness she changed her mind. Somehow the idea of vacation came up again, just before darter breeding season (heh, heh, heh)!

My next move was to contact some NANFA members in the Missouri area to see if we could get together for some collecting. This is really helpful in areas you haven't sampled before, for obvious reasons. But the best reasons are to share the addiction, swap fish tales, learn different methods, and just meet some real nice people.

Dave Hall from Lohman, Missouri is one of those people. On my first visit to Missouri, Dave took me to some of his local sites on the Fourth of July with only a day's notice. I guess I should thank his wife, since she allowed him to join me again this year on a two-day trip to southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas in addition to a repeat of Dave's local sites in central Missouri.

Another thank you is due to Paul Ribitzki from Tulsa, Oklahoma, who provided information on sites on northwest Arkansas. Unfortunately I couldn't get in touch with Paul before the trip to Arkansas to see if he could join us.

We left Rochester, New York on Friday, April 18, 1986 at 5:00 p.m., drove straight through the night, and arrived in Polo, Missouri (northeast of Kansas City) at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday. After the welcoming procedures, I gave Dave Littlefield "the nod" (much like a darter's territorial display), knowing he'd understand it was time to slip away for our first collecting trip. I'd wisely packed my gear on the roof rack of my wagon for quick, easy access. I could always unpack everything else after dark.

We went to a medium-sized stream about five minutes down the road. It was a typical plains stream, slow to moderate flow and quite silty. Gene and I had sampled this stream in 1935. Gene, who grew up in the area, didn't think there was much of interest in the stream, but wasn't about to deny the possibility, especially after the "gas station ditch incident." That occurred when he chauffeured me around Jacksonville, Florida. Gene pulled into a station to gas up, and I told him I was going to try the roadside ditch in front of the station. He gave me quite a skeptical look, but by the time he'd filled up, so had I, with Flagfish (Jordania floridae), Sailfin Mollies (Poecilia latipinna), and Golden (or Golden-ear) Topminnows (Fundulus chrysotus). I think he was just as surprised, if not more so, when we hauled out fully colored Red Shiners and breeding-colored Green Sunfish (Lepomis cyanellus) from his own backyard in Missouri. The male Red Shiners had metallic-blue bodies, with the fins (except dorsal) and the top of the head red, and a pink vertical bar on the body behind the pectorals. The females were silver. The Green Sunfish were impressive, with the contrast of the yellow-edged fins and belly with the blues and greens of the body.

This time, unfortunately, Dave and I were too early for either fish to be colored up, though a few silvery male Red Shiners were getting some pink in their fins. We caught our quota of adults in a pool below a small waterfall and called it a day.

The second day, we tried a similar stream nearby and found the same species as well as Central Stonerollers (Campostoma anomalum) in breeding condition.

Monday morning, I decided to give my family a chance to sleep in by removing their main obstacle, my two-year-old son, Shawn. There was a tiny brook on the property just a short walk down their driveway. The brook in most spots was only 6" or less deep. Shawn, Dave, and myself, armed with a bucket and some 10" dip nets, went Orangethroat Darter hunting (Etheostoma spectabile).

My two-year-old had had intensive basement training but had not actually gotten his feet wet (though he had soaked everything else). His practice pond was a five-gallon glass

jug with a narrow mouth and neck which reduced the net's maneuverability enough to give the fish a fair chance of avoiding the slashing dip net. But two-year-old collectors, like their older counterparts, soon get the urge to try other waters, in this case low-standing aquariums and styros of feeder fish.

I've never seen him happier than when he stepped into the brook, and positioned his net and I herded a couple full-colored male Orangethroat Darters into it. Then he hoisted his net to a position where he could admire his catch. My apologies to the relatives of the small frog he applied "the grip" to before I could reach him.

Another catch here was what I believe was a dwarf race of Central Stonerollers. We caught lots of males in full breeding colors with tubercles. Egg-filled females of similar size also abounded. I took a couple pairs home to New York and put them in a 20-gal.-long aquarium. One male dug a shallow depression about $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the size of his body in diameter. He determinedly fought off Red Shiners, Northern Studfish, Blackspotted Topminnows, and other Stonerollers. The only fish allowed near the pit were a few $1\frac{1}{2}$ " Orangespotted Sunfish. The females were thin one morning and the pit was gone. Whether they actually spawned or not I don't know. It's unlikely any eggs would have survived, as the tank was filled to the limit with other fish.

Later that day, we were about to sample the Crooked River, but as we got there, a pretty strong thunderstorm turned us back. After it blew over, we had barely enough time for something very close to home base. We went to a spot on Shoal Creek where in 1985 we'd collected Red Shiners, Green Sunfish, Black Crappies (Pomoxis nigromaculatus), Channel Cats (Ictalurus punctatus), and the best catch of all--the Orangespotted Sunfish. This was a site I was anxious to return to. Unfortunately, the water was so high and fast that we couldn't enter the water at all. We returned home and were rained out all day Tuesday.

On Wednesday, Dave Littlefield and I started off early to meet and collect with Dave Hall about three hours away in central Missouri. Along the way, we stopped to sample the Lamine River. The river had been high from the recent rain, but had already begun to drop, leaving a large, isolated pool and some shallow backwaters. Under one or two inches of water, in the mud bottom, Dave noticed some tracks. At each end of the path were small circular indentations. I boldly put my reputation as an authority on aquatic life on the line by declaring them to be turtle tracks.

"Really?" Dave queried doubtfully.

"Oh yes," I replied, as I grabbed a handful of mud marked by one of the indentations. With my other hand I crossed my fingers. Thank goodness I came up with a small ($1\frac{1}{2}$ ") Soft-Shelled Turtle .

Soft-shelled Turtles are very bizarre-looking turtles with a low, flat, leathery shell, a short stub of a tail, and a long neck. They are an agile aquatic turtle only occasionally seen sunning themselves. They are also rather nasty, with the personality of a Snapping Turtle. We found two more while at the Lamine River.

In the isolated pool and backwaters, we found Northern Studdfish, Plains Topminnows, Blackspotted Topminnows, Mosquito Fish (Gambusia affinis), Green Shiners, juvenile Orangespotted Sunfish, Red Shiners, and Redfin Shiners (Notropis umbratilis).

Shallow riffle areas provided us with Orangethroat Darters and Fantail Darters (Etheostoma flabellare). One shoreline, a deeply undercut bank with moderate current through a tangle of roots and brush, yielded more sunfish and one Blackside Darter (Percina maculata).

Also along this bank, spaced about every 20' or so, were poles and lines with large hooks baited with crayfish that dangled just barely in the water. Does anyone know what the quarry was? My guess was turtles. I guess if a fish were to strike, it just might hook itself, but I wonder if fish wouldn't be somewhat suspicious of a floating crayfish.

Next we set off to meet Dave Hall and sample a couple of his home sites on the Moreau River and Saline Creek (See Dave Hall's "Collecting in Missouri, Part I: the Osage System," AC, Jul/Aug 1985).

While collecting, we'd spot large schools of Bleeding Shiners and Ozark Minnows, but when we'd try to herd them downstream into the waiting seine, the vast majority would simply turn upstream and escape long before reaching the net. So two of us would take the seine upstream from the school and the third person would start downstream as a chaser. All of us would then rush the school, pulling the seine very quickly to create a pocket in spite of the current pushing from behind. This method worked very well, though the majority of fish still escaped. We also found the method helpful later in the week collecting Duskystripe Shiners (Notropis pilsbryi).

A highlight on the Saline Creek was the near capture of the endangered (only one left to my knowledge) Missouri Tripping Sucker (Hallus submergus). We would have had him dead in the net, but my brother-in-law, a novice collector, wasn't quick enough lifting the net, and the Missouri Tripping Sucker, alias Dave Hall, was able to flip out of the seine, regain his balance, and escape! Darn, the big ones always get away. I wonder what I could have gotten through Trading Post for a Missouri NANFA member? Please don't answer, "Two New York NANFA members."

We finally left Dave Hall so that he could prepare himself for our two-day trip to southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas, scheduled to begin the next morning. Dave Littlefield and I

made a roadside clothing change before detouring to Columbia, Missouri, where Dave Hall suggested a bookstore that carried Pflieger's The Fishes of Missouri. We arrived in Polo in time for a few hours' sleep before meeting Dave Hall in Kansas City to begin our two-day quest for Redfin Darters (Etheostoma whipplei) and general sampling of southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas.

As Dave Hall, Dave Littlefield, Gene Fletcher, and I traveled south, crammed in my Escort wagon along with food, clothers, books, and collecting gear, I deeply regretted not having chosen a mini-van instead. Oh well, a couple more trips like this and it will be trade-in time anyway.

Our expedition turned out to be great fun and good collecting, though the main quarry was never found. We didn't really give it an honest try, as the many tempting waters on the way south diverted our efforts and time. When we reached the proper area, we'd run out of time and had to start back home. I hope to develop the will power to go directly to the area containing the most-sought-after species, and, if collecting goes well, branch out from there.

Would anybody trade an Etheostoma whipplei for a Missouri Tripping Sucker?

Reference

Pflieger, William L. The Fishes of Missouri. Missouri Dept. of Conservation, 1975.
