

MUD CREEK IN UPSTATE NEW YORK

by Michael Lucas, East Rochester, New York

My first experience collecting in Mud Creek near East Bloomfield in upstate New York was as a 12-year-old. My friends and I spent much of our summer there catching an abundance of fish, frogs, salamanders, and crayfish. The creek at this site is mostly shallow riffles with an abundance of small pools cut into the layers of rock. Due to the fact that the sides and bottom of the pools were solid rock, it was possible to trap fish in the small pools and catch them by hand. Combine that with a good swimming hole or two and it is easy to see why it was one of our favorite haunts.

I still remember the first fish I caught there 20 years ago. It was so brilliantly colored that my friends and I were sure we had captured a young Rainbow Trout. Now I realize that it was more likely a Blacknose Dace in breeding dress.

As the years passed, I forgot about Mud Creek, until I began collecting natives for my aquariums. When I revisited it, old memories flooded back. Collecting was even better, since now I knew what I was catching.

The water here often enters the pools from several spots, creating havoc with a seine. The fish seem to know this and dash directly to those spots, where they hide under a rock. After a while, you can actually hear them laughing and taunting you as you go on to the next pool. The best way to combat this is to bring a friend or two and gang up on them.

In this area I find Fantail Darters (Etheostoma flabellare), Creek Chub (Semotilus atromaculatus), Blacknose Dace (Rhinichthys atratulus), Stonerollers (Campostoma anomalum), Cutlips Minnows (Exoglossum maxillingua), Common Shiners (Notropis cornutus), Bluntnose Minnows (Pimephales notatus), White Suckers (Catostomus commersoni), and Stonecats (Noturus flavus).

Early spring is a good time to collect here, even though the creek gets pretty fast and the footing is treacherous. The breeding colors of the fish make it worthwhile. The male Blacknose Dace are absolutely gorgeous, with a red midlateral stripe, yellow to red belly, and fins of yellow and red. The male Common Shiner's body turns from silver to an iridescent metallic blue, with fins of black and red. Black and orange markings on the male Stoneroller's fins intensify, and with their bright orange eyes and darkened body are quite attractive. The male Fantail Darter's body turns a pale mustard yellow, the head a dark black.

The Cutlips Minnows are common, as are one-eyed Stonerollers. Perhaps the Cutlips are attracted to orange, as most of the Stonerollers are missing at least one eye. Outlips definitely eat eyes, as I've seen them do it in my own tanks, even if well fed. Stonerollers seem to be a favorite victim, from my home

and field experiences. I've also seen adult Central Mudminnows (Umbra limi) eat eyes of fishes (small sunnies), but only when those mudminnows had not yet become accustomed to aquarium foods.

This creek is also home to gargantuan crayfish with claws almost as large as their bodies. These giants ended my childhood daredevil feat of allowing a crayfish to pinch my finger while my friends cringed and screamed in mock pain.

My favorite spot on Mud Creek is downstream some four miles or so, just east of Victor. This area isn't as dominated by small pools as is the first site, and has more gravel and stone bottom cover with fast ripples $\frac{1}{2}$ -2' deep over variously sized rocks and boulders.

This site had gone untested until just this year, as I was always trying waters farther from home. Well, the grass wasn't greener on the other side of the fence, or the fish either. At this location, I've found some of the largest, most colorful Greenside Darters (Etheostoma blennioides) I've ever collected, especially in the early spring when the spawning males turn almost entirely deep green with red markings.

The Greenside Darters, along with the Stonerollers, spawn earliest in the spring (March or April), followed by the Common Shiners, Fantail Darters, and Blacknose Dace (April or May). During early spring, the Stonerollers can be found in the shallow riffle areas, whereas later they are usually found in the pools. The large adult Greenside Darters are most commonly in the fastest stretches of water about 1-1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ' deep. After the spring, they can still be found in these areas, but are fewer in number and have less intense coloration. The adult Greensides are aggressive with their own kind; males, especially, should be given plenty of room and places to hide.

The last Greensides I caught spawned two days after I got them. I had two pairs in a 15-gallon all-glass aquarium with a Common Shiner, a Stoneroller, and two small Stonecats. The bottom was very sparsely covered with gravel and small pebbles. With the light on, I could look from under the tank and see the darters over the gravel. The male was quite determined and would follow the female all around the tank. I took this to indicate a desire to mate, as I recall exhibiting similar behavior myself in my pre-marriage college days. I wouldn't say "chased," because the female never seemed to flee her suitor (unlike my personal experience), but just hopped off a short distance so as not to appear too easy. The male would nudge the female's body with his head (something I hadn't thought to try); then, if she stayed in that spot, the male would hop on top of her, they would do a little shimmy, and a single egg would be laid on the tank bottom. Due to a cramped neck from twisting my head under the tank stand, I observed for only a short period. Perhaps more eggs were laid at one time as the spawning went on. The eggs were eaten by the other fish, as well as by the Greensides themselves.

Other fish found at this site are Fantail Darters, Johnny Darters (Etheostoma nigrum), Outlips Minnows, Stonerollers, Common Shiners, Blacknose Dace, Bluntnose Minnows, Northern Hog Suckers (Hypentelium nigricans), Stonecats, and, in the slower areas, Rock Bass (Ambloplites rupestris), and schools of Gizzard Shad (Dorosoma cepedianum).

Another surprise found here is a large aquatic salamander called a Mudpuppy. They are quite comical-looking, with their large, bushy, red gills hanging from the sides of their heads like a clown's wig. These can be found by overturning rocks along the shore or by seining around rocks they can get under. Trying to grab one by hand is much like grabbing a greased pig--almost impossible. I've caught them ranging from four to 14 inches. They are fond of eating fish and can be messy in the confines of a tank, but are interesting anyway. Unfortunately, they are mostly nocturnal.

Mud Creek is fairly long, and I hope to try some new sites soon. I'm sure I'll find something exciting, since I haven't been disappointed yet. If you're in the area, I'd be glad to take you along. Contact Mike Lucas, 419 West Ave., East Rochester, New York 14445. Phone: 716-248-3304.