

NATIVE CRAYFISH? BAH, HUMBUG!

by Donna Magee, Waterford, CT

For years, I have kept invertebrates and fish together in my native brackish and saltwater tanks with no problem. Besides their fascinating behavior, they serve an important function as scavengers when overfeeding or dead fish present a problem.

On a collecting trip during the NANFA conference in Alabama earlier this year, I obtained my first freshwater invertebrates--three good-sized crayfish. They were put together in a bag for the long train ride home to Connecticut. Upon my arrival, I unpacked the bag containing the crayfish and held it up for my husband to see. I was in for a surprise--instead of three crayfish, there was one fat beast munching on the remains of the other two! While my husband was rolling on the floor in hysterics, I placed the carnivorous beast in my twenty-gallon tank along with my dace and shiners. The crayfish, now called Blueclaw by my children, behaved himself for a while and then disappeared. I found him downstairs surrounded by my three cats, who couldn't decide whether to attack or run from this strange creature.

When the tank was fitted with a proper lid, Blueclaw stayed there, and did very well on a diet of worms and bait shrimp. After moulting twice, he was getting rather large, almost five inches. It was around this time that I acquired two more crayfish of the northern variety during a collecting trip in Massachusetts. Blueclaw immediately attacked and destroyed the two, despite the fact that they were larger than he.

Things went peacefully after that, until I transferred Blueclaw, fish, and everything else to a new 55. I thought Blueclaw would appreciate the caves and ledges as well as the extra room. After making himself at home, he started attacking my fish. The Fundulus diaphanus was the first. I suspect all those hiding places gave the crayfish an advantage in the dark. I countered with more food, but once he had tasted fresh game, there was no stopping him. When I found him a couple of days later with my prized sunfish in his jaws, I lost control. Calling to my husband, I said, "Get the cocktail sauce, he's all yours. Maybe I can chop him up in a salad or deep-fry him. All the while, my children were pleading with me to spare his life and return him to the wild. We didn't eat him, but in the spring I plan to release him to fare as he will. In the meantime, if there is anyone who would like to adopt this brute, I'll pay the postage.