

# NATIVE FISHES AS AMBASSADORS FOR OUR GREAT STATES

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I've been keeping and breeding tropical fishes in my home for the last 20 years. I started with Lake Malawi cichlids, then moved on to Lake Tanganyika cichlids, then to Lake Victoria cichlids, and finally to West African cichlids (my current focus), with a few detours into African killifish, South Asian labyrinth fishes, and Latin American cichlids. Because my job requires significant international travel, I've leveraged those trips to collect and photograph many representatives of these families of fishes in the wild in Africa, Asia, and South America. I currently host a wide variety of tropical species in my 30 tanks at home.

About seven years ago I realized that one doesn't need to go to the tropics or Petco to find cool little fishes—we have hundreds of fascinating species swimming in our streams right here in the US, and many of them adapt well to aquarium life. Since then, I've

sought out opportunities to collect native fishes in different states. I've established a few “state tanks” in the house and enjoy them at home here in Seattle.

## OHIO TANK

My first collecting trip to Ohio was in 2014. I was invited to give a presentation on African cichlids at a meeting of the Columbus area tropical fish club, and after the meeting we headed out to the Mad River and Big Darby Creek to seine up some of the local fauna (Figure 1).

We caught and photographed a bunch of common species, which were mostly new to me, and I found them fascinating. I used my little photo tank to take pictures of Logperch *Percina caprodes* (Figure 2), Mottled Sculpin *Cottus bairdii*, Grass Pickerel *Esox americanus vermiculatus*, Bluntnose Minnow *Pimephales*



Figure 1. Seining in the Mad River

All photos by the author.

Lawrence Kent works for a humanitarian foundation based in Seattle combatting poverty and malnutrition in Africa and South Asia. He travels abroad frequently for his job and takes advantage of these trips to look for freshwater fishes on the side. He has made fish presentations in 26 cities on three continents, collected fish in 23 countries, and published dozens of articles in *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*, *Amazonas*, the *Cichlid News*, the *Buntbarsche Bulletin*, and the German magazines *DATZ*, *AKFS*, and *BSSW Report*. Lawrence currently serves as an editor-at-large for *Amazonas* magazine and as a judge in the North American category of the Biotope Aquarium Design contest. He keeps 30 tanks at home filled with African cichlids, catfish, tetras, Southeast Asian labyrinths, and self-collected North American fishes.



Figure 2. Logperch caught in the Mad River.



Figure 3. Native fishes aquarium on author's back porch.



Figure 5. Redside Dace (top) and Silverjaw Minnow collected on second trip to Mad River.



Figure 4. Ohio fishes tank mail order additions: Rosyside Dace (top) and Greenside Darter.

*notatus*, Johnny Darter *Etheostoma nigrum*, Rainbow Darter *E. caeruleum*, and Golden Redhorse *Moxostoma erythrurum*.

I brought home a few of the minnows and darters and established my first native fish aquarium—a 40-gallon tank that I kept outside on my back porch with a sponge filter, powerhead, rocks, driftwood, and a drainage port to facilitate water changes (Figure 3).

I later added to this collection by ordering a set of Greenside Darters *E. blennioides* and Rosyside Dace *Clinostomus funduloides* (Figure 4) from Jonah's Aquarium, which is owned by NANFA member Mark Binkley and is based in Ohio. I dubbed this aquarium my "Ohio Fishes Tank," and I enjoyed it very much, especially in the spring when the Greenside Darters would color up in amazing shades of bright green.

In 2019, I was invited back to Ohio to speak at the Columbus and Cincinnati fish clubs. Again, my topic was African cichlids, but I requested that after each talk that the club take me out into local creeks to collect native fishes. A dozen members of the Columbus club joined the expedition, and we used seines and dipnets to catch and photograph several handsome species. It was April, so the water was cold, but this worked to our advantage, because many species were beginning to show their spring breeding colors, including the Redside Dace *C. elongatus* (Figure 5) we caught in the Mad River, a minnow species that is unique in its ability to leap from the water to catch flying insects. Central Stonerollers *Campostoma anomalum* were also showing off, with orange and black on their unpaired fins and tubercles on their heads, signaling their eagerness to begin breeding. The Southern Redbelly Dace *Chrosomus erythrogaster* sported their finest attire, with bright yellow fins and scarlet bellies. We also caught Silverjaw Minnows *Notropis buccatus*, an interesting species whose head is adorned with silvery plates that cover internal tubular channels that are



Figure 6. Rainbow Darter collected in the Rio Grande Creek

thought to serve as sensory organs to detect prey in the sand. I brought a group of each of these species back to Seattle to populate a second “Ohio Fish Tank” that I set up in my unheated garage.

#### MICHIGAN TANK

In June 2017, I gave a presentation on Asian labyrinth fishes to the Grand Valley Aquarium Club in Michigan, and afterwards we headed to Rio Grande Creek in Muskegon County to check out the local fishes. We used dipnets to collect a nice group of Rainbow Darters *E. caeruleum* and a seine to collect Western Blacknose Dace *Rhinichthys obtusus* and Common Shiner *Luxilus cornutus*. I brought two dozen fish back to Seattle to re-populate my first Ohio Fish Tank, which unfortunately had been devastated by a raccoon attack three weeks earlier. It now became my “Michigan Fish Tank.” The beauty of the Rainbow Darter (Figure 6) hopping among the cobble helped compensate for the loss of my Greenside Darters, and the dace and shiners kept the upper strata of the tank lively and entertaining. When I showed this tank to visiting friends, the reaction was always: “I had no idea that native fishes could be so colorful!”

#### FLORIDA TANK

In February 2021, I decided to escape the cold and rain of Seattle and head down to South Florida for some nicer weather and waters. While there, I contacted a local naturalist named Javier who agreed to show me how to find tropical fishes in the irrigation canals in Homestead. We found, photographed, and dip-netted many species (Figure 7), including the beautiful Sailfin Molly *Poecilia latipinna*, Florida Flagfish *Jordanella floridae*, Golden Topminnow *Fundulus chrysotus*, Sheepshead Minnow *Cyprinodon variegatus*, Marsh Killifish *F. confluentus*, Gulf Killifish *F. grandis*, Swamp Darters *E. fusiforme*, Bluefin Killifish *Lucania goodei*, and Least Killifish *Heterandria formosa*. I brought a couple dozen of these fishes home to populate a new “Florida Fish Tank” that I set up in my basement. Unlike the Midwestern species that need cold water, the Florida fishes do fine in an indoor planted aquarium, serving as great ambassadors for the Sunshine State. I keep the tiny, live-bearing Least Killifish in a separate, smaller tank where they breed constantly. The Least Killifish (not a true killifish but a member of the Poeciliidae family) are considered the smallest fish species found in North America and are well-suited to the types of small, planted tanks that are popular in the Seattle area. It’s not hard to find friends to adopt the abundant fry.



Figure 7. Fishes collected for the Florida tank (from top): Sailfin Molly, Golden Topminnows, and a Gulf Killifish in front of a Florida Flagfish.

#### MISSOURI TANK

In July 2021, I delivered a presentation at the American Cichlid Association convention and arranged to look for native fishes the subsequent day with my friend Kurt Zahringer. He kindly took me to LaBarque Creek, 40 miles southwest of St. Louis, and a couple of streams in the Osage drainage in the



Figure 9. Banded Killifish collected at Willamette River locality.



Figure 8. Bleeding Shiner (top), Northern Studfish (middle), and Longear Sunfish collected in LaBarque Creek.

Ozarks, where we snorkeled, photographed, and netted some wonderful local fishes, including the Bleeding Shiner *L. zonatus*, Missouri Saddled Darter *E. tetrazonum*, Stippled Darter *E. punctulatum*, and Banded Darter *E. zonale*. We caught and photographed a beautiful male Northern Studfish *F. catenatus*, which is the largest of the killifish in the southcentral United States, and we did some underwater filming of a colony of gorgeous Longear Sunfish *Lepomis megalotis* (Figure 8) guarding spawning sites on the sandy substrate. I brought home four Slender Madtoms *Noturus exilis*, a catfish species that does well in captivity, where they swim boldly around their aquar-

ium in search of thawed bloodworms, and a few Longear Sunfish eggs, which I hatched in an aerated Tupperware container before moving the fry to a tank in my garage. Those fish, along with a freshly captured set of Greenside Darters, now constitute my “Missouri Fish Tank.”

#### OREGON TANK

I’ll close this article with a vignette on collecting in Oregon, a state just 175 miles south of my home in Seattle. I agreed to drive down there in October 2021 to speak on African cichlids at “Fishtoberfest,” an event organized by the local aquarium club, on the condition that the club organize an expedition to look for the Banded Killifish *F. diaphanus*, a species that is native to the southeastern United States but is reported to have established itself as an invasive in a few spots in Oregon. The club agreed, and a group of us traveled to a specific location on the Willamette River (Figure 9), where we shuffled our feet through the shallows to drive those little fish into our nets. We succeeded in catching a couple dozen Banded Killifish, and I brought home 20, housing ten inside in a ten-gallon tank at 75 degrees and another group outside in the garage at 45 degrees. Both groups are thriving, eating baby brine shrimp and Grindal worms, while darting in and out of the floating plants. I hope to get eggs and fry in the Spring.

#### WRAPPING UP

Native fishes are fun to find and fun to keep. Every state offers great opportunities to learn about new environments and search for new treasures. I hope I can tell you more about my North Carolina, Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Mississippi collecting trips and fish tanks in a future article. And maybe additional states after that, if new opportunities arise.