



Native Fishes for the Aquarium

by Don Fowler

Since the club has had a recent talk on native fish, and members have had a chance to collect on the Fox River, I thought it would be useful to review some of the common native fish which are suitable for aquariums. While a well-kept aquarium of native fish is something of a rarity in this country, it is an easy kind of aquarium to set up and adventurous to keep stocked. If you are interested in the science of aquatic life, what better way is there to advance your knowledge than to go out and collect your own specimens and maintain them in your own aquarium.

It is not necessary to go into a wilderness to collect suitable fishes. Even in the outskirts of our cities, enough different species can be found to keep you collecting for years. Exploring a lake, a swampy lowland, or a small brook may yield an amazing assortment of fish. Once you have them installed in their new quarters, you will find them undemanding house-guests; less demanding, in fact, than most of the tropical fish.

In brooks and streams, the best means of catching small fish is a hoop net with a fine mesh. Dark colored material is preferable to white cloth. In a pond, lake, or river, you'll probably have better luck with a minnow seine. Seining is a two man operation, each holding an end in the water while wading along the shore. If there are fish around, a single haul will often catch more specimens than you can use. The smallest fish are almost always most desirable. Put those you wish to keep into a bucket of water and carefully return the others to the pond. The wise collector is satisfied with a few choice specimens. Always check the state fishing laws and have a fishing license.

The game fishes such as bass, pike, and pickerel, along with garfish, perch, wall-eyes, crappies, sticklebacks, and large eels, or catfish are not suited to an aquarium of mixed species. They must be kept by themselves, one to an aquarium, because of their aggressive temperaments. Bluegills and other sunfish may be kept together if they are uncrowded and of the same size. Catfish and eels will not harm fish they can't swallow whole. Since they are hardworking scavengers and keep the bottom of the aquarium clean and free of decaying matter, they are desirable in a community aquarium.

To successfully maintain different species in one aquarium, choose fish that are distinctively peaceful. Dace, darters, shiners, and killies best fit this category. These fish in nature are the hunted rather than the hunters. It would be cruel to put a defenseless shiner together with a voracious game fish.

On no account should trout be captured for aquariums. These fish require cold water, unusually rich in oxygen. In a home, these conditions cannot be duplicated.

By the process of elimination, then, the most satisfactory wild fish for the aquarium are dace, shiners, darters, killifish, small catfish and eels, and, because of their beauty, if not their temperament, the various sunfish.

Shiners are abundant almost everywhere in the United States and not difficult to find. They are quite hardy and adapt quickly to aquarium life. Best known is the common shiner, or redbin, followed by the golden shiner or roach. But there are numerous other varieties, all of which may be maintained as easily as goldfish. Shiners are fond of insects, larvae, and small or chopped earthworms, but eagerly devour any of the prepared dried foods.

Dace are among the most attractive of the American fish. You'll have to be quick to collect any, though, because they are fast and agile swimmers. The redbellied dace ranks among the world's most colorful fishes. Its back is olive

NATIVE FISHES FOR THE AQUARIUM

brown and two blue-black stripes, separated by a pale golden band running along the sides. In the breeding season, the fins, belly, and throat turn a vivid scarlet. Almost as beautiful is the blacknosed dace. This fish has silver sides and a band of intense black encircling its body horizontally. Like others of the dace family, either of these two species are ideal citizens in a community aquarium and will eat anything that is small enough.

About a hundred species of one to two inch fishes in the East and Midwest United States are called darters. They spend most of their time resting on the bottom. When they move, they dart about in a jerky manner which has earned them their name. The three species of most interest to the collector are the Johnny Darter, Rainbow Darter, and the Fantail Darter. Prettiest of this trio is the Rainbow Darter, but they are all eye-catching and undemanding pets.

Except for two or three species, all sunfish are spangled with beautiful colors. Unfortunately, they tend to be bullies in aquariums with smaller fish. It's an ironic fact the common sunfish commands high, extravagant prices among European aquarists, yet is totally without honor or recognition in its own country. All told, including bluegills, crappies and bass, there are about three dozen species and sub-species in the sunfish family. Best for the aquariums are the pumpkinseed, the diamond or spotted sunfish, the long-ear sunfish, the yellow-bellied, the bluegill and the black-banded sunfish. They are all easy to care for.

There are about twenty-five species of catfish in the United States, ranging in size from 150 pounds down to small bullheads, stone cats and mad-toms. The last three may be considered suitable candidates when less than four inches long. Catfish and eels are valuable scavengers, avidly poking about in the gravel for bits of food overlooked by their tankmates. Both are omniverous and will eat just about anything they can stuff in their mouths. Don't keep them with bite-sized fishes or you'll soon wind up with one fat catfish or eel in the aquarium.

At least forty-seven varieties of killifish can be netted in American waters. The most common species in this area belong to the genus, "FUNDULUS" or top minnow. In my opinion, these are the most interesting and worthwhile native fishes suitable for aquariums. There is quite a range of habits and habitats. Some are typical surface-dwelling fishes; others prefer to remain in the vicinity of the bottom, occasionally even in the mud; others are to be found in brackish waters or even in absolute seawater. The surface-dwelling representatives are distinguished by the possession of a very conspicuous iridescent golden mark on the crown of the head.

Generally, these fish like plenty of room to move about (at least during the breeding season), thick plant growth, and sunshine. The water level should not be low. Special concern for water quality is not necessary, either for routine care or for breeding. However, frequent additions of fresh water should be made. All the species take live or dried foods, being very voracious feeders. The majority of them are peaceful, although the males are occasionally quarrelsome themselves.

Supposedly these species are not suitable for the community aquarium because under such conditions they remain shy and show evident discomfort at the usually much higher temperatures. However, I personally have not found this to be true. I have kept one species in an aquarium at 80 with a number of mollies, and have noticed no evidence of adverse effects. For breeding purposes I would recommend keeping them at lower temperatures. The breeding of many of the species is not difficult to accomplish. The small eggs are laid on plants in the course of a spawning period of several days and should, complete with plants, be transferred each day to a rearing aquarium (in which the water level is low), since the adults are in some cases enthusiastic spawn-eaters. The young hatch

NATIVE FISH FOR THE AQUARIUM (continued from page 6)

after eight to fifteen days and can be fed immediately. Growth is not very rapid.

I hope this article will interest you in our native fish. Try collecting and keeping a few native fish, and I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

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