

NIGHT COLLECTIONS

by Konrad Schmidt, Bemidji, Minn.

I first considered the idea of collecting fish at night several years ago when I began to take an interest in a rather different kind of recreational activity called catfishing. I primarily fished for Channel and Flathead cats, but occasionally the nights would be highlighted by hooking into American Eels and Longnose Gars. I rapidly developed an interest in these fascinating species, and tried to collect smaller specimens for my aquariums. I started using minnow traps, and found that they would sometimes work for Stonecats, but for nothing else. I considered the idea of seining at night, and wondered if it would produce any results, but at that time the fear of drop-offs, snapping turtles, and whatever else goes bump in the night was stronger than my desire to collect fish.

I continued to stock my aquariums with fish I collected from seining only during the day, but I have always been frustrated at trying to head off fleeing schools of minnows which seemed even more skittish on sunny days. I have also noticed that seining on cloudy days would generally be more productive. These observations persuaded me to take another serious look at night seining, and eventually led to some interesting results.

The first attempt was made under conditions I felt were far from ideal--it was mid-December, and ice had begun appearing on the rivers. I somehow managed to infect my two collecting partners, Don Richmond and Eric Lindberg, with an acute case of spring fever and revived their seasonally dormant urge to collect fish. We realized the need to dress appropriately for this time of year, and thought waders, wool socks, and long underwear would be enough, but that frigid water was bordering on unbearable. After two or three very short passes, however, we were rewarded with more River Darters than we knew what to do with, and many had to be thrown back.

I have since tried night seining in many other Minnesota lakes and streams, and during more favorable seasons. This method has so far produced easy catches of Trout-perch, Logperch, Tadpole Madtoms, and Emerald Shiners. None of these species are considered rare in Minnesota, and I have been able to collect them during the day, but night seining has produced a great deal more--with less effort.

The most memorable results from night seining hapoened last summer when Don and I made a collection trip to Missouri. We were interested in finding the Ozark and Slender madtoms, which Fishes of Missouri, by William Pflieger, lists as being very common. Although we were aware of their nocturnal habits, we tried to collect them during the day by checking logs, rocks, and of course beer cans that unfortunately litter the more accessible streams. These efforts failed to produce a single fish, and we decided to try our secret weapon as a last resort.

We arrived at a stream shortly before sunset and made a few passes with the seine, but did not collect any new species; however, when it became too dark to see without a flashlight, both the Ozark and Slender madtoms started showing up in the seine. There was also the totally unexpected, but welcomed, appearance of Yoke Darters. Again, in a very short time, we had collected more fish than we needed and many had to be released.

I believe this method will be of use to many that may be interested in collecting nocturnal fishes, but I would like to offer a few suggestions to anyone trying it for the first time. I prefer to collect from sites that I know very well, or to arrive before sunset at new sites to check for snags and drop-offs. The excellent results have never made it necessary to seine in water more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ ' deep. I admit different species may be found at greater depths, but, for now, I have more than I can handle in shallow water. Finally, a flashlight or lantern is a must for this kind of work; recently I started using a head lamp, which directs the light exactly where I am looking and frees both hands to work the seine. I hope these suggestions will help others find collecting at night as enjoyable and rewarding as I have.