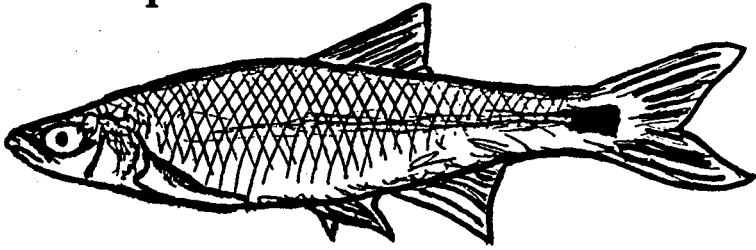


# Notropis venustus I: Gentle Giant



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This is the first of two articles dealing with the Spottail Shiner (*Notropis venustus*), a large cyprinid common in the southeastern US. Description of the fish, its habitat, habits, and care in the aquarium are discussed. The second article will deal with breeding behavior.

My experience with *Notropis venustus* began on a collecting trip I joined to help an ichthyology PhD candidate. As we collected in the Escambia River (Escambia County, Florida) for *Carpoides* species, a number of adult (4" - 5") *N. venustus* turned up. They were a new species for me and I was intrigued; the fish were larger than any other non-predator fish I had caught and were ideal for my 75 gallon tank. They adjusted readily to the aquarium and accepted frozen and flake foods eagerly.

On the next trip I was on the lookout for more Spottail Shiners. This surprised the ichthyologists. One of them looked at me oddly and said, "Why? They're as common as s---." Common, indeed. Bailey, Winn, and Smith report *N. venustus* to be one of the largest and commonest cyprinid of the southeastern US, ranging from the Rio Grande in Texas to Apalachicola River in Florida, Alabama, and Georgia and north in the Mississippi River to south-west Missouri and Illinois. However common, I had never before collected or seen it, nor had I read any aquarist literature dealing with the species, and there is good reason; *N. venustus* generally inhabits larger rivers. I had never collected any from tiny, seinable streams or accessible weed beds along larger bodies of water. We had, in fact, taken the shiner in deep water by means of the special electrical device for scientific collecting. The water there is much too deep and swift for conventional collecting methods. However, on sand banks schools of the shiner can be seined, although these are yearlings or young-of-the-year, one and one half to two inches long. I have, at this writing, maintained one of these young for a year and it has reached 3"-3½"; probably then, the 4"-5" adults I captured previously were at least three years old at that time. One of these is still alive, now about 6", and I would guess, about four years old. From its appearance, it does not have another year to live.

Without the electrical collecting apparatus, I had resigned myself to capturing yearlings to raise to maturity. One day I saw a woman pull in a Spottail Shiner as she fished on the bank. I tried the same, and came home with seven beautiful, full-grown specimens, none the worse for wear.

"All this trouble for a shiner?" you say? "And one so colorless besides?" Oh, yes. In spite of all the beautiful Sailfin Shiners, Flagfin Shiners, and all our gorgeous darters, there still was lacking, in my opinion, that nice touch a larger fish gives to tanks of thirty gallons or more. I mean, of course, a larger fish which can get along with all those other small, delicious fish in the community tank. *N. venustus* serves this need very well. This fish is very active, slicing through the water, especially at feeding time, right under the surface. At dizzying speed, it covers the distance across the four foot long tank, snatching every particle of food in its path. As for color: nothing. Well, not exactly. It is that slightly bluish-silver color which characterizes many minnows. However, its size alone brings out detail which is beauty in itself, at least where this fish is concerned. The scales appear to be outlined in black, producing a network pattern. The dorsal and anal fins in adults show black rays with milky white in between. Their trailing edges are also trimmed in white. The distal tips of the forked dorsal are white. Add to this the bold, distinctive black spot on the caudal peduncle on a 4"-6" fish and you have the center of attraction in a large community tank.

The fact that this "plain shiner" is very striking in appearance is amply demonstrated by the reaction of other hobbyists as they look at my tank. Those who deal with native fish are aware of the vast number of hobbyists who, after years of knowledgeable tropical fish-keeping, can look at a native community tank without being able to identify one single fish. When these veteran hobbyists see my *N. venustus*, they immediately ask me if it is a shark (*Labeo* species, that is!), due no doubt to the general shape and fin configuration, although the dorsal is not *that* large.

Try these, especially in a tank larger than twenty gallons; they are active, peaceful, mid-water fish whose size is a big plus. They are relatively long-lived and generally hardy (mine have survived a year of not-too-careful handling while others have come and gone). Additionally, they tolerate a wide range of conditions. And if you do land any adults: don't frantically treat them for ich after a cursory examination. *N. venustus* exhibits the breeding tubercles typical of many cyprinids. That fish with a face full of ich is more likely a breeding male.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Bailey, Reeve M., Howard Elliot Winn and C. Lavett Smith 1954. Fishes from