

Okefenokee II: The Return

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The weekend of March 28-30, 2003, a number of us traveled to the Okefenokee Swamp, repeating a successful visit from March of last year. A split squad of campers and motel dwellers worked out of Folkston, GA, on the east side of the swamp, including two father-and-son teams. The crew this year numbered 18 from seven different states:

- AL Charles Ray (Auburn) and David Smith (Mobile)
- FL Jim & Nancy Capelle (Gainesville), Doug Dame (Interlachen), and Paul & Jerome Sachs (St. Augustine)
- GA Steven Ellis (Kennesaw), Harvey Langabeer (Lawrenceville), Henry Wolfe (Bethlehem), and Michael & Andrew Wolfe (Statham)
- KY Geoff Kimber (Lexington)
- MI Philip Kukulski (Detroit), winning the distance award!
- OH Klaus "Dead Man Walking" Schoening (Cincinnati)
- SC Dan Hagley (Columbia), Chip Rinehart (West Columbia), and Dustin Smith (Newberry)

Rather than just repeat the itinerary from last year, we researched a new area that included the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR) and its periphery. So, on March 1, 2003, Chip Rinehart and Paul Harney (Clermont, GA) joined me for the scouting run. During the course of the day we circled the swamp and located several promising sites. Despite a near-constant downpour, and so much high water that it was often difficult to determine where the normal shorelines were, we did manage some pre-trip sampling with excellent results. We were delighted to find banded topminnow (*Fundulus cingulatus*), which had eluded us last year.

On Friday morning (March 28), I rolled into Folkston to find that Philip Kukulski and Klaus Schoening were there ahead of me. I was more than a little impressed that Philip

made the long drive down from the University of Michigan. If the entire rest of the weekend had turned out to be a total flop (it didn't!), I would still have counted it worthwhile just to see Klaus back in the game. His near-fatal illness last summer gave many of us quite a scare. Though still not 100%, he handled the strain of the trip quite well. Welcome back to the land of the living, Klaus!

As one might expect, a National Wildlife Refuge is not normally accessible to fish collectors. A written request is required and scrutinized before permission is considered. Although I had tendered such a request two weeks prior to the trip, I didn't know until I arrived that it had been approved under strict guidelines. ONWR biologist Sara Aicher met with me to issue the special permit and to go over the limitations. She was an extremely helpful professional, providing us with topographical prints of the immediate area, and granting us 500 feet on either side of the navigable waterways in which to work. It turned out to be more than adequate.

Elated by this rare opportunity, I returned to the motel for a 3 p.m. rendezvous with the first wave of collectors. Doug Dame, Paul Sachs and his son Jerome, and David Smith soon joined Klaus, Philip, and me. We sampled a small pond on the motel property, but it yielded nothing. Charles Ray and Harvey Langabeer rolled in next, and then we were off to the first stop of the trip.

St. Marys River, U.S. Highway 1 South of Folkston at the Florida Line

As with many of the streams we encountered, high water from recent flooding covered the normal banks, creating steep, sudden drop-offs. This blackwater river winds past a state park on the Florida side. We collected and/or observed

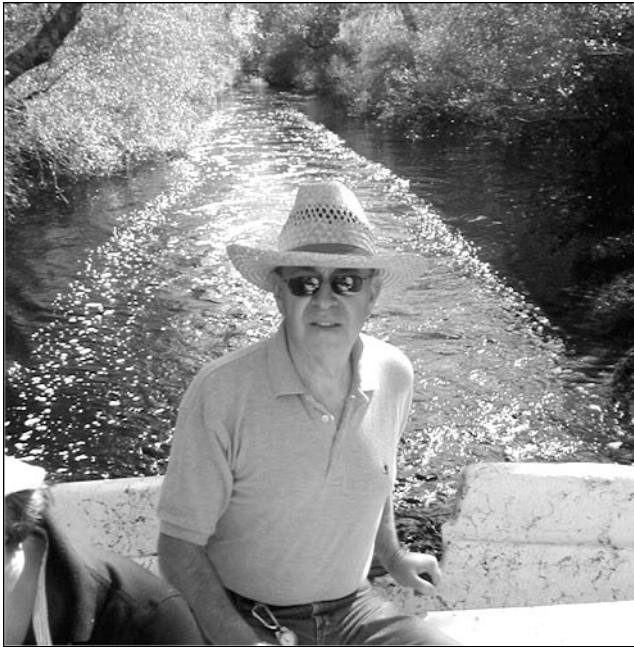


Fig. 1.

“Cap’n” Henry Wolfe (Bethlehem, GA) was kind enough to guide our boat through the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Steven A. Ellis.

chain pickerel (*Esox niger*), redbfin pickerel (*E. americanus americanus*), pygmy killifish (*Leptolucania ommata*), eastern mosquitofish (*Gambusia holbrooki*), least killifish (*Heterandria formosa*), swamp darter (*Etheostoma fusiforme*), bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*), bluespotted sunfish (*Enneacanthus gloriosus*), and Everglades pygmy sunfish (*Elassoma evergladei*).

Mack Island Creek, U.S. Highway 1 5 Miles NW of Folkston

Mack Island Creek was vegetation-choked and spread out along the side of Highway 1 due to the high water. The brush was thickest near the bridge, so we had better success working ditches just north of it. We saw juvenile pickerel (*Esox* sp.), banded topminnow, pygmy killifish, mosquitofish, bluegill, bluespotted sunfish, and Okefenokee pygmy sunfish (*Elassoma okefenokee*).

Spanish Creek, U.S. Highway 1 4 Miles NW of Folkston

What a difference a half-mile makes! Doug offered to speak his excellent mock Spanish to the fish. It must have worked as we did much better here. The creek was a lot easier to work, and the fish were less displaced. We observed and/or

collected chain pickerel, golden topminnow (*Fundulus chrysotus*), pygmy killifish, mosquitofish, least killifish, flier (*Centrarchus macropterus*), black crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*), bluegill, banded sunfish (*Enneacanthus obesus*), bluespotted sunfish, Everglades pygmy sunfish, and Okefenokee pygmy sunfish.

With the sunlight fading and the mosquitoes forming attack squadrons, we returned to the motel to find three generations of the Wolfe family waiting for us. That brought our total to 12 for the customary group meal.

Earlier in the day, I had located a mom’n’pop barbecue place (C&M Barbecue) just off Folkston’s town square. If I hadn’t been there in the daytime I never would have found it after dark! We arrived just 30 minutes before closing, causing the couple who ran the place to really scramble to accommodate a dozen hungry fish folk. They were very kind to us, and the barbecue was good enough to rank within my top five choices for barbecue in Georgia.

Back at the motel, we were greeted by Jim and Nancy Capelle, Geoff Kimber, and those wild-eyed South Carolina boys, Dan Hagley, Chip Rinehart and Dustin Smith.

On Saturday morning, many of us met for breakfast before taking to the pursuit of fish. Soon afterward, our original plan for the day took on new options. Making just a day trip out of it, the South Carolina gang chose to skip ONWR in favor of a trip to the Waycross area of Georgia. Several others joined them. Another group opted to work some of the local sites, intending to hook up with us later.

With that sorted out, seven of us (the Wolfe guys, Nancy, Geoff, Philip, and myself) drove down to ONWR and boarded a flat-bottom boat. After seeing our collecting gear, one of the park attendants asked to see our special permit before letting us pass. Henry Wolfe agreed to drive the boat for us (Fig. 1).

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge East Entrance, Chesser and Grand Prairies

We traveled only a short distance down the main channel before we spotted a seven- or eight-foot alligator absorbing sunlight on the bank. Unlike other ones we saw later, this one stuck around long enough for photos. (Yes, Chip, there are ’gators outside of South Carolina!)

Turning left at the first opportunity, we began descending the narrow waterway into Chesser Prairie. It was immediately evident that we were at ground zero of the food chain. Getting out of the boat for the first time was a bit unnerving, knowing that ’gators were all around. Not being able to see them is the spooky part. However, when the others plunged



Fig. 2.

Philip Kukulski (Detroit, MI) on a stretch of “floating earth” in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Steven A. Ellis.

in without reservation, I reminded myself that this is what we came for, and followed. As long as we didn’t step off into the channel, the water was usually less than waist deep.

There was plenty of solid ground to be seen, but we just couldn’t reach it. Every “true” landmass was ringed around the edges with impenetrable brush. Philip made a gallant effort to break through, but 15 feet in about as many minutes was the best he could manage. “Floating earth”—the ever-shifting waterlogged peat beneath the surface—doesn’t look as though it would support the weight of a man, but Philip proved to us that it would. We took photos of him kneeling on a patch of it (Fig. 2).

Cap’n Wolfe was patient with us and our navigational directions, and often raised the motor to allow us to tow the boat into fields of lily pads without fouling the propeller. He and Miss Nancy used field glasses to locate wading birds. The birds did not allow us to approach them closely, but we did get a fair look at a pair of ibis and a large white crane.

Although ONWR boasts 37 snake species and 14 turtle species, we didn’t find any. Of fishes, we collected and/or observed chain pickerel, redbfin pickerel, banded topminnow, pygmy killifish, mosquitofish, many hybrid sunfish, dollar sunfish (*Lepomis marginatus*), bluegill, bluespotted sunfish, banded sunfish, flier, black crappie, Everglades pygmy sunfish, and Okefenokee pygmy sunfish.

While we were enjoying this vast, untamed wilderness, the South Carolina renegades were thrashing the waters around Waycross. Chip was kind enough to submit a report (see box, next page) of their activities.

Double Run Creek, U.S. Highway 94 5 Miles SE of Fargo, GA

Although collecting in ONWR was anything but easy, it was still difficult to leave. Nevertheless, we had other sites to hit before nightfall. Heading north, we returned to Folkston for a 3 p.m. lunch at Huddle House. Miss Nancy bailed out right after the meal. We let her out at the motel and proceeded to the next stop.

Chip continues the story...

Dan Hagley, Dustin Smith and I arrived in Folkston 10:30 Friday night and checked into our motel. I walked over to the motel next door where Steven and some of the other guys were staying. We talked about what they had done that day and what they planned to do the next day. We agreed to meet at a nearby diner for breakfast at 7:30 the next morning to talk about where we would be visiting.

Breakfast was nice, with some of the best company a person could ask for. Due to Dan and Dustin's need to be back home that night (honey-do lists, guys?), and the species they wanted, we had to pass on Steven's swamp tour. David Smith, Klaus Schoening, Charles Ray and Harvey Langabeer opted to follow us as well. Doug Dame, Paul Sachs and his son Jerome, and Jim Capelle also followed us to the first site but split apart until meeting up with us at our final collection site much later in the day.

Spanish Creek at U.S. 1/U.S. 23 The sun was shining, the sky was clear, the water tannin-stained to the color of strong tea—a perfect day for collecting! We stopped here to get Okefenokee pygmy sunfish. We also found pirate perch (*Aphredoderus sayanus*).

Roadside ditch at GA 177, 7 miles from GA 94 intersection Doug, Paul, Jerome, and Jim headed off on their own. The rest of us dipped into Florida and then back into Georgia to a spot on the western side of the swamp that Steven and I had visited on our scouting trip several weeks earlier. This area consisted of ditches along the road heading into ONWR but outside of park boundaries.

On our scouting trip it was raining most of the time, which kept the insect population grounded. We weren't so lucky this time, as it seemed every mosquito from the state was here with us. At least we found lots of fish that prey on the larvae of this blood-sucking horde. Since mosquitoes don't lay eggs until they've had a meal of blood, we were providing food for the next generation of fish, at least in a roundabout sort of way.

We found banded topminnows with blood-red fins as well as nicely colored pygmy killies and Everglades pygmy sunfish. Mosquitofish were abundant; Klaus found several males with black spots. We also found a ribbon or garter snake, a small siren, some cool water insects, and many frogs and tadpoles.

GA 177 at Sweetwater Creek We turned our vehicles around and drove a short way back to a stream we saw on the way in. The bloodsuckers were even worse here and it was getting pretty warm, so we didn't spend a lot of time at this spot. Fishes we saw included juvenile pickerel, pygmy killifish, banded topminnow, and eastern mosquitofish.

There is no road directly across ONWR (a good thing), so we had to circle the lower end of it to reach the next site. This took us on a stretch of highway that ran across the top edge of Florida before re-entering Georgia just southeast of Council.

Double Run Creek was not on the itinerary, but it looked promising as we approached. True to its name, a long bridge spans twin channels of the same creek. High water blended the two creeks into one and swelled the ditches on both sides.

The fishes seemed badly displaced. We only found a few near the edge of what might have been their original territory, so we didn't stay here long. We saw juvenile pickerel, banded topminnow, pygmy killifish, mosquitofish, and banded sunfish.

The mosquitoes were growing more aggressive. The repellent slowed them down, but they continued to fly "touch'n'gos" over us. We hadn't heard the last of them yet.

Cypress Creek, U.S. Highway 94 3 Miles SE of Fargo, GA

Cypress Creek was a much better location, but we found mostly the same fishes we had seen already: chain pickerel, banded topminnow, pygmy killifish, mosquitofish, dollar sunfish, bluegill, bluespotted sunfish, and banded sunfish.

Sweetwater Creek, GA Highway 177 4 Miles NE of Edith, GA

We made a fairly brief stop at Sweetwater Creek. The mosquitoes began to ignore the repellent, and we saw few fish: juvenile pickerel, banded topminnow (Fig. 3), pygmy killifish, and mosquitofish.

U.S. 441/GA 89 at Tatum Creek We stopped in Fargo to eat lunch at the Sportsman's Café, operated by Ima Jean Knowles. The food on the buffet was pretty good if a little on the expensive side (we must have been charged the "tourist price"). The waitress was a young girl with a distinct south Georgia accent, a "tb" tattoo on her wrist (I'm not sure I want to know what it stood for), and a belly button visible to all. We were unsuccessful in our attempts to get Dan to eat collards.

After lunch, we headed up towards Homerville. Along the way, we stopped at Tatum Creek, another spot Steven and I had visited. This time the water was much lower. We found blue crayfish, dwarf crayfish, and some other variety with red lines and spots. We also found several banded topminnows and one golden topminnow with red spots.

Pond at Swamp Rd. and 12-mile post We headed towards a site we had visited last year that was loaded with pygmy killies. But the water level was much higher this time and little vegetation was present. Still, we worked our dipnets and soon found the killies we were after. We also found banded topminnow, which we didn't find here last year.

As we were preparing to leave, a young boy and his father pulled up to do some fishing. We showed the boy some of the fish we were keeping and he goes running to his father yelling, "Dad, look at these fish!" Maybe a seed was planted for a new generation of fish collectors. Across the road, Klaus and Charles started dipping in a ditch in search of daphnia. They found enough to take home and start new cultures.

U.S. 1/U.S. 23 at Satilla River The last spot we visited was another one we had sampled last year. As we pulled in we saw just ahead the group that split off from us earlier that day. Talk about timing! On our previous trip here, the water level was so low because of drought we could walk across the river. This year the water was 15-20 feet higher, so we had little luck getting the much-desired taillight shiners that were so numerous the year before. We did find some nicely colored brook silversides and a bowfin (*Amia calva*) about an inch in length. Other fishes we sampled included bannerfin shiner (*Cyprinella leedsi*), lake chub-sucker (*Erimyzon sucetta*), and redbreast sunfish (*Lepomis auritus*).

Jim was helping Doug pull a seine when he had an "over the waders" experience. Actually, it was more of an "over the head" experience. I still don't know out how his hat remained dry. I hope the pictures turn out on those shots! After a while we all decided it was time to call it a day. We said our good-byes and headed our separate ways.

Thanks to Steven Ellis, our awesome NANFA Georgia representative, for hosting Okefenokee II.

Suwannee River, U.S. Highway 94 1 Mile SE of Fargo, GA

At the final site of the day, we pulled up at the wide overflow that ran the entire distance between the bridge over the Suwannee River and the junction with GA Highway 177 leading to Stephen Foster State Park. Since sport fishermen and boaters occupied the area north of the bridge, we chose the south side.

Once again the original shoreline was not visible and treacherously dropped off into deep water. The boldness of the mosquitoes increased in proportion with the approach of night. We rapidly went from test dummies for West Nile virus to bait.

In spite of the mosquitoes, the collecting was good. We even found the much-sought lined topminnow (*Fundulus*

lineolatus). A mystery shiner caught in near-darkness turned out to be a taillight shiner (*Notropis maculatus*). We also collected and/or observed chain pickerel, banded topminnow, pygmy killifish, mosquitofish, brook silverside (*Labidesthes sicculus*), bluegill, bluespotted sunfish, and banded sunfish.

Now the bugs were at absolute swarm stage. I let dozens of them in the car just getting seated, and had to drive back to Folkston at top speed with the windows down to clear them out. We risked anemia if we stayed any longer!

Once everyone was cleaned up and fed, the fish swap began. Bags of fish, plants, and assorted foods from around the country changed hands. Everybody seemed pleased with what they got. It was a hoot to watch!

On Sunday morning, after picture-perfect weather the previous two days, it was a bit of a shock to awaken to a cold



Fig. 3.

Banded topminnow (*Fundulus cingulatus*) from Sweetwater Creek.
Photo by Steven A. Ellis.

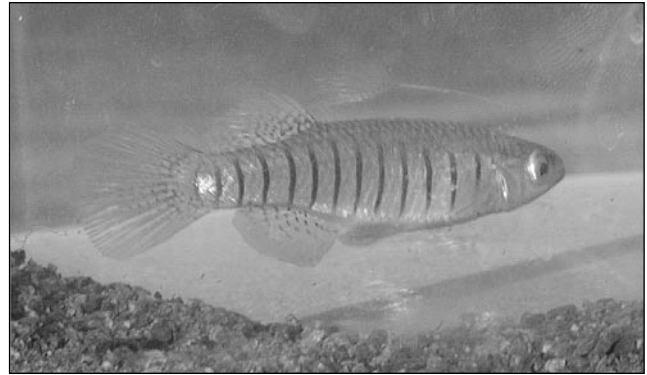


Fig. 4.

Lined topminnow (*Fundulus lineolatus*), male, from Perch Creek.
Photo by Steven A. Ellis.

rain driven by strong winds. Many of the fish folk had already taken their leave to begin the long drive home. The ugly weather reduced that number to four (Doug, Klaus, Philip, and me) for the final assault.

**Perch Creek, U.S. Highway 82
17 Miles West of Waycross, GA**

Perch Creek was one of the most productive sites of the 2002 trip. It is a fairly small but deep creek, running under the bridges of a divided highway. The woods on both sides are beautiful, conjuring up images of fairy tales. I thought about this place a lot during recent cold winter days. I knew that the South Carolina boys had passed up this site the day before, but I wanted to take advantage of its abundance of lined topminnows (Fig. 4). We found plenty, but it took us a while.

Similar in behavior to the blackspotted topminnow (*Fundulus olivaceus*), adult lined topminnows hover beneath the surface just out of reach of dipnets. They're also quick, which means that long-handled dipnets provide only a slightly greater advantage. When we had our fill of topminnows, Doug and Klaus departed while Philip and I remained. The sun had broken through once again, prolonging the urge to explore. In addition to lined topminnow, we observed and/or collected chain pickerel, pygmy killifish, mosquitofish, bluegill, bluespotted sunfish, banded sunfish, and one redear slider.

We decided to try an alternate approach to the nearby Satilla River than the one used by the South Carolina boys the day before, seeking the elusive taillight shiner. In that respect we fared no better than they did. The water was swift and deep. Unwilling to risk drowning, we passed on the attempt and called it a day, finally putting a lid on Okefenokee II.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks are due to Fritz Rohde and Dr. Bud Freeman for technical assistance, Chip Rinehart and Paul Harney for accompanying me on the scouting run, Sara Aicher of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for facilitating our sampling inside ONWR, and Klaus "Miracle Man" Schoening for not dying!

I'd also like to take this opportunity to call Casper Cox a horse's patoot for bailing out at the last minute!

An unedited version of this account, with dozens of color photos, is available on NANFA's website at www.nanfa.org/NANFA_regions/ga/oke0303/oke0303.htm. ←

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