

OKEFENOKEE REVISITED

by Richard Stober, Semmes, Alabama

Let me start off by rekindling in the backroads of your mind the memory of NANFA's old and dear friend H. Ross Brock, whose spirit most assuredly was watching us as we worked our way through the tea-colored waters of southern Georgia not long ago. I could visualize the hulk of "Teddy Bear" standing on the far bank with his long-handled dip net as a guidon waving in the breeze, watching over his domain. Sure wished that he could have been with us in person as he had so many times before. Ross was the only person I ever knew whose heart size matched his Size 16 shoe. He didn't waste energy; when he dipped a net, he made it count, and it was uncanny how Ross would so often come up with the Catch of the Day. Ed Taylor's article, "Collecting Fishes--Southern Style," which appeared in the February '84 issue of Tropical Fish Hobbyist is an excellent treatment of Ross and his area, so I'll not go into redundant detail, but rather highlight our own, more recent collecting trip in June '84, briefly describing our efforts under what I consider to have been adverse conditions.

Going back to last winter, if you remember, the Southeast as well as other areas was hit by some exceptionally frigid weather. Old Man Winter deposited some deep ice over a great part of our area, which, I'm sure, didn't do the aquatic flora and fauna much good. Then we were hit by an extremely dry spring, as our normal rainfall moved elsewhere. Now our summer is nothing but hot and dry. You can bet that the going has been mighty rough on our native fish. Even when the rains came, they would give a false sense of prosperity, as often that water would be devoid of the fish life which had already been killed off. Some of the species we found showed signs of extreme stress, especially the pygmy sunfish. We found them for the most part to be small, hollow-bellied, and lacking any of the characteristic, distinct color pattern. At the time, we suspected that we were finding a new, nondescript species of Elassoma, but in retrospect, it just may be a lousy year for the pygmy.

My old friend Mike Stegall from Jackson, Mississippi and I have collected together for many years now, and, like a good brace of mules, "gee" and "haw" together quite well. Mike arrived at my place late Saturday afternoon in his old Ford Granada, specially tuned for this expedition, back seat removed. We packed three seines, a good assortment of dip nets, styrofoam boxes, thermos jugs, heavy-duty "Zip-lock" bags, two small cannisters of regulated oxygen, road maps, and lots of snacks. We were ready for just about any condition Nature could provide. After spending the night, we arose before dawn, and, as the sun peeked over Mobile Bay, we were on our way. We were to rendezvous that evening with Ken Beja of Edison, New Jersey. We had never met him, but had only talked with him over the phone several times. Our destination was the Holiday

Inn in Waycross, Georgia, which is a "fur" piece down the road for us. Ken was to fly in to Jacksonville, Florida, and drive up to Waycross.

Mike and I made our first stop on the way to Waycross at a small stream crossing the Interstate close to the Alabama/Florida line, where we had hoped to pick up some E. zonatum for Ken Beja and Bruce Gebhardt. Mike had collected there before and had netted some nice ones. We managed to pick up some pygmies, but they were pitiful, and didn't seem to resemble any zonatum we had seen before. Always interested in finding something new, no matter how drab, I bagged them up anyway. Disappointed, we moved on out, making several more dry runs at a few interesting creeks which crossed the Interstate.

Realizing that the sands of time were relentlessly flowing, we pressed on and decided to make only one more major stop for the day. That was to be at Wakulla Springs, where I have been collecting Sailfin Shiners (Notropis hypselopterus) for quite a few years. As usual, after arriving at the springs, we found the Sailfins plentiful in the clear, cool, flowing water. Most shiners are "suckers" for the old trick of standing in the water with one's backside pointed upstream and stirring up the bottom mud; as the shiners come in to feed, they're easily captured with a long-handled dip net. As a fringe benefit, I gathered some cabomba, anacharis, willow moss, baby tears, and a few apple snails.

Now here's where Mike's oxygen started paying off again. Making sure that we had only placed a maximum of 10 fish in each large, heavy-duty "Zip-lock" bag with clean, fresh water, we bagged our catch. Engaging the Zip-lock with only a small slot left open, the oxygen tube was inserted and the bag filled. When the bag was full, the tube was withdrawn and the slot immediately closed. This sealed bag with oxygen can maintain the fish in good shape for some time. I'm sure that this procedure has saved many a fish for us over the years.

We thought that we were pacing ourselves fairly well, as it appeared we were going to be only a few minutes late arriving in Waycross; that was until it dawned on us that we had passed into a new time zone, from Central to Eastern. By advancing our watches an hour, we could see that we were much later than anticipated. Ken was waiting for us in the room, however, and all was well.

After a good night's rest and a hearty breakfast, we got down to the business of serious collecting--and I do mean serious. At times, Mike and I were literally up to our necks in the water pulling Mike's Blunderbuss (40' seine with a heavy chain on the bottom) through the barrow pit. I'm sure Ken thought that we were out of our ever-loving minds.

It didn't take Mike and I very long to realize that Ken was a heck of a nice guy. We kidded back and forth. Under that Yankee exterior beat the heart of a true Swamper. Ken

was learning why some of us folks down here are called "Red Necks," as that hot Georgia sun beat down unmercifully on us. Mike, a genuine southerner, gave Ken lessons on how to talk like one. As a carpetbagger, I maintained tongue in cheek, enjoying every bit of the exchange.

At first, Ken was a bit timid about walking into 2-3' of turbid water, but it wasn't long before he was leading the way. "Damn the moccasins--full speed ahead!" Success wasn't immediate. After considerable hard work, we started to hit pay dirt, picking up some nice Taillight Shiners (Notropis maculatus). No Blackbanded Sunfish (Enneacanthus chaetodon) were netted until around noon. We split up and each hit a separate barrow pit. Ken and I each started to dip up Blackbandeds, and Mike joined us. In the next few hours, we registered a fair catch of Blackbandeds, some Bluespotted Sunfish (Enneacanthus gloriosus), some Banded Sunfish (E. obesus), and several Golden-ears (Fundulus chrysotus). At this time, we made a smart move--taking our catch back to the motel, where it was nice and cool. Even with oxygen, the afternoon heat would have killed them. We took this opportunity to clean up, change clothes, and head out again. This time we went exploring to the north, traveling over land which appeared from the maps to be good collecting areas. We didn't have much luck, but did pick up a nice Mud Sunfish (Acantharchus pomotis). With nighttime setting in, we returned to Waycross.

Next day early, we hit it hard once again. This time we journeyed south, and entered into the Okefenokee itself. We found some outstanding gloriosus, which Mike was keenly interested in. It didn't take long to become highly selective, keeping only breeder-size. We were also picking up a good supply of Swamp Killies (Leptolucania ommata). (Years ago, when involved in the pet-shop business, I called them Lemon Killies for the sake of merchandising. Somehow, it still sounds better to me.) Ken was quite impressed with this little killie.

By late morning, we had a good supply of most of the fish we were looking for, except any of the beautiful Elassoma species. We were bagging some, but they were lackluster at best. We did not net any which could even be classified as fair. Only time will tell, however, as I found a place for these ugly ducklings out back in some seasoned refrigerator liners behind my shed.

Overall, the collecting trip was highly successful. Mike made it back to Jackson. Ken made it back to New Jersey all right, but, in the excitement, left his bag of Sailfin Shiners behind. Mike and I packed it up with ours. As soon as the heat lets up a bit, Ken will get his Sailfins.

Thanks to NANFA, the three of us were able to get together and enjoy a fellowship which shall long be remembered.

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