

## Our Hidden Jewels

Robert Rice

Many fishermen and naturalists are overlooking a resource of beauty unparalleled in the world. This item is exported and established in Europe and Asia, where it has been winning awards and fame. Yet here at home, it is virtually ignored.

What are we missing, you may wonder? Is it some rare unknown plant, an exotic mineral, the latest batch from a micro winery? No, these gems are our non-game native fishes. When you say non-game fishes most people say "nothing to 'em. Dull as dust". As an aquarist and amateur naturalist, I can tell you our natives are among the most beautiful and easy to keep fish in the world. They rival most tropicals and a great many Saltwater fish in color and diversity of body types. Surprised? A great many people are, as they have gotten the mistaken notion that the only fish worth investigating are the game fish, and the only fish worth keeping are the tropicals.

I spend a lot of my free time collecting and studying our natives, so my idea of fishing is a bit different than others. While many of my peers labor away at bass and trout I take a stranger turn. I spent hours mucking around with seine and dip nets catching "bait" and more than a few puzzled looks. "What'cha catching there fella?" I hear it often and enjoy getting the chance to explain what most people have been missing.

You may wonder "What does it take to get

started in keeping non game natives?". For the novice to either collecting or keeping fish I recommend the following: A Tank of at least 20 gallons setup and waiting for fish. Natives are extremely tolerant to temperature and water variables, so avoid the extremes and fluctuations and you'll be fine. You'll need a fishing license and an awareness of local regulations regarding collecting. The collecting gear I recommend is a 4 foot, 1/8 inch seine net, a 1/8 mesh dip net (Try to avoid larger mesh, as it can harm the fish). Additional items you'll want to bring include bug spray, buckets, zip lock bags and a partner, if you can talk someone into it make the trip.

Once all your gear is together you're ready for action. Pick a spot that is convenient, away from sport fishermen, and looks like it's got a regular water flow. Some people prefer to use waders, I am what they call a "Primitive Collector". Shorts, tennis shoes, and my testosterone aided attitude are all I use. My greatest joy is being waist deep in mud, as the water tickles my chin and I navigate my net past a tree trunk. Others who are much wiser or have a more realistic self perception (my wife for instance) take a more civilized route: waders, sunscreen, picnic lunch etc. You, of course, will find your own way of doing things, as there is no one right way. Just remember to be smart, don't take what you shouldn't, don't keep what you don't want, and don't take what you don't have room for. The second most important thing is not how you do it, but that you enjoy doing it

After I have caught my prize I gently bag them in a zip lock bag with a small amount of water and a lot of blown-in air. Pack them away from the sun and repeat until happy. In my experience trips that are less than two hours away from your home and your tanks are the best. Once at home open the bags floating them in the tank for around 20 minutes until the temperatures are equal. Next, your fish into the tank. Never, I repeat, never dump the water into the tank, as this is the number one way to transmit diseases and parasites.

You'll find with a little care and attention your new additions will quickly adapt to domestic life and will come up to greet you at feeding time. In time, with proper care and a little luck, your catch may even spawn in the tank.

People often wonder what fish work well in an aquarium, so here are some that I have kept and really enjoy:

Orange-spotted sunfish (*Lepomis humilus*): This colorful little sunfish adapts readily to domestic life. It's been recently introduced to the European pet industry. It will commonly spawn in an aquarium. The breeding colors of the males make them one of the most beautiful fish in the world.

Central Longear (*Lepomis megalotis*): This beautiful and durable sunfish is attractive year round, eats anything from worms to frozen tropical fish food to dried dog food soaked in water. It is intelligent and will often eat out of your hand. It's looks remind me of the discus and it's hardiness is unparalleled.

Red Shiner (*Notropis lutrensis*): This

colorful and very adaptable minnow with its red fins and bluish body is an eye catcher in any tank. It readily eats flake food and is sometimes sold in the pet industry as a "Redhorse Shiner".

Southern Red Belly Dace (*Phoxinus erythrogaster*): This gorgeous little minnow is truly a world class fish. In England, they have peaked in their domestic popularity, commonly winning national trade shows, and with it's red belly and yellow fins it is no wonder!

Of course there are many other central United States species that are very well suited for the aquarium. However almost all of your sport fish and cold water species are not. So do yourself and the fish a favor and don't try it!

People have often asked me "Why are you such an advocate for native fish?". I will tell you why: I believe we will not preserve things that we do not love, and we cannot love things that we have not known. I work to share with others all the wonderful native species we have. I hope that my great grandchildren can someday look across a prairie stream and see a flash of color in the water and begin to wonder aloud "What was that?" and start on their own journey to knowing.



Southern red-bellied dace (*Phoxinus erythrogaster*) Photo: K. Schmidt