

Pigmy Sunfishes

By H. Ross Brock



The Pigmy Sunfishes of the genus *Elassoma* are the tiniest members of the family Centrarchidae, never larger than a couple of inches in total length. Three species have been identified from various parts of the United States. These include *Elassoma evergladei* Jordan, *E. zonatum* Jordan, and *E. okefenokee* Bohlke. These fishes are often found in sluggish streams, shallow thickly weeded ponds, and in floodplain pools. I have found them to be particularly prevalent among thick matted weeds and grasses in darkly stained water with a depth no greater than six or seven inches.

Elassoma evergladei, the Everglades pigmy sunfish, ranges from North Carolina to Florida throughout the coastal plain. This most diminutive member of the genus (barely reaching an inch and a quarter) is considered by many the most attractive of all the *Elassoma*. Males are generally velvety black overall, with numerous emerald green scales scattered over the body. The females are slightly smaller, paler, and have smaller fins. Females in good condition are usually quite swollen in the belly region and somewhat pinkish from the roe therein.

E. evergladei spawns in a manner typical of all members of the genus. A few eggs are placed rather indiscriminantly on a plant leaf or other similar and suitable surface. These are guarded to some extent by one or both parents until hatching occurs in two days. Once the yolk is absorbed, the fry disperse and are paid no further attention by the parents. The adults don't usually go out of their way to eat the fry.

The most restricted in range of all the pigmy sunfish is *E. okefenokee*. This reputedly attractive little fish was first collected from Kettle Creek near Waycross, Georgia in 1956. Though *E. evergladei* and *E. okefenokee* occur together, there are certain differences that can be used to distinguish between the two. Besides being somewhat different in color pattern (*E. okefenokee* is blotched), there are some basic behavioral differences. *E. okefenokee* is very slow and deliberate in its movements. When feeding it moves very slowly and steadily along on its pectorals,

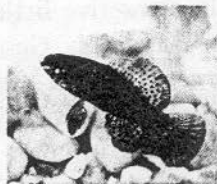
and would prefer to reserve judgement until I have had an opportunity to collect a number of specimens of this nominal species, and an opportunity to study them before setting forth to upset the delicate sanctimony of piscine taxonomy.

The largest number of the genus is *E. zonatum*, the banded pigmy sunfish. Reaching a maximum length of an inch and a half, they are also the most widespread member of the genus. They may be collected under the previously described conditions all the way from southern Illinois southeastward to middle Georgia and westward to Texas.

The banded pigmy sunfish is much slimmer in body outline than *evergladei*, in addition to being of greater length. Its' fins are usually smaller in relation to body size, than the fin: body ratio of *evergladei*. The males are generally light grey in color with several broad, vertical black bands spread evenly across the body. A dark vertical line crosses the eye. Females are similar to males in almost every way, but tend to be smaller and basically grey-brown in body color.

The maintenance requirements of all the pigmy sunfishes in captivity seems to be quite simple. Their small size and slow movements enable them to live quite well in containers as small as one gallon jars. In fact, if a pair of either of these fishes (*zonatum* or *evergladei*) is placed in a jar like this with a few plants for security, they tend to be quite hardy. They are very shy, though, and should not be kept in bare containers or with other, more active, fishes. Keep them in slightly alkaline water at room temperature and feed well with live mosquito larvae, brine shrimp nauplii, or sifted daphniae, and the fish should spawn readily. Newly hatched fry can negotiate larger infusoria and soon graduate to brine shrimp nauplii. Do not offer dry food, or freeze-dried food, as they will most likely be refused. They can be weaned to frozen brine shrimp with a little effort.

Photos by Dick Stober



Ellassoma zonatum