

Quest for the Orangespotted Sunfish

Lance Merry

3255 Holly Dr., Decatur, IL 62526

natureman187@yahoo.com

The tiny Orangespotted Sunfish (*Lepomis humilis*) is one of the prettiest native fishes the Midwest has to offer. To the creative eye, finding a full-suited male with its jet black opercular flap surrounded by that vivid pearly-white margin, contrasted against shades of sparkling sapphire blues, sprinkled with brilliant orange polka dots and red tinged fins and underbelly, is quite the sensational event! Rarely reaching four inches, there is nothing more spectacular in the hot summer sun than pulling one of these miniature glimmers of sunshine from muddy degraded waters lacking everything but silt and branches (Fig. 1). Neither camera nor description can capture the elegance of their majestic sheen.

I decided that after a long day's work, I would reward

myself by viewing my favorite sunnies of all time — the Orangespotted Sunfish (Figs. 2, 5, 6) — before it was too late in the year. These fish are relatively difficult to find in the higher quality streams I frequent, and solo-seining through the muck, riprap, and rebar that they are normally associated with seemed less than an appealing day's work for the laid-back enjoyment I was seeking. Since it's significant work catching them in the seine, I decided to dust off the fishing gear. To my surprise, I found that I had previously depleted all my secret weapons and, of course, in my inevitable wisdom, never restocked. So the quest for the elusive Orangespotted Sunfish begins.

A specialized little fish requires specialized gear to capture: solder, nymph hooks, blades, and propane. Finally I



Fig. 1.

Locally known as the "Little Dam" below Lake Decatur. The original Lake Decatur dam on the Sangamon River.



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Fig. 2.

Male Orangespotted Sunfish (*Lepomis humilis*).

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Fig. 3.

Parts and Progress.

tracked down all that I needed, grabbed the needle torch, and started the assembly line (Fig. 3). I turned on the radio, mixed a drink, and fired up the torch. Welcome to a typical evening in the nerd dome of a handyman! Big boy tools, hammers, drills, grinders, bolts, transfer cases, and other random truck parts were replaced by precision tools. The workbench had turned into a craft bench. The precision hammers, pencil torches, wires, files, and paintbrushes resembled that of a jewelry repair outfit. Anyone like vinyl paint (Fig. 4)? The leveling properties my thick vinyl paint obtained in its old age came in handy to cover my rusty soldering skills — or at least the fumes led me to believe. White primer, two coats of orange, white eyes, black pupils, and a clear coat finish all lead to the unveiling of the finished product.

Over the years of fishing for this sunfish, I have found this species to be extremely elusive and hard to track down during the daytime. Nailing a hamper full is only possible for the skilled individuals who take the time to find their annual isolated spawn-



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Fig. 4.

Applying the first coat of orange vinyl paint.

ing groups. To add to the frustration of finding them, prime time consists of only around 14 days or less out of the year depending on water levels. Amongst riprap below dams seems to be a *L. humilis* favorite for these isolated spawning pods. Some preemptive reconnaissance is necessary for quick success. Being close to a spawning cluster will yield finding bodies of little sunfish beached on the bank mixed in with the usual scattered carcasses of gars, carp, and drums. These are positive signs of human-induced consequences of typical bait stealing shenanigans that these spawning hordes of rodent sunfish are known for by the average angler.

One place of interest was a third mile stretch in between a set of three dams below Lake Decatur. Not the most productive for the target species, or nicest smelling, but the most photogenic of any of my *L. humilis* sites. I was checked for a valid fishing license here for the first time ever, and I was the only one checked. From what I gathered, there was a complaint. Weird, I hadn't moved in three hours. The local herd of bank-dwelling riffraff at this popular location must have been envious of my floating bucketful of



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Fig. 5.

A male Orangespotted Sunfish (*Lepomis humilis*) landed with a recently fabricated homemade ice jig.



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Fig. 6.
Female Orangespotted Sunfish (*Lepomis humilis*).

three-inch beauties. After a hunt through multi-state fishing licenses from the past several years and kind words, I proceeded to wade back out through the hazards of bricks, rebar, washing machines, and birds nests of spider wire to resume my semi-aquatic state amongst my fishy friends. I spent a decent amount of time scouring the expanses of riprap the Sangamon River offers below Lake Decatur due to it's convenience from my house. Some of the most brilliant fish came from here (Fig. 5), but most of my visual bounty came from a newly discovered patch of riprap on the Kaskaskia River, slightly south in Shelby County.

Spawning Orangespotted Sunfish are notorious for vigorously pushing all foreign objects off their nests. Because of this, most get barely skin-hooked in the lips. Those little suckers loved to fling off the hook while attempting the simple airborne grab. After watching the biggest, most beautiful males repeatedly fling off and ricochet off my body, hand, fishing pole, equipment bag, hand again, and into the watery world of "not my bucket," I decided to cut out the step of handling them. It soon turned into

a smooth, hands free, two-second procedure of hooked and dropped in my bucket — where they freed themselves within seconds. Then, and only then, I would handle and gawk at them. The reward: an entire day in cool knee-deep water catching dozens of the most beautiful three-inch sunfish the Midwest has to offer, at a site totally uncovered by myself, on something completely fabricated myself, with a huge smile on my face the whole time. Although these mini-rainbows lack much value as a sport fish, a full-suited male rivals the appeal of any 15-inch black crappie in my book.

Hopefully, by reading this article, my enthusiasm, hands-on understanding, and admiration in regards to these little jewels of the degraded can be enjoyed and passed on to others. Even the smallest of events, with the most unexpected of hosts, can metamorphose into dazzling adventures, opening doors for knowledge, respect, and appreciation of the wonderful world around us.

Your small sunfish enthusiast, Lance Merry. 