

# The Quest for the Southern Studfish, *Fundulus stellifer* or Remind Me Again Why I Do This To Myself

Thomas Ganley  
Newington, CT

**T**he joys and rewards of collecting are many. And in many ways, actually acquiring the fish and getting them home is secondary to the adventure itself. Just ask anyone who collects fish regularly. People who collect fish will always have some good stories and often, some really great stories. I don't know what category of story this is exactly but I do know it is definitely a "typical" collecting story. Collectors, you'll know what I mean. Non-collectors, refer to the second title of this article.

I was in Alabama again in July of 2008 with my sons Grant and TJ for a week of fishing, fish collecting and general goofing off. We had been so successful catching our target species the first two days of the trip that we decided to venture far away from the Huntsville area and check out some new river drainages and the different species of fish they held.

We had spent time in river drainages that held the gorgeous northern studfish, *Fundulus catenatus*, for the first two days of our trip and wanted to collect the equally gorgeous southern studfish, *Fundulus stellifer*. I had never collected it before nor had I ever seen a live specimen but what pictures I had seen of it convinced me that this fish would be worth the extra effort to collect. To collect this beauty, we had to travel south from Huntsville a few hours to get into the river drainages that contained it.

Luckily for me, I had obtained what was considered to be some hot insider information on a collecting site for this fish. That made the decision to drive several hours into uncharted territory much easier. I was even able to pinpoint the collecting spot on a road atlas map. How much easier could it be?

Therein lays the conundrum of the fish collector. It seemed so easy, so guaranteed and I even had a timetable for this little adventure. What could go wrong and how wrong could it possibly go? We know what we are doing and where we are going . . . right?

## The Plan

Get up early, have a quick breakfast, map quest the directions, load up the car and hit the road. Try to get south of Birmingham and hit the "spot" by mid-morning, collect all the southern studfish we needed and then hit a few other creeks that bisected the road, spend about an hour at each one and head home before the Birmingham rush hour traffic. Finish up the day at the Hooters Bikini car wash next to the hotel (no, that is not why I picked that hotel), with a leisurely dinner and then spend some time admiring bags of southern studfish before bed time.

We are on the road early and making good time towards Birmingham. A line of huge thunderstorms keeps sweeping in from the gulf and affecting the whole eastern United States. No problem, the weather channel clearly shows that for today, few if any storms will affect central Alabama. They are all tracking eastward through Huntsville and we're several hours south of there. The clouds around Huntsville give way to beautiful cloudless skies as we roll south towards Birmingham. I am feeling both excited and confident that it will be a good day. Any day collecting usually is.

As we approach Birmingham, I make two discoveries. One, my son is having trouble interpreting some of the map quest directions. I had assumed he had read these before and he had not. The directions to get around Birmingham were a little convoluted to begin with and we got more than a little spun around. Now we are going to arrive much later, which would give us less time at the collecting spots. No big deal, we know what we are doing. As we drive all over the greater Birmingham area, we notice that it is getting very, very dark and the humidity is going through the roof. We were sweating bullets in the car with the AC blasting. This is no isolated thunder storm, this is a beast that spawns tornadoes and it covers the

sky in all directions. It seems we will arrive at the southern studfish spot in time to drown in the mother of all thunderstorms.

According to the map, the spot is no more than a mile or two away from a major intersection. We drive by the alleged location of the “spot” and not only do not find the stream; we don’t find the next three streams that are clearly listed on the map. It is July in Alabama and it’s possible that some of the smaller streams could be dried up and running low, heck, even a bit overgrown with summer vegetation but I can’t find any sign of any of the streams. Up and down the road we go, again and again and again. No sign of this little stream whatsoever. We find the next major river but nothing in between the river and the major intersection. I’m befuddled. It’s after mid day and we do not have much time left to collect at the stream when we find it, if we find it.

### “We Have Arrived”

After more passes than I care to admit, I locate the stream in what I mistook to be a patch of brush on the side of the road. I can thank the torrential downpours for that. The little stream had not been visible through the brush before but because of the enormous amount of rain that fell, the little stream had filled up fast and I could see the red clay-stained water through the brush. Well, at least we found it. We pulled over on the side of the narrow road and waited for this hurricane-like storm to pass by. It was raining hard enough to knock the paint off of my car but we had invested a lot of time in getting here. We were going to at least try it and besides, it couldn’t rain that hard indefinitely.

Well, the thunderstorms blow through in intervals with the same speed and ferocity as the logging trucks that keep shaking our car as they pass by. One minute it’s as dark as twilight and the next, the light has that surreal hazy mustard gray quality to it. Lightning strikes provide bursts of weird illumination and the on-going thunder sounds like distant shelling. The humidity is indescribable. The storms do pass by but they leave a weird, ominous feeling in their wake and a small window to collect if we are going to do it.

As soon as the last drops of rain hit the car, I’m on the side of the road trying to figure out how to get to the stream. I find the culvert where it passes under the road and see that it is barely a trickle, no more than a few inches deep. I can see small fishes swimming in the nearly non-existent current but I can’t see an easy way down to the stream. The banks are almost a vertical drop to the stream over wet rocks, red clay and everything in Alabama that has thorns. That won’t work. The other side of the road is more of a gradual incline through thick vegetation. I’ll try that. Big mistake! I tried walking through the vegetation in my shorts and wading shoes because it was way too humid to put waders on (and I really didn’t need waders for three inches of water). I found myself in waist-high poison ivy and poison oak (never seen them together before) and with dozens of cuts on my legs from the thorns and razor vine. Forget this!

I trudge back up to the car and tell the boys that until I find a safe way down to the stream, I’d prefer they wait in the car. Besides, here comes another thunder storm and I’m

holding an eight foot metal dip net. The boys get in the car and I try the first spot I saw with the steep banks. I get about halfway down to the stream when the skies opened up again. Moments later I was tumbling down the embankment in less than perfect somersaults, trying to break my fall by grabbing thorn covered vines and a rusty barbwire fence. I come to rest on my backside in the stream with a nice smear of Alabama red clay down the middle of my back and both palms totally bloodied from the vines and fence. Well, I’m wet now and getting wetter, might as well see what’s down here.

I get up rather stiffly and retrieve my now slightly bent metal dip net and head up stream. I can see small minnows along the water’s edge but due to the stream bed being a solid sheet of limestone; it is tough to catch anything. The fish easily outmaneuver me by getting into the little nooks and crannies of the stream bed where they are out of my reach. I move into a section of stream where it is nearly dark because of the overhead trees and bushes. A short way up stream, I come to a beaver damn taller than I am. That would explain why I couldn’t see the stream from the road and the stream is a mere trickle now. Might as well try down stream, I mean what are the real chances of being hit by lightning?

Under the road, I catch a few Alabama hogsucker, *Hypentelium etowanum*, juveniles. Neat fish, similar but different from the more common northern hogsucker, *Hypentelium nigricans*, which we caught plenty of in northern Alabama. Well, at least I now have something to show for my wounds. I continue down stream and check out a few pools but catch some unidentified shiners and more Alabama hogsuckers. No southern studfish and no habitat that even looks like studfish habitat. I figure I’ve pushed my luck enough with the lightning and head back to the car.

Getting down to the stream was hard enough but climbing back out with a pail of fish was something else entirely. It took awhile and I ended up with some cuts on my arms and legs but I at least I was out of that little hellhole. As can be imagined, there was no shortage of mosquitoes, horseflies and ticks. I had bites from the first two and a few ticks on me too. I had had enough and wanted to call it a day or at least go to the bigger river we had seen earlier. But my boys, being the diehard collectors they were, wanted to try the muddy area behind the beaver damn which we had seen from the road before we left.

I did not feel comfortable having them follow me through the brush and down the embankment after what I had just gone through so I had them wait in the car. I had lost my interest in collecting for today and was just going to put on a show and come right back. As I was looking for a good place to step over the guardrail, I got quite the start. I had nearly stepped on the biggest copperhead snake I had ever seen. I know my snakes and have seen plenty but I have never seen one as big as this. I instinctively jumped back into the road. God must have taken pity on this fool because no logging truck was screaming down the road at the time. It took me a moment to realize that this particular copperhead’s days of menacing were long behind him. It had been smashed flat by a car but only very recently because blood was still trickling from his mouth. Well Alabama is well known for its healthy populations of ven-

omous snakes and here I was wandering around in the thick brush in just wading shoes. I'd really had enough of this.

I managed to get down to the little patch of water behind the beaver damn. I dip-netted a bit, caught a few bluegill sunfish, *Lepomis macrochirus*, slipped into the water which was actually a few feet deep and tore my shorts on another piece of barb wire in the water. Good thing it was just my shorts...time to call it quits. The late Jerry Reed (RIP buddy) said it best, "When you're hot you're hot, when you're not you're not."

I was thinking of getting a big bag of fried chicken somewhere as I straddled the guardrail walking back to the car. For some reason I looked down on the ground in the grass between my outstretched legs and saw something big, black and shiny moving through the grass. It had started pouring again (of course) and I was frozen because I couldn't tell which way this thing was moving. The bad news is that since it was between my legs; that meant it was either moving towards one foot or the other. I held my position which was not very comfortable on many levels and slowly eased the handle of my dip net into the grass to move it aside. To my relief it did not seem to be a cottonmouth snake or any other snake but I did not know what it was other than alive. I retrieved one leg from the other side of the guardrail and decided to further investigate this creature. It turned out to be a very large black locust several inches long with bright yellow and red stripes. So of course I bagged it.

The kids were excited about getting a locust for a pet. I wanted to quit but the kids who hadn't really done anything all day but sit in the car wanted to try collecting at the big river down the road. I really didn't want to but the thought of washing off my wounds in that big clear river had a certain appeal. Besides, the same drainage as this stream, there could be Southern Studfish there. I figured why not.

### "One More Stop, Okay, Maybe Two"

The storms had not quit blowing through the area when we arrived at Hatchet Creek. It was wide, clear and fast flowing over a limestone and rocks. From the bridge I saw a few areas that looked collectable so I thought let's give it a try. It took us a while to get down to the water's edge. I had to back the car down a very wet and muddy trail that was quite steep, something I did not like with the threat of more rain. The boys jumped out of the car and were in the water before I had the keys out of the ignition. They reported that they could see there was tons of fish in the water. As I walked down there, I saw the ground was littered with lots empty bottles of Jim Beam and Jack Daniels. Obviously a rough crowd likes this spot too.

A few pulls of the seine showed us that this river contained many interesting species of fish, several which I had not encountered before. We caught larger specimens of Alabama hogsuckers, tricolor (*Cyprinella trichroistia*) and Striped (*Luxilus chrysocephalus*) shiners, bluegill sunfish, longear sunfish, *Lepomis megalotis*, that differed radically from the ones caught up north and even some of the federally endangered blue shiners, *Cyprinella caerulea*. Because of the rocky bottom, it was difficult to catch lots of fish on any one pull of the seine but I felt we were getting our mojo back. And the cool water sure

felt good on my wounds.

We had collected some interesting things when once again the wind started to blow and it got dark. The air pressure changed so fast, I knew this was going to be a bad one. I told Grant to gather some gear up and run up to the car. TJ and I wrapped up the seine and started to lift the tub of fish to carry it up to the car. Too late! The skies opened up and were instantly drenched. It was raining too hard to walk up the trail to the car and we were too wet to get into the car anyway. We found shelter under an enormous overhanging tree and tried to wait the deluge out by collecting very cool rocks. Of course it lasted longer than we thought so we started pulling the seine again under the protective canopy of the tree. We continued catching fish in small numbers which was okay, because our collecting tub was quite full.

When this storm blew by, we managed to get up to the car with our fish. Grant was bone dry and TJ and I looked like we went swimming with our clothes on. We loaded the car up and started the slow crawl back up the trail to the main road. Due to the sharp incline, I managed to dump three quarters of the fish tub water into the car as we headed up the trail but at least we didn't get stuck.

Our timetable was blown for the day and it was obvious that we were never going to make the Hooters bikini car wash either so we decided we might as well explore a bit more. We drove up and down many country roads but did not find any really good collecting spots. We did see several eastern box turtles crossing the roads though. Do thunderstorms give them the urge to travel?

We had time for one more stop and we had seen a spot where a major road crossed Hatchet Creek farther downstream from where we had collected earlier so we decided to make this the last stop of the day. When we got there, the clouds were breaking up and some of the humidity was dissipating. We walked down to the river which was particularly scenic. Even with all the heavy rain, the water was very clear and we could see fish everywhere.

Though this part of the river was similar to the other part of the river we had just collected in terms of bottom structure, this area held some sandy areas which made pulling the seine a bit easier. We caught all the same fish as the other location but just more of them and larger specimens. The tricolor shiners were particularly attractive here. We caught numerous species of shiners but I was unfamiliar with many of them. Some of these areas looked like southern studfish habitat but alas, none were to be had. We kept the tricolors and some more of the longears and figured we had enough fish for the day. We finished off the day casting for bass. We caught several coosa bass, *Micropterus coosae*, a smaller and more colorful version of the smallmouth bass, *Micropterus dolomieu*. Some quick pictures of the river were in order before we left.

It wasn't a perfect day, it wasn't a terribly successful day and we didn't get any southern studfish but it sure was a memorable collecting day, maybe more so than some of the more successful fish catching days on our the trip when everything went our way. I look at it this way; at least my son didn't get a cottonmouth snake stuck in his sandal like the previous day (which we didn't tell his mom about). 