

THE REAL TREASURE AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW



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Marble Falls, AR

In late April, after a long day driving and a night spent sleeping in my van in a Walmart parking lot, it was with great anticipation that I arrived at a small stream in central Alabama and began my search for an elusive aquatic treasure. However, my high hopes quickly came crashing down. It seemed I was too late. Scattered throughout the streambed were gravel mounds, around a foot in diameter and a few inches high, the spawning nests of Bluehead Chubs (*Nocomis leptcephalus*). But all the nests appeared to be old and inactive, silent remnants of past splendor. During the height of spawning activity, chub nests are utilized not only by chubs but also by many other species of minnows. In this particular stream, a very special species of minnow gathers in large spawning schools over the chub nests: the Rainbow Shiner (*Notropis chrosomus*), one of the most beautiful freshwater fishes of North America.

The Rainbow Shiner is a species of minnow occurring in the southeast United States, mainly in Alabama, but also in small portions of Georgia and Tennessee. Its preferred habitat includes small, headwater streams and spring runs with cool, clear water. Growing to two to three inches, it is a schooling species, occupying shallow pools and feeding primarily on small insects. As its name suggests, it is very colorful, particularly during spawning when it exhibits a variety of hues including glowing-magenta and electric-blue. Its beauty and adaptability to captivity have made it a popular aquarium fish.

For years, it was a dream of mine to observe and photograph a large school of Rainbow Shiners spawning in the wild. With that goal in mind, I had made a trip to this stream just three weeks earlier. However, at that time the stream was high and turbid from a recent storm, and best I could tell,

the spawning activity had not yet begun. In past years, I had come here a little later in the year and had missed the spawning season altogether. Could it really be that I had now missed it again? Feeling disappointed, I decided to search the stream more extensively before giving up.

It is a tranquil, spring-fed stream, about 10-feet wide, mostly covered by a canopy of trees from the surrounding hardwood forest. It is quite shallow, with a depth of only a few inches in the riffles and a foot or two in the pools. The substrate is a



The Rainbow Shiner is perhaps the most colorful freshwater fish in North America.



I counted over 200 Rainbow Shiners in this photo.

Photos by the author.

Isaac Szabo is a nature photographer with a strong interest in native fishes. Based in the Ozark Mountains of northern Arkansas, he also travels extensively to other parts of the country to document native fishes in their natural environments. His hope is that showcasing the beauty of native fishes to a wider audience will increase awareness and appreciation and benefit conservation. To view more of his photos or contact him, visit his website: www.isaacszabo.com.



Can you spot the male Bluehead Chub among the hundreds of Rainbow Shiners?

mix of silt, sand, cobble, and bedrock. Water clarity is around four to five feet, sufficient for some underwater photography but not ideal. On this day, the water temperature was around 70° F, perhaps a little on the warm side to find spawning minnows but not totally out of the realm of possibility.

As I worked my way downstream, I cautiously navigated stretches of slick, algae-covered bedrock and banks lined with thick vegetation, including patches of brambles and Poison Ivy. After a few minutes, my spirits were suddenly lifted when I stumbled upon a small chub nest with about a dozen colored-up Rainbow Shiners. I marveled at their glowing-pink bodies with metallic-blue accents for a short time, but this nest was in water just a couple inches deep—too shallow for my bulky camera housing—so I pushed on with renewed hope that perhaps I was not too late after all. Traversing the next several hundred yards of stream was slow-going and yielded nothing, but then I happened upon another chub nest with a small school of Rainbow Shiners, this one in water just deep enough for my camera. I considered trying for some photos, but, for the time being, I decided to keep on looking, hoping for something better.

Shortly thereafter, as I climbed the bank to navigate around some treacherous rocks, I caught a glimpse of a glowing-pink orb at the head of a riffle about 30 feet downstream. My spirits soared as I realized I had found what I had been dreaming

of for years. It was a huge school of spawning Rainbow Shiners, over 200 glowing individuals packed into a few square feet above a chub nest. It was a glorious sight! Feeling a little dazed and overwhelmed, I sat down on the bank and watched with a sense of awe and contemplation. I felt tremendously privileged to finally witness this rarely seen phenomenon, and it seemed like I should let the experience soak in a bit before rushing to get photos. I was also struck with a sense of sadness by the fact that this amazing natural spectacle goes on mostly unnoticed and unappreciated by our modern world.

The rest of the day went by in a blur as I photographed the spawning school from different angles and with different lenses in an effort to make the most of this special opportunity. Underwater photography is a difficult endeavor with a low success rate, so I took as many images as possible in order to maximize my chances of coming away with a few images that could perhaps do justice to the incredible natural beauty before my eyes. I am not sure that I fully succeeded—I definitely have plans to try again in the future and do better—but hopefully these images will help to raise awareness about this beautiful species and provide motivation to improve water quality and preserve stream habitat. Perhaps these photos might also inspire another adventurous individual to embark on a quest to find the real treasure at the end of the rainbow.