

REELIN' 'EM IN AT REELFOOT

BY H. Ross Brock, Jr.

Everyone has his own favorite collecting spot for native fishes. Whether it be across town or across the country, it serves as a favored retreat to escape the madding crowd as we wet our nets and dunk our worms.

My unquestioned favorite is Reelfoot Lake, located in the northwestern corner of Tennessee within fifteen minutes drive of the Mississippi River and bordered by such municipalities as Hickman and Fulton, Kentucky on the north, Tiptonville, Tennessee on the west, Samburg, Tennessee to the south, and Union City, Tennessee to the east.

Originally, Reelfoot Lake was a wild, forbidden area that was inhabited by a few Indians, one of whom was a cripple by the name of Reelfoot. In a period around 1811 to 1812, a fair-sized earthquake dropped the bottom out of an area of land that filled with backwash and succeeding floods from the Mississippi River. White settlers found the rich bottomlands around the lake perfect for growing a wide variety of crops. This same rich soil has begun to wash back into the lake, where the nutrients have contributed much to promote the fantastic variety of plant and animal life that abounds there. In fact, the plant life in the waters of the lake is so rich in variety that it is worth a trip just to examine it.

Some experts say that the lake contains most all the species of fishes and aquatic and semi-aquatic plants native to the central Coastal Plain. I doubt that this is true, but the species are numerous. Reelfoot is a major stopping place for migratory waterfowl on trips up and down the Mississippi flyway. Both golden and bald eagles are seen in the area from time to time. A resident population of mallards calls the lake home and are highly regarded by the people living around the lake. Road signs around the periphery of the lake warn motorists to drive slowly and watch for ducks and children crossing the road.

As far as fishes are concerned, there are a minimum of at least six species of Lepomids, gizzard shad, Roccus mississippiensis (yellow bass), Elassoma zonatum, pirate perch, bowfins, three species of gar, menidia audens (silversides), Gambusia affinis, Ictalurus lacustris and others, buffalo, quillbacks, carpsuckers, freshwater drum, mudminnows, and the most beautiful Fundulus chrysotus I have ever seen are just a few.

Reptiles and amphibians are abundant. Several water snakes including the western cottonmouth are present. Check snags protruding from the water and along banks in sawgrass beds and willow bushes. If you ever collect the area with me, I'll show you the patented "Brock Method" for collecting the beasts. Turtles are abundant in a number of forms and can regularly be seen sunning themselves, sometimes three deep, on a snag or crossing the area roads. This last activity does much to help keep the turtle population in check.

Reelfoot is accessible to most of the U.S. by highway or air. The nearest airports offering service by scheduled airlines include Jackson, Tennessee, Memphis, Tennessee, Paducah, Kentucky, and Cape Girardeau, Missouri. From these points, there are plentiful roads to get you there. One of the nice ones is the Great River Road, Highway 51 and 78 depending on whether you come from north or south. There are abundant motels and camping spots available. The State of Tennessee runs a small motel with nice units at the state park. They also have a large camping area. The Blue Bank, Eagle Nest, Gooch's, Samburg, Hutchcraft, Martha Parker's, and Sunset Courts are all very nice motels with varying degrees of attractiveness and home comforts. Sunset has a nice small campground with free hookups and parking if you make use of one of their boats. They have a good fishing pier, too. If you like to cook out, fine. If not there are good eating places all around. I never visit the lake without eating at least one meal at Martha Parker's Restaurant or the Blue Bank where they feature more-than-you-can-eat meals of good home cooked food including fresh lake fish. Prices are reasonable. Above all, make sure to get reservations at motels early, particularly for holiday periods as they get crowded.

As for fishing, a three day resident or nonresident Tennessee fishing license costs \$2.10. If you can get barbless hooks in size 8 or 10, they are good efficient fish collectors. Bait with worms or crickets for small Lepomids. For gar, bowfin, and others a piece of shad is good bait. Shad are very plentiful. You can't catch them on a hook unless you snag them. Their oxygen requirements are so great that they die readily. So don't try to keep any alive. Seining is efficient only below the spillway in Reelfoot Bayou. The northern extension of the Bayou near Sassafras Ridge, Kentucky is also good. Also most all small creeks and sloughs near the lake are good. For dip netters, any area around clumps of submerged weeds and in extreme shallows beneath a cover of duckweed, you catch the nicest fishes. What seems like less than an inch of water will sometimes yield a surprisingly large mud pickerel or a small gar.

Below the dam at Spillway, three of us fished in a deep pool and caught a large quantity of various fishes during a short afternoon.

I have always been interested in seining this spot near the west bank. But a number of factors including the presence of fishermaen, unknown water depth, and the possibilities of catching more than we bargained for has kept me from doing it.

There are a number of inviting looking roadside ditches and flood-plain ponds. But, many are so loaded with submerged limbs, snags, and other net disabling debris, that they are useful for dip netting only. But don't pass up any spot that may have some possibilities.

By the way, if your mode of transportation to the lake is by your own plane, there is a nice well lighted landing strip at Phillipy, just north of Tiptonville.

This Spring or Summer, if you want to get away from it all, take your fishing rod and reel, seine, dip net, bags, buckets, styrofoam boxes, and wife, husband, or other seining partner and head for Reelfoot Lake.
