

## RETURN TO KECK'S CREEK, ARKANSAS

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As I admired the new fish that I had just introduced to my aquarium, I thought of how smoothly everything had gone compared to my previous visit to Keck's Creek. This small stream is located in northwestern Arkansas just south of Huntsville.

It all began two years ago while on vacation at my mom's house north of Ozark, Arkansas. It was mid-July and I had decided to visit a friend in Huntsville, fifty miles to the north. On the way back, I stopped at a small creek that crossed Highway 23 just to look around. As I approached the water, I noticed dozens of small fish trying to ascend a small waterfall. The water was clear, shallow, and barely flowing. I didn't have a net with me, so I took off my Razorback baseball cap and seined it through the school. Much to my surprise, I had caught one. It was a silvery minnow about three inches long with a subterminal mouth. I quickly finished the Pepsi I was drinking and rinsed out the bottle. He fit just fine. I looked into a shallow pool underneath the overpass and saw that it was crawling with darters. Darters are my prime obsession in collecting natives. After a minor panic, I decided to return to the little roadside grocery store where I had purchased the soda a few miles back. When I got there, all they had to offer was a glass gallon pickle jar. I accepted. I returned to the creek and washed the jar the best that I could and left it out in the sun.

The site at the bridge consisted of two large pools connected by small rapids. The pools were formed on giant flat rocks rimmed with gravel. One of the pools was approximately thigh-deep at its deepest point and about 60' long. The other was about a foot deep and 35' long. Both pockets were approximately 15' wide. The large pool contained schools of small surface and bottom fish; however, I could not get close enough with my cap to make an attempt to catch any of them. The small pool became my prime target.

The darters there were not afraid of me or my red ballcap; however, convincing them to swim into it was a different story. I tried several methods, but placing dead leaves and sticks in my cap and herding them into it worked best. In approximately an hour, I had 12 of the most beautiful fish I had ever collected. They were Orangethroat Darters (Etheostoma spectabile). I also caught several plain-looking darters that I could not identify. During one of my attempts at herding, I raised a large, flat rock and poked my fingers underneath it. When I examined the leaves in my hat, I was surprised to see a long, slender catfish about three inches long with a mouth as big as his body. I later identified it as a Slender Madtom (Noturus exilis). I caught one more later in the day using the same technique. I changed the water in my jars and put the two madtoms in the Pepsi bottle just in case they

got hungry on the way home. I left for home already making plans for my return in two weeks to Keck's Creek.

The day of my return had finally arrived; however, instead of the two-week wait I'd planned, it had been two years. Things never seem to go as planned. With all that behind me, I was determined to be prepared. I had two long-handled nets and two one-gallon buckets. My goal was to replace the darter school that had been gradually decimated by the less-than-compatible denizens of my 125-gallon aquarium.

It was June 28, a very pleasant, partly cloudy day. I arrived at the creek shortly after 1 p.m. Things had changed a lot in two years. The gravel bars had shifted and covered all of the flat rocks that had covered the bottom of the pools. The terrain had become pretty typical of mountain streams, with narrow, gravel-bottomed stretches of fast water and wide, rocky pools of slow water. This made locating the darters very difficult, compared to my last trip. It also destroyed my idea of hauling in darters like a tuna fisherman. The water was alive with very small minnows. Every time I made a pass with the net through the fast water or the pools, I seemed to catch a couple. I brought a few home for identification, but I could not positively identify them. They are slender and about 1" maximum in length. They also have a brilliant copper stripe along their lateral line when the sun shines on them. It appears bluish in the aquarium. They reminded me of Mississippi Silversides (Menidia audens), but their dorsal fin is slightly ahead of the anal fin.

As I was dragging my nets through the leaves and debris along the banks, I netted a small, chocolate-banded sunfish. Even though this fish is only an inch long, he is fully colored, the three brown bands trimmed with white. This fish is not recognizable from my reference books, but he is beautiful just the same.

The darters were down in the rocks and seemed to be laughing at my fruitless attempts to scoop them up. Herding them with my fingers into the nets was the only thing that worked, and it was a slow process. There were several very large darters, approximately four inches in length, swimming in the pools; however, I could not get close to them. In the four hours or so that I was there, I caught approximately two dozen darters in various shapes and sizes. I later identified four species and still have three types that I can't identify. The identified species are as follows: Orangethroat Darter; Speckled Darter (Etheostoma stigmaeum); Stippled Darter (E. punctulatum); and Johnny Darter (E. nigrum).

The surprise of the day came as I was pushing the net in front of me up some small rapids. When I looked in the net, I saw a long, silver minnow about three inches long. It looked just like the bottom-feeders that I had been dumping back all day, so I turned the net up and gave it a shake. Fortunately, nothing fell out. I reached in and pulled out a moderately compressed speckled minnow with an oddly shaped face. I quickly put him in a bucket. He looked like a killifish of some type, so I checked the area for more. I spotted a couple of them in one of the larger holes, but I couldn't get close enough to make an attempt. I later ID'd the killifish as a Northern Studfish (Fundulus catenatus).

Rejoicing at my success, I headed back to my mom's house with the spoils. It appears that my second trip to Keck's Creek has been a rousing success.

The reference books that I have found to be of great value in identifying the fishes of this area are as follows: The Fishes of Oklahoma by Rudolph J. Miller and Henry W. Robison, obtained from Oklahoma State University; Key to the Fishes of Arkansas by Thomas M. Buchanan, obtained from the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; and A Survey of the Fishes of the Mulberry River, Arkansas, Water Resources Research Center Publication No. 10 by Olmsted, Hickman, and Cloutman, obtained from the University of Arkansas. These publications are useful in narrowing down the possibilities. Only The Fishes of Oklahoma has pictures and full descriptions.

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