

## RETURN TO THE OCALA NATIONAL FOREST

by Konrad Schmidt, Hammond, Wisconsin

In December, 1984, I made my first visit to the Ocala National Forest of northern Florida. Although there was a chill in the air and fog on the water, I persuaded myself to take part in a unique and very memorable experience of snorkeling in Juniper Springs Pool (see AC, Oct '85). I enjoyed the dive so much that I promised myself to return someday and explore two other pools, at Salt and Alexander Springs.

In September, 1986, I did return and made my first stop at Salt Springs. This time I coaxed--or perhaps coerced--my wife, Mary, to join me in the dive. She had received ample warning and fuel for her suspicions earlier in the year when "somebody" gave her mask, fins, and snorkel for birthday gifts. After a brief introduction on clearing the snorkel tube, spitting on the mask lens to prevent fogging, and practicing a simple kick stroke, we were off to explore the depths of Salt Springs. We had not covered more than 50' when Mary stopped, stood up, and shouted, "Did you see all those fish? It's like swimming in a giant aquarium! This is really neat! I'm glad you made me come with you!" In a second, she was off exploring again, and I breathed a sigh of relief, realizing I had hooked yet another snorkeling convert.

I had to agree with Mary 100-percent that Salt Springs was a snorkelers' paradise. The pool was interspersed with lush micro-forests of vallisneria and clearings containing substrates of pearly white sand. The most fascinating attractions, of course, were the numerous schools of fish which never fled but always remained just beyond reach. The most conspicuous species was a mullet. These whales (some ranging to 15 and 20 pounds) were gray with quarter-sized scales. They struck me as odd because of their pectoral fins, which seemed to be attached 90 degrees off from those of "normal" fishes. I felt like nick-naming them "stubby-finned flying fish," but that was too much of a mouthful. The second largest species was the Largemouth Bass; the pool contained a few trophies in the 10-pound class. The smallest and most common species was the brownish-yellow "bream," which rarely exceeded eight inches. The schools congregated in the clearings and currents around spring fissures. I found these fissures in the limestone bedrock extremely interesting. They were large cracks about 15' long, three feet wide, and up to about 15' deep. I couldn't resist the temptation, and dove for the depths. Near the bottom, the walls were perforated with small holes up to about 12" in diameter where water

gushed out with considerable force. I relaxed and allowed the currents to raise me gently toward the surface and spew me out of the fissure. Take my word for it, hydraulic levitation can be very entertaining.

After setting up our tent at an adjacent campground, I decided to try some collecting from the boat access on Salt Springs Run. I found dense schools of Mosquitofish congregated over the launching ramp. I took a single swoop with my dipnet and captured at least 50. As I fingered through the writhing mass of bodies, I found three males peppered with black blotches. I had heard of this coloration trait sporadically showing up in Mosquitofish, but this was the first time I had collected such attractive genetic deviates. I then headed along the shoreline checking promising patches of aquatic vegetation which occasionally yielded Pygmy Killifish (Leptolucania ommata) and Sailfin Mollies.

The next morning, we headed for Alexander Springs, the largest and most natural of the three pools. We entered the water from the swimming beach and immediately noticed several Largemouth Bass. A number of three- to five-pounders came within inches of people wading through the shallows. Judging by these waders' reaction--or, better stated, lack of reaction--all of them were completely oblivious to these close encounters. Proceeding toward the spring hole, we reached the edge of the vallisneria forest. I almost missed a Bowfin casually snaking its way through the vegetation. I followed it for a few minutes, hovering on the surface just above it. Then it descended into the greenery and vanished for good. The vallisneria ended abruptly at the edge of the spring hole, where it precipitously dropped off. As we approached the edge, we noticed several streams of air bubbles rising to the surface. I began to wonder about Mary's earlier comments at Salt Springs that just maybe this really was a giant aquarium; but, as we peered over the edge into the hole, we discovered the source--at least ten scuba divers lounging around on the bottom of the pool. The spring hole was roughly 100' in diameter and 25' deep. There were three main springs on the bottom of the pool--one a fissure, another a cave, and the third a sand geyser which slightly clouded that end of the pool. I explored them all one by one and breath by breath. The most interesting was the cave, and several scuba divers took turns entering it. I was tempted, but it was pitch-black inside, and the current coming through the opening quickly wore me out. I did manage to satisfy about 50 percent of my curiosity by shining my submersible flashlight into the darkness. It illuminated a small cavern about ten feet wide and 30' long. Common sense chilled any desire to explore for additional passageways, and I headed for shallow water.

I followed the shoreline and bumped into a large school of aptly named Redbreast Sunfish (Lepomis auritus) which ranged in size from four to ten inches. I wondered how a couple of these little jewels would behave in a community aquarium.

We again set up camp in another nearby, conveniently located campground. I decided to wait till dark to see what some nocturnal collecting would produce. Just before sunset, I walked by the swimming area where several die-hard scuba divers were preparing for a night dive. I could tell that at least two divers were already in the water, since eerie green and blue lights glowed from the bottom of the pool. Because of all this activity, I decided to try the canoe access about 100 yards downstream. It was completely deserted, and I started collecting in earnest. Initial scoops produced several Mosquitofish and Least Killifish. I probed deeper into the water hyacinths which stubbornly gave up Sailfin Mollies, Bluefin Killifish (Lucania goodei), and either Everglades or Okefenokee Pygmy Sunfish (Elassoma sp.). Although I had only been there a short time, the aerial mosquitos were really doing a number on my back and legs. I decided to call it a night. As I headed back, I could barely make out someone else coming down the trail toward me.

When he got close enough, I greeted him with a neighborly "Hello." He responded by shining a flashlight in my eyes, and, in a deep, deliberate voice, said, "Forest ranger. Hold it right there." I was certain I hadn't violated any collecting regulations; nevertheless, I reflexively clutched the dipnet I held along my side.

"This is a restricted area after 8:00 p.m.," he said.

Somewhat relieved, I replied, "Oh, sorry, but I wasn't aware of that. What time is it?"

He looked at his watch and said, "It's 8:17," and added, "Are you staying at the campground?"

I answered "Yes," and he rifled back, "What campsite?"

I was beginning to feel like a private being drilled by his sergeant, but I obediently responded, "A-10."

He finished our conversation with, "Alright, but remember the 8:00 p.m. curfew!"

As I continued down the trail, I remembered the scuba divers and wondered how he was going to manage getting those curfew-violators out of the water.

The next day we moved to Juniper Springs for our last stop in the Ocala National Forest. One more time, we put on

our snorkeling gear and aimlessly cruised the surface, viewing the pool's aesthetically pleasing aquascape of springs and vegetation. The ever-present and abundant Mosquitofish was the first to greet us--usually colliding into our mask lens like bugs against a car's windshield. Ignoring these little pests, I began to follow an edge of vallisneria, looking for other residents of the pool, when what looked like a snake almost three feet long popped out into the clearing just below me. My first reaction was instant recoil, splashing water everywhere and inhaling some of it in the process. Then it dawned on me that it wasn't a snake at all, as I coughed and sputtered, trying to regain my composure.

Mary had witnessed the entire episode and said with a smile, "I take it you met the eel?" She had been talking with another snorkeler who had had a similar encounter earlier in the day. Slightly chagrined, I was determined to confront this pool terrorist, and found it slithering through the vegetation not far from where we were first introduced. From the surface, I followed for several minutes until it entered a clearing. Then I dove on my prey--four feet, three feet, two feet, but the eel would not flee or even acknowledge my presence. I stopped and slowly reached to grasp it. Finally when my fingers were within an inch, the fish exploded into a gray streak erratically ricocheting through the entire pool. Eventually it vanished into a dense patch of vallisneria.

That adventure done, I began to ponder the whereabouts of the large, majestic Sailfin Mollies so common in 1984. Then, they schooled in swift currents provided by the springs on the bottom of the pool, but now none could be found in these former haunts. I was almost ready to give up when I found them at the entrance to the wading area where they were feverishly dining on a brown-colored algae. I counted forty-seven in this school, and none were less than five inches. There were several very swollen, pregnant females.

The next morning, we rented a canoe for the seven-mile trip down Juniper Springs Run. We launched just below the pool where the swiftly-flowing, barely ten-foot-wide stream begins. At first we did not have a great deal of time to enjoy the scenery. The stream was so sinuous that our canoe behaved more like a bumper-car, and we repeatedly slammed into the banks. We learned in a hurry how to handle the canoe, and the stream became a challenging, thrilling obstacle course. After about 30 minutes, the stream widened and the current slowed, granting us a welcome rest to sit back and appreciate our surroundings. The streambanks were densely forested with cabbage palmetto, which decorated a scene out of a tropical

rain forest. An occasional bald cypress lined the water's edge; the massive trunks provided some interesting woody structure. The stream was now about 20' wide with white sand covering the bottom. Vallisneria patches started appearing in the eddies and side channels. Sitting in the bow of the canoe, I decided to try some val-crashing with my dipnet. Miraculously I scooped up three sapphire-like minnows that I tentatively identified as Dusky Shiners (Notropis cummingsae). Besides the eye-catching bright blue sides, they were slender-bodied, about one to two inches in length. Persistent dipnetting produced additional Dusksies and one chunky, appropriately-named Blackbanded Darter (Percina nigrofasciata) about three inches long.

The palmetto jungle eventually gave way to open marsh. The stream split into multiple channels. Lavender-flowered water hyacinths carpeted the muddy shoals, and several species of birds perched on the snags and fished in the shallows. The habitat appeared excellent for collecting, but the weather quickly soured. It began to rain. We hustled for the pick-up point where a shuttle bus brought us back to the campground.

We left the Ocala for the second time with several more memorable experiences to add to those of the first. We will return again to explore other areas, not only in the Ocala, but also the Apalachicola and Osceola National Forests. There are so many recreational opportunities to pursue that it may take a lifetime to accomplish.