

The Second Annual Illinois Garvana

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In July 2006, planning for the Second Annual Illinois Garvana (combination of gar and nirvana) sampling trip was in its infancy. Once we had a list of people with free time to attend, the dates began to solidify. All we needed now was appropriate accommodations and good weather. On this trip we had members coming from Michigan, Ohio, Virginia and Illinois, so getting acceptable accommodations was important for the long distances these guests were to travel. At first we hoped to camp; however, the threat of rain made us settle on a not-so-nearby hotel. In fact, we almost missed out since rooms were filling up quickly this time of year.

Scouting and Worrying

With the plans set, I wanted to make sure the collection locations were up to par for the group I had invited. With a week to go before the trip and the potential to gain access to a large backwater lake habitat connected to the Illinois River, I convinced a friend to join me on a scout of this remote area. After a two-hour drive, we finally found the closest land access to this massive backwater lake. Unfortunately, we needed 4 x 4 vehicles to get close to the area, and even then the long walk was too strenuous. We decided to cut our losses and head to some waters where we were sure to find fish. It wasn't a bad day netting and angling; we caught Shortnose Gar (*Lepisosteus platostomus*), Red Shiner (*Cyprinella lutrensis*), White Bass (*Morone chrysops*), Yellow Bass (*M. mississippiensis*), Smallmouth Bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*) and Slenderhead Darter (*Percina phoxocephala*), among others.

With the trip only days away, it was time to make sure my nets, aeration equipment, camera, food, water and fishing tackle were in order. Severe weather alerts had now been

issued for the area and I was worried our rivers and streams would be swollen so badly we would not be able seine in the places I had planned. As I checked the recent rainfall totals on the USGS database, I could see my worst fears had become reality: the valley we intended to sample had received between two and four inches of rain in less than one hour. I could only hope the water would be in order by the time my guests were to arrive.

First Nets in the Water

We had arranged to meet below the dam on the Illinois River located near Utica in La Salle County, Illinois, on August 11th. I got there a bit early to fish with rod and reel until everyone arrived. With hopes of getting photos of the redhorse suckers that live in this river, I made my best attempt at finding one before the gang arrived. After many Freshwater Drum (*Aplodinotus grunniens*) mangled my live bait I decided today wasn't the day for redhorse. Just as I started to change tactics, the cell phone on my hip rang and our group's first guest, Richard Kik IV, had pulled into the parking lot looking for me. Before we could get our nets in the water Matt DeLaVega had arrived with Andrew Gunthorpe. We were now just waiting for Kate Birkett to show up and the group would be complete.

Once we got our nets into the water, we found Skipjack Herring (*Alosa chrysochloris*, Fig. 1), Gizzard Shad (*Dorosoma cepedianum*, Fig. 1), Silver Chub (*Macrhybopsis storeriana*), Emerald Shiner (*Notropis atherinoides*), Sand Shiner (*N. stramineus*), Spottail Shiner (*N. hudsonius*), Highfin Carpsucker (*Carpionodes velifer*), River Carpsucker (*C. carpio*), Quillback (*Carpionodes cyprinus*), Smallmouth Buffalo (*Ictiobus bubalus*), River Redhorse (*Moxostoma carinatum*), Channel Catfish



Fig. 1.

Top: Skipjack Herring, *Alosa chrysochloris*.
 Bottom: Gizzard Shad, *Dorosoma cepedianum*.
 Photos by the author.

(*Ictalurus punctatus*), Western Mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*), White Bass, and Freshwater Drum (Fig. 2).

My phone rang again when our last guest, Kate, arrived. After getting her settled in the water with several passes of the seine, I decided it would be nice to see something different.

The Backwater

In years past I had come across a small backwater not far from the river that had the potential to be a prime spawning habitat for various species. We couldn't pass up this opportunity to visit this area since I'd never been able to convince anyone to sample this location with me.

At first, the walk to the backwater looked menacing due to vast patches of stinging nettle. I would later realize this was the easy part. After many hundreds of yards of high-growing nettles, we discovered the backwater had been consumed by *Phragmites* grass. Against Richard's advice, I convinced the group to forge through the dense 8- to 10-foot tall grass that seemed to grab us with every step we took. We made our way to a group of trees where I received an earful from Richard. He was able to now convince the group, including myself, that the backwater had been fully consumed by this invasive grass. We headed back towards the river with what little credibility I had left. On the way back Richard turned a few logs and found a nice tiger salamander.

Lucky Goldfish, Unlucky Sucker

We sampled at least three more locations on the Illinois River and found many of the same species we had found

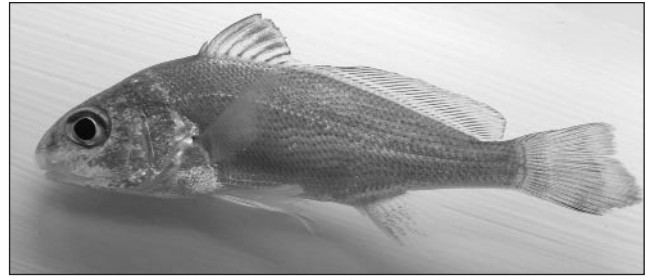


Fig. 2.

Freshwater Drum, *Aplodinotus grunniens*.
 Photo by the author.

earlier. Even though the diversity wasn't all we had hoped for, the main river did contain some excitement. We found a medium-sized eddy behind a small logjam. This area seemed worthy of a few passes with the seine. We could tell by the "thumping" in the net that we had several large fishes escape at the last moment. Curiosity got the best of us and we did not leave this area until we knew what kind of fishes they were.

On our next pass we felt a large fish in the net. We quickly moved towards the bank to discover that it was a sucker. As I reached for the fish and heard Kate's horrified shrieks I realized something was wrong: Most of the sucker's head was missing.

After a few pictures we released the sucker, which swam off as if nothing had happened. We sampled a large rocky shallow for darters before we realized this was enough for this area and headed to our hotel. I don't think we'll ever know what exactly caused this poor sucker's condition.

We packed our nets and headed to our hotel. A goldfish inside a ridiculously small one-gallon tank greeted us upon check-in. Its name was "Lucky." At this time I had a feeling this would be a trip to remember. After dinner at a local chain restaurant and talking fish late into the night, we were ready for the big event—Garvana.

Seining in High Water

Garvana—actually the Vermilion River in the Illinois River drainage (not the same as the Vermilion River in the Wabash River drainage)—is a medium-sized river that flows through a state park surrounded by steep bluffs. Its substrate is mostly limestone with a silt/sand combination in the few areas where the water is slowed. Since the river cut steep bluffs into the limestone, the walk to Garvana is difficult, to say the least.

When we reached the water, my worst fears about a massive rainfall had been confirmed. The water was high



Fig. 3.
Seining the high and turbid water of “Garvana”—the Vermilion River.
Photo by the author.

and turbid (Fig. 3). Trying to make the best of it we dug right in. It didn’t take long to find our target—Shortnose Gar. Richard wouldn’t let a single gar go until he had measured each one. After hundreds of passes with the seine and countless measurements, we came across a population of Grass Carp (*Ctenopharyngodon idella*) that would have fared better with almost any other group of people. (We killed the invasive carp quickly and humanely.)

On days with normal water conditions I’ve sampled well over twice the number of species from this area, but today we found only these: Shortnose Gar, Longnose Gar (*Lepisosteus osseus*), Gizzard Shad, Grass Carp, Emerald Shiner, Spottail Shiner, Red Shiner, Northern Hog Sucker (*Hypentelium nigricans*), Smallmouth Buffalo, Stonecat (*Noturus flavus*), Smallmouth Bass, Largemouth Bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), and Logperch (*Percina caprodes*).

We took a break and snapped a few photos (Fig. 4), then quickly got back in the water to sample new spots within walking distance. We found one location interesting enough to spend the rest of the day there. Despite the fact that we

worked the riffles thoroughly we were unable to produce any large numbers of the Stonecat and darters that I know thrive in this stretch of river. Since we were tired and we knew the trip back up the bluffs was certain to be more difficult than the trip down, the time was right to make the long uphill walk to our cars.

Night-Sampling for Trout-Perch

We went back to the hotel to gather the supplies for a cookout on the sandy river edge just across from where we had met the previous day. Matt supplied wonderful rib eye steaks, I brought potato salad, and Kate brought cookies for dessert. We were so hungry that I believe we would have eaten anything, which was a good thing since the potato salad was partially frozen. (Potato salad Popsicle is as unappetizing as it sounds.) After dinner we sat on the river’s edge watching barge traffic and shooting stars.

With food in our bellies, the sun well below the horizon and some energy still left, we hoped to find some of the night-



Fig. 4.

From left to right: Uland Thomas, Richard Kik IV, Andrew Gunthorpe, Matt DeLaVega, and Kate Birkett.
Photo by the author.

time residents of the Illinois River. I had convinced the group we had a chance of finding Trout-perch (*Percopsis omiscomaycus*), which fueled the effort all that much more. We made several passes with our nets and produced the following fishes amongst the mud and the scattered chunk limestone rock bottom: Gizzard Shad, Emerald Shiner, Spottail Shiner, Western Mosquitofish, White Bass, Bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*) and Freshwater Drum.

Unfortunately, Trout-perch didn't show up in our nets that night. So we went back to the hotel to discuss our strategy for the next day.

Stickleback Slough

On day three we headed about 30 minutes west of our hotel to a small, vegetated slough we affectionately named "stickleback slough," in Bureau County, Illinois. The slough flows several miles west into Rock River. We hoped the water wouldn't be high and turbid like it was at Garvana, and it wasn't. And the walk to the water was flat and relatively short.

We broke out our dipnets and hit the slough with the energy that only five complete fish nerds could possess. We found the following fishes amongst the weeds and sand/silt bottom: Bluntnose Minnow (*Pimephales notatus*), Common Carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), Western Mosquitofish, Blackstripe Topminnow (*Fundulus notatus*), Brook Stickleback (*Culaea inconstans*), and Johnny Darter (*Etheostoma nigrum*).

I've never been fond of aquatic insects, but Kate was able to name every creepy bug we found and offered interesting information about their mechanics and life cycles. This gave me a greater appreciation for these creatures. After a few hours we set forth towards another promising location.

A Sign from the Fish Gods?

We drove about an hour back east to the Illinois River upstream from the dam we had previously sampled. We parked on a point that had a convenient boat launch and picnic area. Weed beds in the large pool created by the dam looked like a promising place to sample. This pool was filled with the



Fig. 5.

Kate Birkett, Andrew Gunthorpe and Uland Thomas sample a ditch.
Photo by Richard Kik IV.

logs and debris that settle in areas of reduced flow—a change of pace from the swifter currents we had been sampling.

We didn't waste any time getting into the water, and now that we had a few hours together, we worked like a well-oiled machine. We quickly found a spectacular Longnose Gar with numerous bold spots. The whole group was clearly excited about this find, which attracted the attention of a nearby wildlife photographer. After a few photos of our own and a quick conversation with the photographer, we worked our way around the point. We were quite a sight running around excited about gar, all the while lugging large seines, waders and dipnets.

We soon found ourselves being questioned by a fellow who knew his fishes. Even though we were within the rules and regulations of my home state, Illinois, we were a tad evasive with our answers. After all, even when you're within the law, you can still attract the attention of conservation officials.

It turned out we were speaking with a fisheries scientist now on the board of the American Fisheries Society. He talked for some time about the various *Umbra* species, which interested us all. He also gave us excellent advice on shipping *Alosa* species. He had apparently been responsible years ago

for sending live *Alosa* around the country for various research purposes, and had developed a simple yet effective technique to transport these fragile fishes. Running into him was a sign from the fish gods, right?

We continued to sample the point, finding Longnose Gar, Skipjack Herring, Emerald Shiner, Spottail Shiner, Sand Shiner, Spottfin Shiner (*Cyprinella spiloptera*), Bluegill, Orangespotted Sunfish (*Lepomis humilis*) and Rock Bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*).

Irritating the Locals

We packed up and headed back to the hotel, cleaned up a bit, and got lunch. We wanted to try night sampling again, so this time we went to the mouth of a small tributary that emptied into the Illinois River near a large backwater. The smell of Silver Carp (*Hypophthalmichthys molitris*)—apparently caught by fishermen the day before and left on the bank to rot—wrinkled our noses.

Richard and I headed off to see what fishes might live in the backwater while Kate investigated the small tributary. None of us found anything other than a few confirmed

Common Carp. Once in the river we could tell the water was shallow and the bottom felt like clay. Due to these conditions we were able to take our nets far into the river and make long runs with the net towards shore.

Our sampling technique seemed to irritate the locals. A recreational boater with a couple of ladies onboard tried to make our sampling as difficult as possible. When we went far into the river, he gunned his engine very close to us and circled just outside our sampling location. Hand gestures were exchanged. Eventually, we headed to shore and he kept making watercraft donuts.

The sun was almost below the horizon and again we hoped to sample a few nocturnal fishes, including Trout-perch. We seined until well after dark but found the same fishes we found during the day: Gizzard Shad, Common Carp, Emerald Shiner, River Carpsucker, Channel Catfish, Orangespotted Sunfish and Green Sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*).

Ditches and Oxbows

We headed back to the hotel to plan for our last day of sampling together. That night we considered sampling locally in hopes the water conditions would be favorable. We also considered heading east to sample the remnants of a swamp that had been drained over 100 years ago. With a unanimous decision we resolved to head to a swamp in Kankakee County, Illinois. The next morning we checked out of the hotel, said goodbye to Lucky the goldfish, and headed east.

We found a completely different group of fishes. The ditches that drain this vast swamp are crystal clear and cool since they're fed by groundwater. The edges of the ditches are lined with watercress so dense you'll often be fooled where water begins and the land ends. The substrate is a soft mix of mud and sand. I felt some satisfaction in knowing I had pleasantly surprised my collecting partners with this location.

We found these fishes before moving on: Ironcolor Shiner (*Notropis chalybaeus*), Golden Shiner (*Notemigonus crysoleucas*), Hornyhead Chub (*Nocomis biguttatus*), White Sucker (*Catostomus commersonii*), Yellow Bullhead (*Ameiurus natalis*), Tadpole Madtom (*Noturus gyrinus*), Grass Pickerel (*Esox americanus vermiculatus*), Central Mudminnow (*Umbra limi*), Pirate Perch (*Aphredoderus sayanus*), Blackstripe Topminnow, Redear Sunfish (*Lepomis microlophus*), Longear Sunfish (*L. megalotis*), Bluegill, Green Sunfish, Rock Bass, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass and Blackside Darter (*Percina maculata*).

The next location was just over the Illinois-Indiana state line in Lake County, Indiana. The State Park we were in



Fig. 6.
Lake Chubsucker, *Erimyzon sucetta*.
Photo by the author.

consists of ditches and oxbows that were formed when the Kankakee River was channeled. We sampled the ditches and oxbows (Fig. 5) and scouted the once-meandering riverbed that regularly floods, where fishes often remain. Andrew, Matt and Kate sampled a very small ditch that had a large group of bees that didn't particularly care for human activity. Before escaping (without being stung), they found Lake Chubsucker (*Erimyzon sucetta*, Fig. 6), Yellow Bullhead, Grass Pickerel, and Northern Starhead Topminnow (*Fundulus dispar*).

Drawn Together by Fish

After four days of sampling our backs hurt, our hands were raw from measuring gar, and our legs never recovered from carrying the equipment up the bluffs. But in four days we sampled over 47 different species. Three exotic carps and two native introductions were also noted. Hundreds of photos were added to my collection and I made new friends. In fact, I had just met Richard the year before and I had never met Matt, Andrew and Kate, nor had they met each other. Yet here we were, drawn together by fish. I'm sure stronger friendships have been made, but I think friendships that come together over fish seem to be special.

I can't say enough about the netting skill and knowledge this group exhibited during the trip. I'm very grateful they took the time to drive the distance to visit my home waters. Without their dedication and skill, I would never have been able to see many of these fishes and would certainly not have been able to photograph them.

With our sun-dried and stinky nets packed up alongside the Kankakee River, we parted ways until the next time. This was our first trip together but certainly not the last. 