

SHOW-ME THE FISHES

A RE-CAP OF THE 2017 NANFA CONVENTION

MERAMEC STATE PARK, MISSOURI, JUNE 8–13

Robert (Bob) A. Hrabik

For many NANFA members the annual Convention either is or becomes the centerpiece of summer vacations. For those of us who volunteer to host a national convention of this kind, it is important that we bear this in mind as we prepare an itinerary and select a site that is both affordable and provides lasting memories.

Missouri is a good choice to host NANFA Conventions. First, the state is located near the center of the contiguous United States; second, it has big cities (St. Louis and Kansas City) such that transportation, whether it be by vehicle,

plane, or train, mainstreams into the state; and 3) most importantly, it has many fish species (over 230), several of which are endemic (found only in Missouri).

Why so many species in this medium-sized Midwestern state? Varied habitats! Missouri is home to our nation's largest rivers (measured in length), the Mississippi and Missouri. The Ozarks, an ancient eroded plateau of sufficient age to foster speciation events—thus the endemic species—is flanked by the former tallgrass prairies to the north and west (Till and Osage plains) and by an extension of the Gulf Coastal Plain or Alluvial Basin (which we lovingly call the “Bootheel”) to the southeast (Figure 1). Missouri is at the biological crossroads of these major landscapes. Therefore, an organizer of a convention that centers its activities on collecting fishes has a natural treasure chest from which to introduce people from faraway places to the state's wonderful diversity. To that end, we had planned field trips to a big river (the Missouri), a major tributary to the Mississippi River (the Meramec), and a suite of smaller rivers and creeks in the Ozarks and Ozark borders to maximize exposure to this slice of Missouri's rich fish fauna. To help get our brains wrapped around the complexity of the Ozarks, on the first night Brian Wilcox of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources presented a fascinating overview of the geology and geography of the Meramec River system and the role

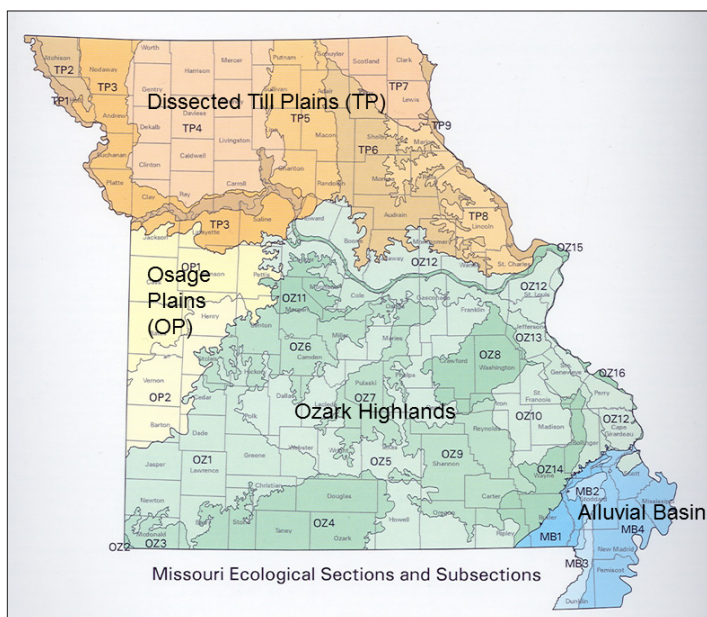


Figure 1. The variety of landscapes that makes Missouri home to so many species of fish.

Photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Bob Hrabik's infatuation with native fishes began while seining for bait with his father on cool fall days in Nebraska. The bait they caught was kept alive overwinter and used for many ice fishing escapades. Curiosity about what kinds of stream fish they were catching led to streambank and garage “fish ID” sessions using the very old *Fishes of Nebraska* pamphlet (1974) and the first edition of *Fishes of Missouri* (1975). Years later, Bob found himself lead author on *The Fishes of Nebraska* (2015) and will soon complete the 3rd edition of *Fishes of Missouri*.



Figure 2. A wet spring led to floods just before the convention.

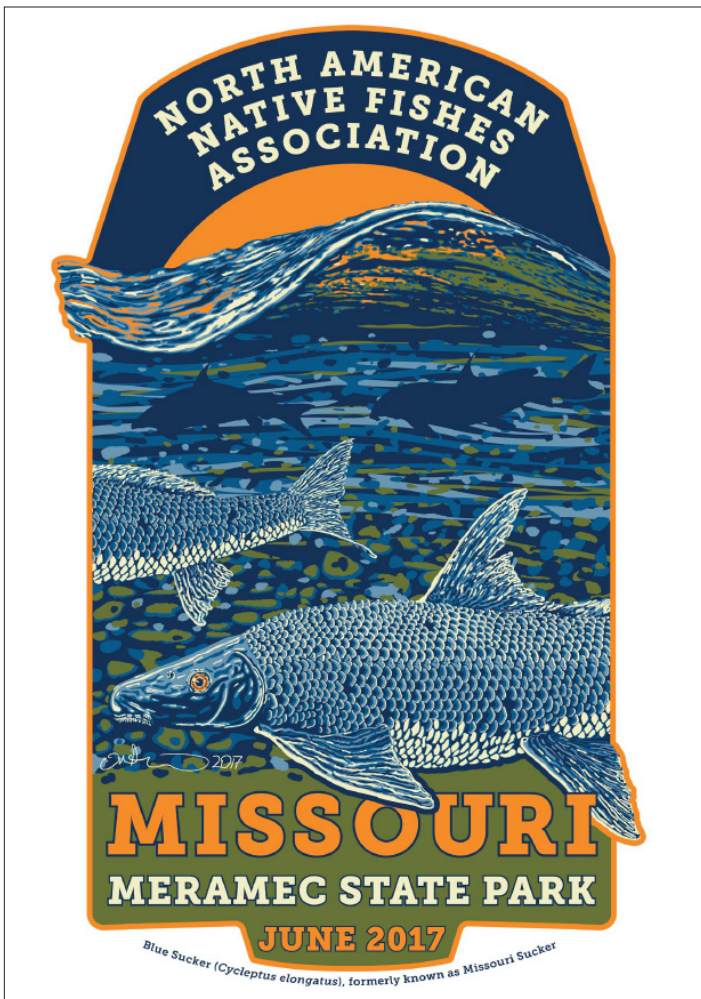


Figure 3.

the Park plays in preserving the beauty and biodiversity of the basin. It was a thought-provoking talk that certainly was germane to the audience and to what we were to observe over the next 3–4 days.

If there is a drawback to hosting NANFA Conventions in June, especially in Missouri, it has to be the fact that May and June are very wet months for the state and, indeed, the Missouri and Meramec rivers had been raging all spring. Just a few weeks before the Convention, the Meramec River experienced one of the largest floods in its history but fell precipitously (no pun intended) just before the Convention (Figure 2). The Missouri River, on the other hand, fell more slowly and the river stage was so high that the large sandbar on which we were going to have a cook-out and sample fishes was well under water. This was unfortunate as the site was a good place to catch a Blue Sucker (*Cycleptus elongatus*), the fish that adorned our strikingly handsome Convention posters and t-shirts (Figure 3). Luckily, we had a “Plan B,” and on June 9 we moved our activities and operations to the Meramec River within the State Park. Instead of big river jon boats, we used jet boats and canoes to transport people to a fabulous Meramec River gravel bar about one mile up-



Figure 4. Top: Isaac Szabo rides in style in a jet boat piloted by Moses Ong of MDC. Bottom: NANFAns on the gravel bar. (Photos by Casper Cox, top, and Bill Ellis)

stream of the Park’s boat ramp. Jet boaters went from the boat ramp upstream and canoeists put in about two miles above and then floated down to where all converged on the gravel bar (Figure 4). Here there was plenty of room to spread out and employ a variety of sampling gear, including hand-pulled trawls and even pole-and-line. The collecting was good as we caught nearly 50 species of fish, as tallied by Jenny Kruckenberg. While there were many interesting and important captures, probably none was more exciting to our friends from Canada (Ontario), Jason Barnucz and Scott Reid, who were delighted at capturing several Gravel Chubs (*Erimystax x-punctatus*), a rare and listed species in Ontario! (Figure 5). All of this activity and fish collecting led to growling stomachs just in time for Vince and Becky



Figure 5. Jason and a Gravel Chub. (Photo by Jenny Kruckenberg)

Travnichek's *Low Country Boil* to be served up as an evening meal. The *Low Country Boil* consisted of ~40 lbs potatoes, 30 lbs polish sausage, 45 lbs shrimp, and 200 ears of small corn cooked right on the gravel bar! (Figure 6).

With satiated stomachs, some folks took the canoes while others enjoyed one last ride in jet boats downstream to the boat ramp. And so, the first day came to an end.

That next morning, we began our speaker program and that evening our banquet and auction. Jenny's summary of the talks follows this report.

The auction was a rousing success! The auction provides the monies we require to fund education and research grants each year. NANFA members really came to the plate at Meramec State Park as the auction netted the best return since its inception! \$2,849! Kudos to all you NANFA members who dragged items halfway or more across the country for the cause! (Figure 7)

June 11 and 12 were dedicated to what we all clamor for when attending roving NANFA Conventions: fish observation, photography, and collection. We attempted to do something a little different for the Missouri Convention regarding how trips were conducted. Typically, collection trips are chaperoned by someone who is usually pretty knowledgeable about an area and/or the fish communities. Thus, fewer trip options are available and usually larger groups will converge on a collecting locality. For the 2017 Convention, we provided detailed handouts for several public areas to explore. Conventioneers would gather in the Hickory Ridge Conference Center in the morning and self-organize into collection parties for the day, resulting in a myriad of collecting opportunities that could be taken on a day of choice and with folks having complimenting gear. Some conventioneers who



Figure 6. Top: The hungry hordes on the gravel bar, ready to eat. Center: Tom Watson wields the tongs while the cooks look on. Bottom: The low country boil menu. (Photos by Fritz Rohde, top, Casper Cox, center, and Jenny Kruckenberg)



Figure 7. Top: Phil Nixon, auctioneer, preparing to squeeze everything he can get from the crowd, opens bidding on the first item, Olaf Nelson's conference art printed on metal by member Dennis Bruso of Vermont. Bottom: Bob Muller with his loot. (Photos by Fritz Rohde, top, and Jenny Kruckenberg)

may have had their minds set on capturing a certain species to fulfill a life-list simply asked me where they could go to see species X, Y, or Z and were given a map or directions and headed off for the day. Each conventioneer and/or party had to sign a sheet indicating which trip they were going to partake in so if someone did not return that evening we would know where to look for them. The only chaperoned trips were the canoe trips on Big River each day.

Overall, conventioners really liked this strategy as it gave them a lot of flexibility in deciding where they wanted to go and which day, and because the Convention was well-attended, there were usually several people going to each collection site, meaning varying levels of fish identification expertise were available to everyone. A few conventioners felt that some trips should have had a Missouri expert with them, but the majority were quite pleased with this strategy.

Each evening, conventioners gathered in the Hickory Ridge Conference Center to share specimens, pho-

tographs, and stories about the day's catch. All said and done, nearly 70 species of fish were observed, including Konrad Schmidt chasing down what most certainly was a Crystal Darter (*Crystallaria asprella*) in Huzzah Creek. Much camaraderie took place on those evenings, which usually lasted well into the night. It was a good thing that Casper Cox brought plenty of Moon Pies to tide everyone over (Figure 8).

I must thank my boss, Mr. Brian Canaday, for allowing me the time to put on this convention knowing that I have a looming deadline to submit the first draft of the 3rd edition *Fishes of Missouri* book. Several Missouri Department of Conservation staff eagerly helped me coordinate the effort and/or work the Convention. These people were Matt Ormsby, Nick Gironde, Moses Ong, Sara Turner, Jen Gironde, Kevin Meneau, Shane Creasy, and Dave Herzog. Two college students helped with setup and administrative tasks: Joe Seigel and Doug Carroll.

I think it should be emphasized that NANFA and organizations like them in any natural resource discipline are important constituents of state resource agencies, like the Missouri Department of Conservation. My boss recognized how important it was that Missouri put on a good show for NANFA members, not just because it looks good for the agency but because the state is able to showcase its resources in a positive way. This most certainly garners advocates that help to ensure the agency and its programs have a place in our human-manipulated world. Given that it is apparent that future natural resource agency budgets will be ever-tightening, the role citizen scientists will play to inform decision-makers will be ever-increasing. This may be particularly true in the field of ichthyology and the disciplines of native, non-game fish distribution, zoogeography, taxonomy, ecology, and life history. Good decision, Mr. Canaday!



Figure 8. Casper Cox preparing to depart for MO, Moon Pies in hand.