

AquaCam Snorkel Camp 2009: Part 1

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I arrived earlier than expected, leaving Chattanooga promptly after dropping my girls off at school. I burned the back roads westward and found myself rained-upon as I approached Hohenwald. The creek flowing alongside the road was running high and cloudy. When I arrived at the campsite I took a quick walk down to the gravel bar, and the stream here was flowing clear and sweet. Within the next 30 minutes it was swollen, rising and opaque. The highway upstream was being widened to accommodate four lanes and all the trees between the creek and current road had been cut back. Though hay bales and silt fences had been installed, lots of sediment and debris was being rushed downstream.

I picked a good site and set up my tent. Since the creek was now uninviting, I did not have many options. I took a short walk hoping to find some edible fungi, and when I returned, big yellowish deer flies started working on me. I

studied the map and decided to drive to the headwaters of a neighboring creek system. I left a note for the others (Fig. 1) and decided to take advantage of the now sunny afternoon.

The bridge crossing offered a motivational view. A big snapping turtle cruised his way under the structure and the remnants of a four-foot diameter chub nest marked the substrate just downstream. Access down was sharp-bouldered and unnerving but I was soon snorkeling through several clear flowing pools and easing steadily upstream. The rain had reduced the visibility to only a few feet but the water felt good and there were plenty of shiners and darters in my facemask to keep me company. I walked over a stretch of slippery bedrock and found a tiny tributary flowing into the stream. An angled log embedded in the gravel created a pool just big enough for me to lie and turn around in. It was crystal clear and I worked carefully not to stir up the leaves and the bit of sediment within. I was hoping to see cold water dace but I was



© Bryce Gibson

Fig. 1.

Pointing the way to clear water.



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Fig. 2.

Fisheye view of the snorkel camp.

most surprised to see a fish I had never seen in the area before. It was well camouflaged and had a dual lateral line down its side and trimmed in gold. I thought it could be a chubsucker but was surprised that it would be found in a Tennessee stream. I've seen them often enough in Florida but this one was uniquely patterned and occupying a tiny, cold spring fed pool here in my home state. After a few minutes of observing, I climbed out and headed further upstream. I soon came across a Mason jar and found a piece of cloth nearby. Remembering my skill at talking an Arrow Darter into a plastic bag a couple years back, I decided to try the same using these found items. Back to the pool and after 30 frustrating minutes of careful jar positioning and twig nudging and garbled fish chatter, no success. I much wanted to return to the camp with my prized mystery fish swimming proudly cramped in a double quart Mason Jar, but it was not to be. I'm a bit worried that I don't have the "gift" anymore.

In the late afternoon I arrived back at the site to meet Lance swatting the pesky yellow flies. Ed soon pulled in his VW camper and popped the top as Dave arrived and considered a tent site underneath a tree strewn with dead limbs. Firewood was needed, and a stick and a length of double-A parachute cord were soon hurled skyward. Limbs began to crash onto the campsite. Some throws were more accurate than others, but the most promising limb failed to yield even to stout pulling sessions. After consultations, cord palm burns and plenty of "heave-hos" Dave positioned his truck and I tied a quick double knot to the hitch and Dave eased forward. We all nervously huddled behind makeshift barriers as the cord pulled tight, the stout limb leaned slightly and, "snap!", the cord snapped clean shaking loose another round of falling branches. But the big limb still stood tall with a big widow-maker swinging to and fro beneath it. Dave's tent site was

abandoned for a safer spot and all the fallen dead wood gathered. Todd and Scott arrived as we were recovering from the excitement and we discussed a chainsaw or triple-A cord as the only viable option. While Todd and Scott set up their tents (Fig. 2), I remembered Bill had told me about a recently cut tree down the road at a church. So, Lance, Dave and I drove over and loaded the van with a jumble of fresh cut logs of Bradford Pear. Lance went to work getting a fire started as we considered our dinner options. Goods were laid out on the picnic table and a menu planned, with Ed becoming the head chef. The fire burned bright then smoldered and smoked with the unseasoned, still green wood and no amount of fan waving, new twigs or rearranging could get a decent spread of hot coals. Darkness was well upon us when Todd offered and set up his Coleman stove and finished the cookery. We were soon content with sausages, cajun boudin and white rice along with a pot of stewed onions, tomatoes and beans.

The next morning, Jeremy arrived with his photo gear. He has been at work documenting life in freshwater streams and was a welcome addition to our group. We shared in a breakfast and gathered our gear into two vehicles to make the trek westward. A short stop at the bathhouse caught Bryce arriving just in the nick of time. A bit more room was made and all eight of us headed southeast to Metalford and a quick look at the Buffalo. A recent "good 'ol boy" damming project made for easier canoe passage and the water was clearer than I had seen in previous visits. Lance had stood at this spot a couple years before with his father and it is a common site for locals to gather and play in the water. I have never snorkeled here as the water has been tinged with green on every visit. A better place beckoned and a 45-minute drive put us at Indian Creek above Hwy. 64. Reasonably clear, we were all soon wetsuited and in the water with cameras and gear (Fig. 3).

The stretch offered several good sites from calm pools to swift runs to crystal clear filtered side pools. The substrate in this part of the state is often a pitty gravel. The erosion of this gravel fills deep pools and reduces habitat for bigger fish but darters (Fig. 4) and shiners love it. This gravel also offers exceptional filtration and in some places that was quite obvious. Small pools off to the side would have water flowing into them from upstream but the water was flowing largely under and through the filtering gravel. Very clear. Darters, sunfish and shiners were all using these quiet pools to feed in. Excellent photography conditions presented themselves and we took full advantage of it.

After a couple hours we gathered for lunch and shared accounts and pointed out locations to visit. Back in the water we went for another hour and then re-gathered for a short drive to another site. California Jack had recently bought a piece of property with a spring-fed stream flowing through it. On a small bluff above this wide branch sits a small hand-hewn poplar log cabin that he stays in while visiting. When I first eased into this stream a couple years ago, I was much impressed by the diversity of fishes

encountered in such a tiny stream. Over 20 species on last count and the clarity is incredible. The water is chilling, however, especially on an overcast day. We all had a bit of fun while chattering, snapping photos and crayfish wrangling. Then we called it a day for snorkeling.

A short options consultation led us back and up to Clifton where we looked out across the mighty Tennessee River from a high bluff line. Across the river a sandy shore beckoned for our seines but it would require a 20 mile round trip. The day had been full, so we entered the Pirate's Lair, a cajun eatery located downtown in this quaint, little, almost was, state capital. A good meal was had by all and crayfish and oysters shared. Especially good was their cheesy bread offerings passed back and forth throughout the meal.

When finished, we walked outside to view the river from the overlook just at the end of the main street. The sun was low and the horizon pretty and wavering light reflecting in the river beyond. Below us stretched a long boat ramp that was gated above but where it reached the water a gravel bar stretched a hundred yards or so upstream. Seines were pulled off the vehicles and



© Lance Merry

Fig. 3.
Bryce going for the closeup while the school passes.



© Todd Crail

Fig. 4.
Coppercheck Darter on the prowl.

where it reached the water a gravel bar stretched a hundred yards or so upstream. Seines were pulled off the vehicles and

we went down and debated who would take the chilling deep end. Volunteers stepped forward and we were soon pulling up Logperch, Spotfin Shiners and sunfish to please ourselves. I was quite surprised, but was assured that it is not uncommon to find Logperch in such a spot. The experience offered a nice end to the day's

fishing activities while Ed cracked abandoned Drum heads to pass around the pearls found within. Dave had taken to shaking during the meal and was soon feeling the pangs of flu as he cranked up the truck's heat to stop his cold fever-shivers.

Back at the darkening camp we pointed out the last remaining tent site to Bryce and offered to help him set up his tent. But with a flashlight shined high, Bryce declined to sleep below the widowmaker and chose a low site downhill. Dave took to his hammock while Lance brought the smoldering fire back to life. But tonight the fire was not gathered around as it had been the night before. Tonight we were all huddled together behind the soft glow of Todd's wide screen laptop swapping cards and flash drives and admiring each other's photos (Fig. 5). Camp Chair Theatre, destined to be the standard activity at future NANFA camp gatherings. I had studied on buying a projector but the \$100.00 Home Shopping Network device suffered terrible ratings. Perhaps one will soon be available that is popcorn-worthy and allow for a larger audience. All night we kept debating who would win the \$100.00 cash pot prize for the best photo but with every picture gaining new raves we eventually called it a draw. These new cameras really add to the snorkeling experience and offer the ability to share the wonderful things seen with others.

Midnight had us all asleep and the morning sunshine brought more promise of clear waters. We cooked a dozen eggs with onions and cheese and Ed brought a new delight to the table from the streamside woods beyond the widowmaker — Paw Paws, North America's largest native fruit. No, apples and watermelons ain't from 'round here but the Lewis and Clark expedition were said to have lived on these native fruits for two weeks. A unique taste, kind of like banana custard,

they were once prized for their tropical flavor. But with the rise of imports in the early 1900s they fell out of favor. A good camp breakfast complimented with flat-head biscuits and watermelon too.

Dave was ready for a home recovery from the Indian or Buffalo Flu and Ed, eager to spend time with his son, left us six. We revised our plan to spend the first part of the day

snorkeling the campside stream. I tried to call President Bruce as we were to meet him at another site that morning, to let him know of our change of plan. Unfortunately no contact was made and Bruce spent his day pushing a rolled up 12' seine in solitary fashion. Sorry, Bruce, but he told me he had a good time in clear fish-laden water though was muscle-worn from his efforts. The water here at the campsite had returned to crystal clarity and we were soon immersed and clicking fishy photos and sharing garbled snorkel speak. Many of us were content to stay in one run for an hour or more as the diversity that presented itself was quite spectacular. Multicolored darters, subtly patterned shiners, stark-banded sculpins along with shimmering herds of stonerollers all enjoyed the sunshine streaming in. Longear Sunfish, pretty in the light, promoted themselves while red-eyed Rock Bass hung back deep in the shadows. Disturbed madtoms raced to dark crevasses as stones were gently turned. Tennessee Shiners in shimmering blue and vermilion-finned Redtailed Chubs gathered downstream of our stirring hoping to catch any tiny morsels exposed. The light continued to stream in and the fish flashed brilliant in the sun and clear water, and yet the day was still young.


...continued in the next issue of AC 



Fig. 5.
Duck Darter Party.

Please see Casper's photo storyboards related to this article on pages 21 and 22!

AquaCam Snorkel Camp

LABOR DAY WEEKEND 2009 CENTRAL TENNESSEE

Jeremy after the perfect shot LM



Split world view LM



Blenny Darter TC



Blotchside Logperch CC



Female Redline Darter CC



Creek Chub JM



Shivering Scott, Casper & Bryce Kathy Roper



Scott & Casper chasing darters IM



Buffalo Darter BG



Monkeyface TC



Male Whitetail Shiner JM



Stonerolling herd JM



All Photos by Lance Merry, Todd Crail, Jeremy Monroe, Bryce Gibson & Casper Cox

Peeking Redhorse CC



Redline Darter nosing a finger LM

Todd after the shiners CC



Camoed Sculpin TC



Tennessee's Passion Flower LM



Swan Creek Ditch Cricket JM

Inviting water flowing under the Natchez Parkway BG



Black Spotted Topminnow BG

Hog Suckering CC



California Jacks Cabin & Gang CC



Scott's new snorkeling buddy BG



Duck Darter CC

All Photos by Lance Merry, Todd Crail, Jeremy Monroe, Bryce Gibson & Casper Cox