

AquaCam Snorkel Camp 2009: Part 2

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Ed. note — Having spent a few days photographing fish and other aquatic life in Tennessee streams, Casper and the rest of the Snorkel Camp Eight continue on to more streams and partake in great meals at more local eateries. It sounds like a fun time is being had by all! When we last left Casper, he and the others were beginning yet another day of snorkeling in the cool Tennessee waters, looking for more life to photograph.

Back to the picnic tables for lunch — and the sun's warmth — we counted our species and discussed the taxonomic revisions that were describing new species. The expanded number of snubnose darters overwhelms me but the differences were obvious when viewing them, and our photos do help much in these discussions. Saffron, Duck, Westrim, Clown, and Buffalo are the new Snubs, Speckled and Orangethroat. Jeremy decided it was time to head back to the Nashville Airport and goodbyes and promises were exchanged. Todd wanted to jump a watershed and observe other species and Lance and Scott went along for the short ride to new water. Bryce and I were content to stay

and explore the stream's flow between the two locations we had already done. A short walk through the woods brought us to another streamside campsite where a few flowing turns and a quiet pool beckoned. Into the water, we took turns clicking pictures in the clear pool. Studfish and Blackspotted Topminnows patrolled the surface, while each settled darter was attentive to the substrate, hunting and pecking at every minute tidbit. Just because we can't see what they are eating, their big downcast eyes certainly do. We could hear distant gunshots and now thunder was gathering closer with every rumble. A loud crack raised our heads simultaneously, and looking at each other we knew instantly what we should do. Quickly standing and soon briskly walking back through the woods, we prepared the camp for the coming rain which was soon upon us, soaking the ground to create puddles around our tents and cars. Bryce and I sat on my van's bumper beneath the upswung hatch pleased with our timing and enjoyed the rain falling in the lush green forest.

Soon it passed and the gunshots resumed in the distance, so back to the water we went. I headed well downstream to

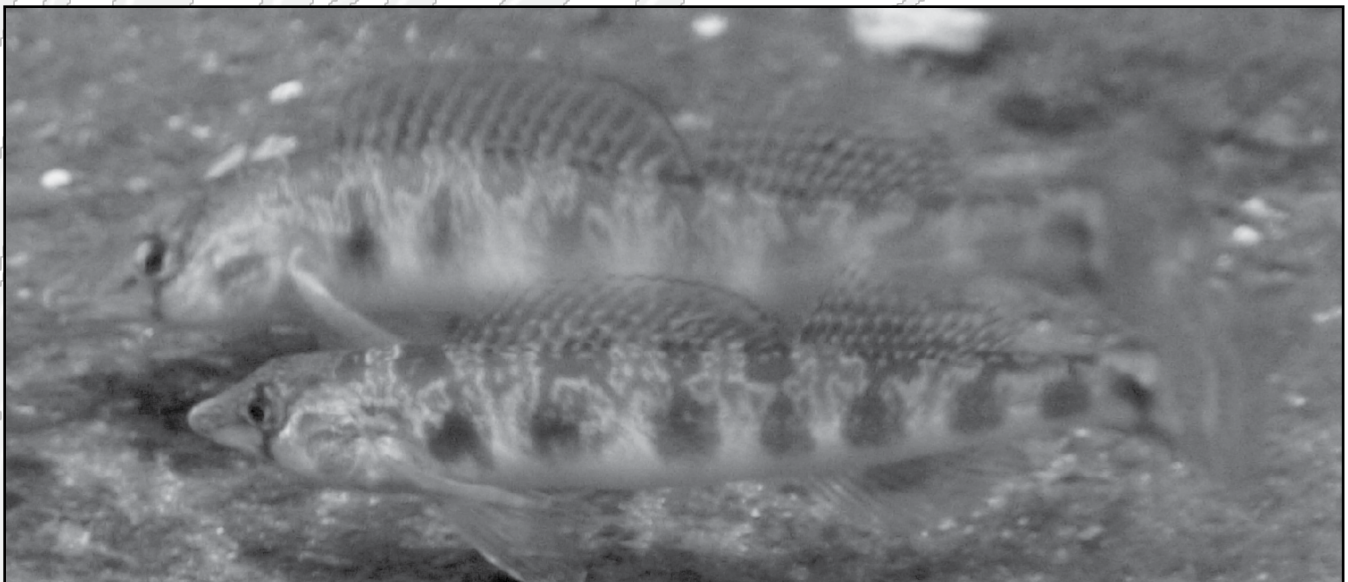


Fig. 1.

A pair of displaying Blotchside Logperch.



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Fig. 2.

Proud Male Longear Sunfish.

where I had observed the Greenside Darter town hall meeting months before. Not many were in attendance today but a Blotchside Logperch (Fig. 1) was present and content to flip stones as I moved ever closer with my tiny camera. The water had remained clear after the short cloudburst and I clicked many more shots before the sun began to lower below the tree line. The battery light flashed red and I got a few remaining shots of a redhorse peering from beneath a pair of stones and of a shadow-patterned, golden-flecked Rock Bass hidden deep in a crevasse.

To the shower house, hot water, clean dry clothes and with the full crew returned, the five of us headed to the cookhouse with Todd's laptop in tow. Baskets of hush puppies were set on the big round table and our orders placed for fried or grilled catfish, salads and potatoes. After the fine meal we pushed Todd to the wall with his laptop before him and us gathered behind. Cables were stretched and memory cards exchanged as we "oohed" and "awed" at every picture. Stories were shared and new species identified from today's sites, including Coppercheeks and Gilt darters. The other diners began to look from their tables and were soon gathered over our shoulders as we testified to the wonders we had seen in that creek flowing just beyond the cookhouse. We held the onlookers' attention and preached the promise of spring spawning colors that would soon come. Pulsing masses of

orange Tennessee Shiners will surely gather over a chub nest at the end of a long gravel run. Striped Shiners in pearlescent hues will dominate the mound's peak while the horny headed Redtailed Chub will gather more stones. Vividly marked Scarlet Shiners will certainly race in and out of the frenzied mass of living color. There is a lot more to see than bass and sunfish (Fig. 2) in these waters, and we shared the motivational speech to keep those streams clean and alive.

Experiences, testimony and sermons had filled our day and we all retreated straight to our tents for a contented rest. Tents were dry except for Bryce's but he was glad to be safe from the widowmaker and well above the wet tent floor on an air mattress. The rain had tested our camping skills.

Sunday morning had us organizing the camp and gear for departure and an excellent six-dollar breakfast of scrambled eggs, hash brown casserole, biscuits, gravy, bacon and jam was provided by Bill and Kathy. They were the finest of hosts and eager to hear of our adventures. Cash was exchanged and expenses were settled up and goodbyes and thank-you's said. But Todd had still not seen a Blotchside though many were present and had been observed by most everyone else. It's another example affirming that one can go to the same site and have a different experience each time, seeing different species and observing different behaviors. A promised quick plunge in a verified Blotchside pool soon



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Fig. 3.

Jeremy, Todd & Bryce reviewing their camera gear.

turned into a two-hour photo quest for the perfect shot. Scott and I were content to sit at the streamside picnic table and share stories about our lives at home. I was clean, warm and satisfied to stay out of the cold morning water and wanted to begin our drive east feeling the same. As Todd got out, I asked if he had seen any of the Southern Redbelly Dace at the spring outflow, but he had not. I grabbed my mask and camera and eased under the short bridge to where Bill had built a small planked dam allowing for a small pool to gather for his drinking water. He had asked me not to snorkel there for obvious reasons but I was able to kneel and lean over the wide planks and peer into the water. Sure enough, I could quickly make out brightly colored Southern Redbelly Dace and Blacknose Dace too, but was positioned very awkwardly trying to take focused pictures. Though the blurred pictures as proof were humorously debated, I for one can clearly make out the red and golden blurs as belonging to the proper species. These two and Todd's addition of Bluntnose Minnow made our final, in creek, species count to be 31.

With the count tallied and Lance and Todd having all the

photos of Blotchside they could prod and pose, we made our final packing and turned east. I asked Scott to ride along so we could talk some more and the Tennessee countryside passed by uneventfully, although I suspect Scott enjoyed the rustic southern views being a visitor from New York.

After an hour or so we arrived at the acclaimed Stan's, just across the street from a Cracker Barrel. Todd and Scott had stopped there on the way to the camp Thursday and Todd has raved about it for years. Now it was my turn to sit down at the table and ponder the nutritional value of cracklins. Our waitress kindly spoke of the variations of regional cornbread and brought us an unadorned sampling of the deep-fried pig skin to pass around. The "Yankee Three" (Fig. 3) were soon brought to the light and Todd has decided to move to the southlands. A fine dinner was had and desserts shared. I think Todd is correct when he said, "Stan's is what Cracker Barrel wants to be".

Though sunshine had been predicted for the Labor Day weekend, we were once again driving through a misting rain. As we approached McMinnville there was some confusion, and our three vehicles pulled over with Todd in the lead. Scott hopped out

AquaCam Snorkel Camp Species List:

Species observed by one or more of the participants.

Identification and compiling assistance from Dave Neely and Todd Crail.

Minnows:

Central Stoneroller *Campostoma anomalum* (cf *oligolepis*)
 Largescale Stoneroller *Campostoma oligolepis*
 Rosyside Dace *Clinostomus funduloides*
 Whitetail Shiner *Cyprinella galactura*
 Steelcolor Shiner *Cyprinella whipplei*
 Spotfin Chub *Cyprinella monacha*
 Blotched Chub *Erimystax insignis*
 Bigeye Chub *Hybopsis amblops*
 Striped Shiner *Luxilus chrysocephalus*
 Scarlet Shiner *Lythrurus fasciolaris*
 Mountain Shiner *Lythrurus lirus*
 Redtail Chub *Nocomis effusus*
 River Chub *Nocomis micropogon*
 Bigeye Shiner *Notropis boops*
 Tennessee Shiner *Notropis leuciodus*
 Telescope Shiner *Notropis telescopus*
 Southern Redbellied Dace *Chrosomus erythrogaster*
 HYBRID *Chrosomus* x *Clinostomus*
 Bluntnose Minnow *Pimephales notatus*
 Western Blacknose Dace *Rhinichthys obtusus*
 Creek Chub *Semotilus atromaculatus*

Suckers:

Creek Chubsucker *Erimyzon oblongus*
 Northern Hogsucker *Hypentelium nigricans*
 Black Redhorse *Moxostoma duquesnei*
 Golden Redhorse *Moxostoma erythrurum*

Catfishes:

Elegant Madtom *Noturus elegans* (Fig. 5)
 Brindled Madtom *Noturus miurus*

Topminnows:

Northern Studfish *Fundulus catenatus*
 Black Spotted Topminnow *Fundulus olivaceus*

Sculpins:

Mottled Sculpin *Cottus sp cf bairdii*
 Banded Sculpin *Cottus caroliniae*

Sunfishes:

Rock Bass *Ambloplites rupestris*
 Green Sunfish *Lepomis cyanellus*
 Warmouth Sunfish *Lepomis gulosus*
 Bluegill *Lepomis macrochirus*
 Longear Sunfish *Lepomis megalotis*
 Smallmouth Bass *Micropterus dolomieu*
 Spotted Bass *Micropterus punctulatus*
 Largemouth Bass *Micropterus salmoides*

Perches:

Coppercheek Darter *Etheostoma aquali*
 Orange-fin Darter *Etheostoma bellum*
 Buffalo Darter *Etheostoma bison*
 Greenside Darter *Etheostoma blennioides newmanni*
 Blenny Darter *Etheostoma blennius*
 Rainbow Darter *Etheostoma caeruleum*
 Black Darter *Etheostoma duryi*
 Cherry Darter *Etheostoma etneri*
 Fantail Darter *Etheostoma flabellare*
 Saffron Darter *Etheostoma flavum*
 Barrens Darter *Etheostoma forbesi*
 Redband Darter *Etheostoma luteovinctum*
 Spotted Darter *Etheostoma maculatum*
 Blackfin Darter *Etheostoma nigripinne*
 Westrim Darter *Etheostoma occidentale*
 Duck darter *Etheostoma planasaxatile*
 Redline Darter *Etheostoma rufilineatum*
 Bloodfin Darter *Etheostoma sanguifluum*
 Bluegrass Darter *Etheostoma sp cf stigmaeum*
 Clown Darter *Etheostoma sp cf stigmaeum*
 Banded Darter *Etheostoma zonale*
 Blotchside Logperch *Percina burtoni*
 Logperch *Percina caprodes*
 Gilt Darter *Percina evides*

and briskly trotted up to Todd's passenger window just as Todd pulled away. Scott looked back confused and then turned and ran ahead faster to try and tap on Todd's window. Todd quickly sped away again and Scott looked back at me just as I stepped on the gas, slinging gravel and speeding past him standing alone on the shoulder. I still laugh when I remember Scott's expressions.

Pulling under the bridge below the Collins River Dam, the Three donned their wetsuits and snorkel gear while I bare-skinned-it further downstream. The water visibility was just a couple feet but enough to look at darters, gathering shiners and the carpets of Asian Clams. A couple years ago I had been confused by the darters here and was hoping for some resolution. If I had studied my Tennessee book I would have been made quickly aware of the unique situation. What I had been considering an unusual form of Redlines were obviously Bloodfin

Darters (Fig. 4) as we set seines and captured handsome bull males with their flanks marked by vermilion spots. Stunningly beautiful. The females and the juveniles certainly resemble Redlines to the common eye, but these striking males were unmistakable. Interestingly, and odd to me, the range maps in Etnier and Starnes's book illustrate the Collins system to be occupied by the Bloodfins, yet exempt of any Redlines. However the surrounding river systems are filled with Redlines north, south, east and west. Interesting!

A couple of years ago we worked a spring run flowing along the bridge's base and seined a healthy fill of Southern Redbelly Dace, Redbanded and Barrens darters from a shallow pool. Today the stream bed and pools were filled with layers of dusky red silt. Obviously, something was going on upstream and though we walked further upstream than ever before, the source was not found. The diversity and quantity of fish were

obviously impacted and, sadly, something one encounters more and more in these ventures. Any disturbed ground has a negative impact when rains wash it down and despair can become an emotion of the day.

Todd and Lance set up their photo gear while Scott assisted me in capturing a few pooled studfish for my one lone male back at home. We also seined a few Scarlet Shiners, which are

always a fine addition, and I was content with these fishes for the trip but for the lacking exception of my Mason Jar Creek Chubsucker.

We all expressed our pleasure at such a good outing and they departed for Nashville as I debated my options.

Spring has its new promises. 🐟



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Fig. 4.
Bloodfin Darter standing guard below the dam.



© Casper Cox

Fig. 5.
Disturbed madtom exposed to the day's light.



Blotchside Logperch - Casper Cox



Fig. 1.

A Blotchside Logperch rests on a stream bottom when it was spotted by participants of the AquaCam Snorkel Camp in 2009.

All photos on this page were submitted by Casper Cox.



Fig. 2.

A Duck Darter poses on top of a boulder.



Fig. 3.

A Blenny was hiding in a vegetated pool.



Fig. 4.

A view that truly is a snorkeler's delight.



Fig. 5.

A Bloodfin Darter displays its bright-red stipples.



Fig. 6.

A Buffalo Darter holds tight amongst some gravel and cobble.