

SNORKELING IN THE OCALA NATIONAL FOREST OF NORTHERN FLORIDA

by Konrad Schmidt, St. Paul, Minnesota

The Ocala National Forest offers a unique recreational experience that many NANFA members may wish to consider trying if they are collecting fish or vacationing in northern Florida. There are three recreational areas within the Forest where large springs surface, creating crystal-clear pools that provide excellent snorkeling opportunities. The names of these sites are Alexander, Juniper, and Salt Springs Recreation Areas.

I first learned of these areas in the Rand-McNally National Forest Guide that listed snorkeling among several other recreational activities available at the Ocala National Forest. I was planning a canoe trip to Okefenokee Swamp at the time and decided to throw the masks, fins, and snorkel in with the camping gear for a small detour.

I arrived at Alexander Springs at about 8:30 on a December morning and found the spring pool shrouded in fog. The shoreline has been kept in a natural state except for a small swimming beach that also provides a convenient access point for snorkelers to enter the pool. I noticed many large schools of mosquito fish in the shallows and easily captured several with a small dipnet. I was tempted to try snorkeling, but decided to drive on to Juniper Springs to allow the sun to burn off some of the fog and raise the chilly morning temperatures.

I was expecting to find another natural pond-like setting at Juniper Springs, but found to my temporary disappointment what looked like a cement swimming pool about 75' in diameter. The depth only appeared to be about four or five feet through the entire pool, but I noticed a marker that indicated a maximum depth of 20' and realized the water's clarity made the pool appear a great deal shallower than it really was. I had the whole pool to myself and decided to try my first winter's dip. The water took a minute to get used to, but so do lakes and rivers in the summertime. I later learned that water temperature in these springs remains a constant 72° year-round, and this almost seemed like bath water compared to, say, some of the very cold trout streams up north.

I quickly shed all my disappointment on my first dive. The bottom was carpeted in a very dense patch of *Vallisneria* about two to three feet tall. I began to follow the undulating bottom down to about 15' below the surface. I found a small limestone cave about one foot in diameter and realized that this was a mouth of a spring. There was a very strong current gushing from that hole, and I found it somewhat difficult to hold my position. I then saw my first fish, which turned out to be Sailfin Mollies. They were schooling about 10' from the spring, all pointed into the current. Their behavior reminded me of

several other fishes I have kept in aquariums that constantly fight the artificial currents created by an airstone or "Dyna-flo" filter. When I surfaced for air, I discovered--or should I say collided--with a second species resident in the pool. The very common mosquito fish seemed to prefer the upper two or three feet. They were not bothered by my presence in the least, and several struck the glass on my mask as I moved through the water. I found a third resident about midway in depth between the other two. I was not able to identify this cyprinid, but it was about three to four inches in length with a very dark lateral band.

I continued exploring the bottom of the pool and headed toward the deepest part. It always remained slightly turbid. There I found a very large spring about eight feet in diameter, where several "sand geysers" boiled constantly. Again, not far away, another school of Sailfin Mollies patiently fought the current. I became so engrossed in what I was experiencing in the pool that I somehow lost two hours there, but I considered it time well spent. Unfortunately, what had seemed like a very leisurely activity had left me exhausted. Although I had the desire, my body was unwilling to investigate the third site, at Salt Springs. I consoled myself by promising to again return to this unusual national forest for a much longer, more detailed look.

All three recreational areas are open year-round and offer many other activities and services, such as boating, canoeing, camping, fishing, and hiking. There is a nominal fee for using some of the developed facilities, as in camping and swimming; there is also a fee for snorkeling, but the December 1984 fee for swimming was only 50¢--a small price to pay for such a unique, enjoyable experience. If anyone would like to receive more information (most of it free) on these recreation areas, write to the following address: USDA, Forest Service, 227 N. Bronough St., Suite 4061, Tallahassee, FL 32301.