

SNORKELING FOR NATIVES

by Konrad Schmidt, St. Paul, Minnesota

About ten years ago, I developed a strong interest in the idea of observing fishes in their natural habitats, and I decided to enroll in a scuba diving course. Most people taking the course at that time were interested either in shipwreck diving in Lake Superior or enhancing their Caribbean vacations. I was definitely in a minority category for wanting to explore the fish fauna in local lakes and streams. Even though the course was directed toward the interests of the majority, I still benefited, because a fair amount of time was spent on the topic of snorkeling. I soon realized that I could shed the cumbersome (and expensive) air tanks to observe many fishes because they are found in shallow water. The only equipment I really needed was a mask, fins, and snorkel. I have since tried this unusual sport in weed-choked lakes, sandy-bottomed rivers, and clear, cold trout streams. Each of these aquatic systems offers something very beautiful and unique, but I will devote the content of this article to those dives that have remained the most memorable.

I was fortunate to have two friends who shared the same interest and were willing to try something new. We decided on Crosby Lake in St. Paul for one of our first dives because we knew the area very well from fishing the lake for many years. We brought a rubber raft for safety's sake and shoved off from shore. It was late spring, but the coontail had already choked the lake's surface in the shallows, so we headed for the middle. The diving was easy and the water was surprisingly clear, but no fish were seen because of a lack of cover. We wanted to enter the coontail jungle, but fear of entanglement proved too great. We decided to turn over the raft and use it as a platform to lay on. The westerly winds gently pushed us over the coontail mats while we watched the bottom go by, viewing through our masks and breathing through our snorkels. The depth usually remained less than three feet, and the vegetation would frequently open up to small, lush patches of hair algae. Almost every patch seemed to serve as a display grounds for the Banded Killifish. I have collected this species on several occasions, but I have never observed such vivid yellows in the fins of the male. We were all puzzled by the killifish's total lack of acknowledgement as our large shadow passed over them, but we did not complain and continued to enjoy the show. When the winds eventually beached us, three pairs of fins easily propelled us across the lake for another ride.

I have snorkeled in many other lakes, but the lush vegetation usually hides the smaller species I prefer to observe. Largemouth Bass, Northern Pike, and sunfish are very common. Many would make any trophy-hunting angler drool, but I have always been more fascinated by what streams and rivers have to offer. I have found these systems generally provide a greater

species diversity and an intriguing variety of natural landscapes and aquascapes. Unfortunately, most large rivers in this region are either laden with silt that severely limits visibility or are navigable to commercial barges. Our group has generally snorkeled in streams that have some type of protective designation. We have had many rewarding experiences diving around rock bars in the St. Croix Wild and Scenic River, but again, as in lakes, most fishes observed were the larger species such as Walleyes, Sauger, and Channel Oats.

We eventually tried a former collecting site called the Rush River east of Ellsworth, Wisconsin. The Rush is a designated trout stream that I would describe as a large creek. The width rarely exceeds twenty feet and we have found some pools to have a depth of seven. Fishermen know this stream for yielding a state-record Brown Trout. I know it for one of my first collections of homely Mottled Sculpins and brilliantly colored Rainbow Darters. We decided to enter the stream at a very large pool that stretched for about 100 yards before it tumbled over a boulder-strewn rapids. As we trudged into the stream, the frigid waters instantly produced the largest goose bumps that I would hope to experience. We realized our cut-offs provided inadequate protection against the temperature we were subjecting ourselves to; but, being stubborn and unwilling to admit defeat, we proceeded toward total, teeth-chattering submersion. The underwater view was incredible and quickly took our minds off our hypothermic condition. The water's clarity allowed us a viewing range of about 30 feet in either direction. I took a closer look and noticed that the three of us were swimming within a large school of shiners. They completely ignored us until we tried grabbing for them. Even this caused a minimal reaction. The shiners simply moved to just inches out of our reach.

I headed for the deepest part of the pool to check out another school of minnows near the bottom. They turned out to be young suckers about four inches long. I noticed that there was something odd about the bottom; I had presumed that it would be silt or sand, but here was a clean floor of limestone. Roughly in the middle of the stream, the floor had been cut by a trench about two feet deep and three feet wide. I wondered how long it took the water to carve this scar in the bedrock, but time in geologic terms has always boggled my mind, so I rejoined the others and headed upstream. We moved in closer to shore and found a narrow band of limestone rubble. The area provided habitat for Johnny Darters and Mottled Sculpins that fled into the crevices as we approached. We continued upstream and the pool shallowed to about three feet. Suddenly, a school of about 20 large fish flushed off the bottom, then settled down again just a few feet away. At our first glimpse, we thought they were trout because of the intense red in their bodies and fins, but they allowed us a second, longer look that revealed them to be some species of redhorse in their spawning colors.

When we reached the bottom of the rapids, we found a chute where we could easily pull our way up through the rapids single-file. Unfortunately for me, I was the last in line, and my two "friends" entered the next pool without waiting for stragglers. When I caught up to them, they were shouting at each

other in words that come to most of us in moments of excitement, but cannot be printed here. After they had calmed down, I heard a fishy tale about the two of them coming nose-to-nose with a monstrous Brown Trout. Chagrined by the whole episode, I did not wish to believe their story, but such a detailed, emotional account could not have been fabricated in so little time. As we stood there talking, all of us began shivering again due to our inactivity. We decided to head back to our starting point and call it a day.

I hope this article adequately conveys the exciting and unique experience that snorkeling has to offer, but it is really something that must be tried to gain a full appreciation of the sport. I would like to make a few suggestions to anyone interested in trying it for the first time. First, the cardinal rule among scuba divers is never to dive alone. It should be followed by all snorkelers, even in shallow water. Second, some type of flotation device should be used in deep water. A truck inner tube towed by the diver usually works very well and provides an excellent resting station. Third, when snorkeling in cold water, consider using a wet suit, which will prevent hypothermia and provide a much more pleasant experience. Fourth, some people, including myself, experience some discomfort in the ears at about eight feet. This pressure can be relieved by pinching off both nostrils and gently exhaling. Finally, anyone desiring more information can read Diving for Fun, a book by Joe Strykowski, or consider taking a scuba diving course.

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Cf. "Through a Glass Brightly," an account of snorkeling in the NJ Pine Barrens, AO, Oct. '82.--Ed.