

# A SOUTHERN ILLINOIS OUTING



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Southern Illinois is home to three large darter species in the *Catonotus* subgenus that do not occur elsewhere in the state: Spottail Darter (*Etheostoma squamiceps*), Stripetail Darter (*E. kennicotti*), and Fringed Darter (*E. crossopterygum*). I wanted to photograph them and Ben Cantrell (Illinois NANFA rep, from Peoria) also wanted to catch this trio. My friend, Sarah Wood, happens to have a friend nearby she wanted to see. Win-win all around, so we decided to make a weekend trip. We all drove as far as we could Friday after work. Sarah and I crashed in Benton, while Ben made it all the way to Cave-In-Rock. The plan was to convene bright and early Saturday morning around Iron Furnace. Iron Furnace is a massive stone iron smelting structure hidden within the Shawnee Forest, a mini-Mayan temple of sorts within the Shawnee. It's hard to miss.

I have caught large *Catonotus* relatives within the highland rim of Tennessee in the past. They were easily seined in riffles with large flat cover stones. These fish have egg mimics and are cavity nesters. In March, males find room under these cover stones, form a nest, and keep guard. Females deposit eggs on the underside of the nests' cover stone. This trip, the streams were chert-filled, Ozarkian-like streams lacking riffles with the key cover stone ingredient. The only large rock was along bridge embankments for stabilization. It's less than kickable, but Ben had this figured out already. A tiny hook and bait dropped at the edge of each rock would determine if one was hiding underneath. If occupied, a curious male would dart out and grab the bait. Ben makes it look easy. He's also a ninja with a dipnet, somehow managing to capture a tuberculate Creek Chubsucker (*Erimyzon oblongus*).

Fringed and Spottail darters are nearly identical. In fact, it was thought both populations in Illinois were Spottail Darters

until 1998. The two are only differentiated by the egg mimic growths occurring on the soft dorsal fin of males during the spawning season.

At one location Ben and Sarah went off and fished further downstream while I photographed. They ran into a mess of redhorse, catching both Golden (*Moxostoma erythrurum*) and Black (*M. duquesnei*). They were even tuberculate! Good thing I had packed the medium photo tank, just in case. A Golden Redhorse was photographed, knobby snout and all.



Creek Chubsucker



Fringed Darter



Spottail Darter

Photos by the author.

Lance Merry is a commercial truck driver by night and conservation blogger by day, and loves ecology of native fishes, orchids, and salamanders. He is the photographer for the upcoming *Fishes of Missouri*, 3rd ed., and created the booklet *Orchids of Macon County, Illinois*. His work has been featured in many publications (and illegally poached all over the web). His dream of viable conservation employment with his degree in biology has led to a career of new careers: yard maintenance, lab technician, photographer, fermentation technician, retail vendor, truck driver. See more of the journey at [earthinaffection.com](http://earthinaffection.com)



Sarah and Golden Redhorse.



Ben and a Fringed Darter.

Ben was after a Black Redhorse for his fishing life-list. (Follow Ben at his fishing blog: [bencantrellfish.blogspot.com](http://bencantrellfish.blogspot.com).)

That evening we camped at Horseshoe Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area. We arrived at dusk and setup shop. Ben pulled out his camping stove and we pulled out our travel cookware. I got to chopping and Sarah started cooking whatever was grabbed from the kitchen on the way out...potatoes, onions, celery, asparagus, bouillon cubes, flour, eggs, and chorizo. Final result: A gourmet, savory dumpling stew. Illuminated by headlamp. Enjoyed by all.

Ben split for Kentucky the following morning. Sarah and I meandered northward, stopping to capture Slender Madtoms (*Noturus exilis*) and visit with a friend, Amber. Slender Madtoms were easily found, along with a bounty of Orangethroats (*E. spectabile*), Rainbows (*E. caeruleum*), and strange darter hybrids of the two. Up the road was a small strip from a remnant logging community that is now a hippie's dream of random art and exceptional custom craft stores. The girls did a little browsing, soaking up the local creativity then tried their hand at seining which ended up being a lot of splashing and catching up on life.



Orangethroat Darter (top) and two hybrids.



Slender Madtom