

SPRING BREAK 2015 NANFA STYLE



Casper Cox (with help from Fritz Rohde)

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Ft. Lauderdale, Daytona Beach, white sand, blue water, girls in bikinis, and buff guys strutting down the beach. NANFA Style? No way! Just eight old or getting old NANFA geeks heading to the Rainbow River close to Dunnellon near the west coast of Florida the first week of February (1-7). Isaac Szabo (our host from AR) had conceived the idea and he was joined by fellow NANFAns Rudy Arndt (NJ), Casper Cox (TN), Bryce Gibson (TN), Mike Lucas (NY), Fritz Rohde (NC), Derek Wheaton (VA), and Michael Wolfe (GA). For those of you who closely look at the photographs in recent issues of *American Currents*, you will recognize that the list contains most of the best underwater photographers in

NANFA. The “Elite Eight” were joined by Floridians Don Clark and Doug Dame (briefly).

DAY 1 SUNDAY “THE RAINBOW RIVER AND LIONS CLUB SUPERFISHBOWL”

Misty morning walk, dips from the dock, excellent breakfast buffet at Carmela’s, produce from the local fruit stand, groceries gathered at the Winn-Dixie, snorkeled the Rainbow dock area, drifted to the K.P. Hole with Don Clark, and observed the small cave opening, sand boils, an Otter, and lone Gar. That late afternoon we went to the Yankeetown Lions Club for the Super Bowl, the West Coast’s Seattle Seahawks



The house on the Rainbow River. (Photo by Michael Wolfe)



Our first morning’s view of the inviting crystal clear Rainbow River. (Photos by Isaac Szabo)



Gathered at the entrance of the Yankeetown Lions Club, ready for the Superbowl party: Don Clark, Casper Cox, Mike Lucas, Isaac Szabo, Michael Wolfe, Derek Wheaton, Bryce Gibson. (Photo by Doug Dame)

vs the East Coast's New England Patriots with an exciting ending. The Lions Club members grilled Nathan's hotdogs and burgers and the ladies providing a long counter of assorted dips and chips, deviled eggs, marinated asparagus, nuts, candies, cookies, and cake. All attended except a resting Rudy and the yet to arrive Fritz. The Lion ladies gifted us with various leftovers for the week ahead as we departed. The Lions Clubhouse featured a big projection wall for the game, tiered seating, bar, and pool tables. Our group of 7 NANFA Fishheads complimented the 25ish Lion members. Doug Dame was our inviting member. Go Darters!

Species observed in the Rainbow River that first day:

- Sunfish: Spotted, Redear, Bluegill, Redbreast, Bass (undecided species).
- Silversides: Inland and probably Brooks with faint red noses, yellow green bodies, and longer noses.
- Shiners: Large Golden Shiners with red fins, probably Coastal Shiners, and perhaps Weed Shiners too.
- Schools of Redeye Chubs.
- Chubsuckers: probably Lake with forward facing mouths, according to Derek.
- Killies: Seminole some with blue hazing on their upper surfaces.
- Sailfin Mollies, Bluefin Killifish, Least Killies, Gambusia including melanistic males.
- Bowfin.
- Florida Gar.
- Atlantic Needlefish.
- Big Grass Carp.
- A dead Catfish.
- Michael dipnetted a Pygmy Sunfish.

About 23 species all together.

Gizzard Shad were added a few days later.



Sailfin Molly (*Poecilia latipinna*). (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Sailfin Molly mating. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Melanistic male Western Mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*) from Rainbow River. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Florida Largemouth Bass (*Micropterus salmoides floridanus*) and babies. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Longnose Gar (*Lepisosteus osseus*). (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Florida Largemouth Bass (*Micropterus salmoides floridanus*), Rainbow River. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



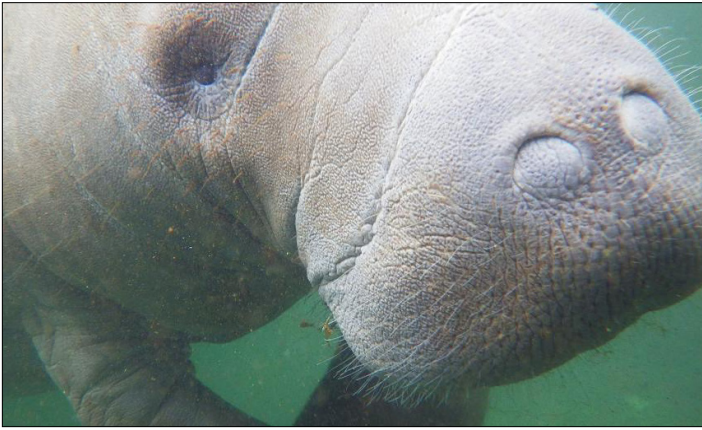
Swimming Double-crested Cormorant. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Gizzard Shad (*Dorosoma cepedianum*). (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Casper dipnetting for oranges (illegally). (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



Manatee, puppy dog friendly. Come rub my belly some more please! (Photo by Casper Cox)

DAY 2 MONDAY "THE CHAZ, MANATEES, AND PICTURESQUE BOAT TRIP"

Chaz is the appropriate local jargon for the Chassahowitzka River. Don met us at the Homosassa Springs State Park parking lot with his Go-Devil John Boat in tow and we caravanned a few miles to the Chaz spring head and campground store. Don took Isaac and Michael across the narrow river to the Manatee sighting and returned for myself and Bryce, taking us a bit further upstream to the Seven Sisters Springs, which were a series of limestone openings connected by streaming sunlight. Drifting downstream after exploring the Sisters we found Isaac and Michael belly rubbing a split-tailed Manatee whom wholeheartedly would rub his toenailed flippers together and roll over repeatedly for belly scratching sessions.

Boat ride to the salty spray Gulf with detours for Bromeliads (airplants), photographic tropical views of Cabbage Palm woodlands, wild Orange trees, Herons (Greats, Blues, and debated Nights), ordered flocks of Gulls riding high in the blue sky sunshine, stilted houses with solar panels and rain tank caches, an American Bald Eagle, and the Dixie Stars and Bars flying in the returning breeze.



Okefenokee Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma okefenokee*), male from Ochlawaha River, FL. (Photo by Fritz Rohde)



One of the Seven Sisters limestone openings with a Gray Snapper (*Lutjanus griseus*) investigating. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Chaz stilthouse. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



School of Striped Mullet (*Mugil cephalus*), ready to feed the masses, smoked, grilled or fried. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Bowfin (*Amia calva*). (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Bluefin Killifish (*Lucania goodei*). (Underwater photo by Bryce Gibson)

The presidential arrival of Fritz after dark, with Mike and Derek in tow, after meeting them to the north where they were dipnetting for small critters.

DAY 3 TUESDAY “MANATEE SPRINGS, DIPNETTING THE WACCASASSA RIVER, AND FROGMORE STEW”

Red Maples with whirling bright red seedpods. Azaleas and Redbuds beginning to bloom, so early for me. A cold morning as we arrived at Manatee Springs. Massive school of Florida (*Lepisosteus platyrhincus*) and Longnose (*L. osseus*) Gar downstream of the roped-off swimming area. Snorkeling was not allowed in that part but Michael and I yearned to do it. A small Manatee did visit the swimming area that Derek and Bryce got to swim alongside.

Mullets galore. Fishes of note included Bluefin Killifish (*Lucania goodei*), Sailfin Molly (*Poecilia latipinna*), Bowfin (*Amia calva*), Grass Carp (*Ctenopharyngodon idella*), jet-



Aquamonk Bryce warming in the chilled air after a cool spring plunge. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Grass Carp, AKA the introduced Amur, a muck-eating monster fish. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



The local BBQ stand served up fresh grilled Manatee Dogs. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Sandhill Cranes. (Photo by Fritz Rohde)

black nesting Gulf Coast Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma gilberti*), and a Catfish (either a Blue *Ictalurus furcatus* or a bluish Channel *I. punctatus*).

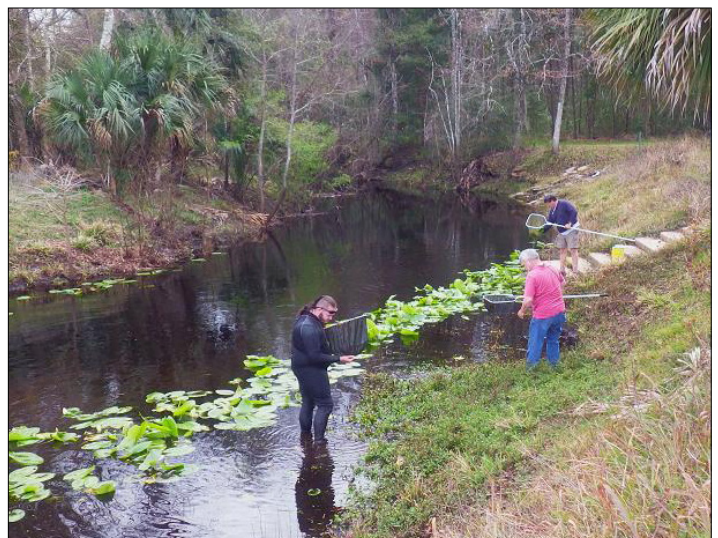
Lunch consisted of fresh-grilled Manatee Dogs served by a local BBQ specialist. Convicts working nearby, Fritz setting up his photo tank, wild oranges in the beautiful park.



Isaac and fresh-caught Fliers from the Waccasassa. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Michael and Don posing American Gothic style. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Derek, Mike, and Don checking their nets along the old Waccasassa launch site. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Chef Fritz with his regional favorite Frogmore Stew. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Michael snorkeling the Rainbow River with his GoPro. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



Rudy with a mullet through his head. Painted in 2000 by Whaling Wall muralist Wyland and assisted by artist Guy Harvey. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Water-prism colored Rainbow River Redbreast Sunfish (*Lepomis auritus*). (Photo by Casper Cox)

On the road trip back we dipnetted at two sites including the Waccasassa River. Bowfin, Longnose Gar, Swamp Darter (*Etheostoma fusiforme*), Killies including *Fundulus chrysotus*, Pygmys, Pirate Perch (*Aphredoderus sayanus*), Fliers (*Centrarchus macopterus*) and stopping to photograph Sandhill Cranes.

Dinner: Fritz's Frogmore Stew, sans the frogs. Fine dining at the house. Finished it off with Chocolate Creme Cake gifted by the Lions Club Ladies.

DAY 4 WEDNESDAY "RAINBOW RIVER, HOMOSASSA STATE PARK, AND CUBAN CUISINE"

Isaac, Bryce, and Michael kayaked to the springhead of the Rainbow, ignoring my request to be towed upstream. They spoke of crystal-clear water and algae-free plants, and no gators. I solo snorkeled the reeded and *Hydrilla*-laden dock area and lastly supermacro videoed Least Killifish (*Heterandria formosa*) gathered over a submerged concrete block.

Rudy returned from a short exploring drive and we visited Homosassa Springs about an hour away, arriving about 4pm. Intro video featuring the park's history and the Mana-

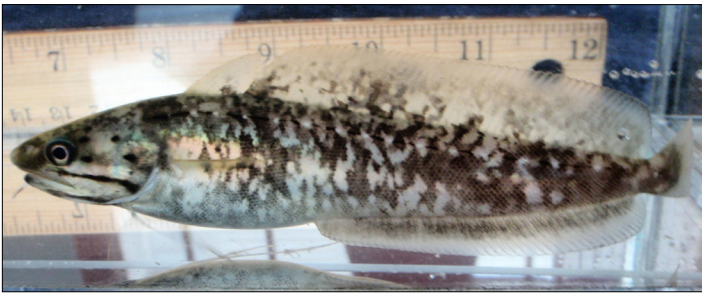


Least Killies, male and female, swimming above a submerged cement block. (Underwater photo by Casper Cox)

tee refuge and rehab center; Winslow Homer prints, and historical notes lining the walls. Too late in the day for the value of a full paid tour.

DAY 5 THURSDAY "RAINBOW RIVER AFTERNOON SNORKEL, CROCK POT BBQ"

Rainy morning, delayed sunshine. Mike headed to Tampa Bay on a saltwater quest and Fritz headed to the Gulf looking for killifish and gobies. I never left the house's property. Snorkeling, crossed to the far side sans a cumbersome dive flag and enjoyed the beautiful views in full sunlight. I finally was feeling the presence of glory. Cleaner plants, submerged logs providing interesting



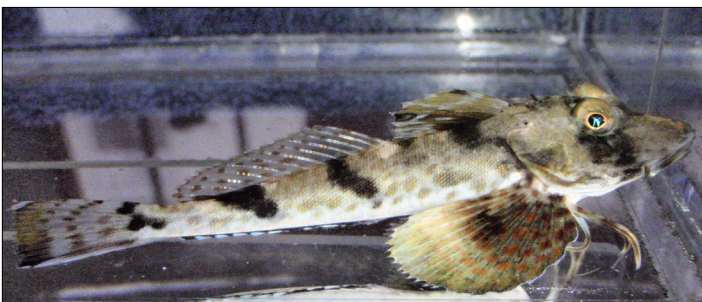
Southern Hake (*Urophycis floridanus*). (Photo by Mike Lucas)



"Metallic" Shiner (*Pteronotropis cf. metallicus*) at Alexander Springs Creek. (Photo by Fritz Rohde)



Decorator crab. (Photo by Mike Lucas)



Leopard Searobin (*Prionotus scitulus*). (Photo by Mike Lucas)



Close encounter with a 6-foot alligator, four of us peering fearfully close. Alexander Springs. (Photos by Bryce Gibson)

DAY 6 FRIDAY "OCALA NATIONAL FOREST"

structure, spring flows, sand boils, Gar, Silversides, and a resting Cormorant. I was very close to encircling the Cormorant's foot with my thumb and forefinger before his sharp hooked beak offered hesitation.

Dinner featured Bryce's Diane's BBQ coupled with baked beans, Winn-Dixie potato salad and slaw, and finished with warmed salted caramel mini moonpies topped with Blue Bell's homemade vanilla ice cream.

Mike's many little oddities from his trip to the salty bay were offered and passed around in a mini aquarium. More of the day's photos and videos were reviewed. Fritz shared his videos and tales from Peru as I faded away.

Early 8am departure with chilling weather but a promise of blue skies throughout the day. Beautiful spring site but my camera leaked after about 30 minutes in Alexander Springs. Mike, Derek, and Fritz had stayed about a mile downstream at the river crossing to dipnet and photo fish before meeting with us in the river an hour later.

Gator encounter. Blue Heron with green legs, a very close encounter...no camera. Poking my finger up through the vegetation, the Heron prepared for a quick knife stab.

Mystery shiners, now likely Silversides, were schooled in the white sandy shallows near the steps.



Spawning Rainwater Killifish (*Lucania parva*) at Alexander Springs. (Underwater photo by Bryce Gibson)



Seminole Killie pod gathered in the calm flow of a sunny cove. (Photo by Casper Cox)



Nile Tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) with Ladyfish (*Elops saurus*) in the background. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Copper-nosed Bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*), Alexander Springs. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



Sleeping Manatee, Silver Glen Springs. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



Spotted Sunfish (*Lepomis punctatus punctatus*), Alexander Springs. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)

Abundant Rainwater Killies (*Lucania parva*) in the shallows along with Bluefins and Sailfin Mollies, proud males waving their exaggerated dorsal fins.

Snack lunch break from the back of the van, warming in the bright sun. Fritz departs for other adventures as we prepare for the 30-minute drive to Silver Glen.

Silver Glen: two Manatees, one fleeing, the other dozing;

relic copper-colored, wide-shouldered free diver scooping lost coins and jewelry from the spring; massive deep-spawning pits from cowardly *Tilapia*, large white males with hints of pink on their undersides. Golden Rainwater Killies aplenty. One lone Tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*). Extensive Ladyfish (*Elops saurus*) schools stretching far to the left and right.



Gar circling below the Bluegills. (Photo by Casper Cox)

Quick and free visit to the interesting Salt Springs, which is worthy of a return someday. Excellent dinner at Bass Champions with a clam chowder appetizer included for all. Peanut Butter Pie passed around with nine spoons. The only complaint... sitting in the NASCAR Room while the other room featured mounted Bass, Gar, and giant lures resembling Darters. BassCar might be the proper name for the restaurant but no complaints otherwise. Don's wife "Eye Lean" spoke of the Silver Spring Monkey population where your gear and picnic lunches must be stowed securely to prevent swimming, thieving Rhesus Monkeys stealing them.

Late, dark, long drive return with a session of prep, pack, and preload gear for Saturday's departures. Photos and videos were viewed well into the night.

DAY 7 SATURDAY "PACK, LOAD, DEPART"

Gathered gear, cleaned the kitchen, dispersed remaining snacks, food, and drinks. Mike crammed a massive amount of gear and coolers into his tiny car, then headed back to New York, with a stop to drop Derek off in Virginia. During the drive, they tallied up the number of species that the group had seen and came up with 80+!

Bryce and I left just a bit later, about 10, stopping in Macon at the Nu-Way Weiner for some slaw dogs, leaving Isaac and Rudy behind. We arrived back in Chattanooga about 6:15 that evening: 1350 miles total.

EPILOGUE:

The mornings were sometimes slow going trying to get motivated with the cold weather, rain, and iffy forecasts. However, generally well before noon we were in the water somewhere. Evenings were typically spent dealing with fish captures, dinner, conversations, and viewing our photos and videos collected during the day.



Salt Springs group. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



NASCAR Room with "Eye Lean". (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



Michael and Derek packing for departure with more stops in the plan. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)

A disappointment for me was the presence of way too much algae and scum in the spring runs and I was greatly disheartened by it. I had been expecting lush green



Sunning Anhinga. (Photo by Bryce Gibson)



Bryce taking aim, Silver Glen Springs. (Photo by Isaac Szabo)



Casper and the Little Blue Heron. (Photo by Michael Wolfe)

vegetation of many varieties. Man's impact is troubling and I suspect is mostly due to all the nutrients we are putting into the water via fertilizers, septic systems, and ongoing development.

The weather was acceptable but I think a month or two later would have provided more pleasant temperatures yet would offer the same low usage that the winter season provides. Come late Spring and throughout Summer the cooling crowds would certainly bring murky disturbances to anyone seeking water clarity.

Highlights were the Manatee encounters. I also enjoyed the stealthy snorkeling close encounter views of the Little Blue Heron with green legs and sunning Anhinga. The 6-ft hissing gator encounter by all those gathered near with some fear, was to be forever remembered. I would never have done so alone. The many species observed, the meals, and the fellowship all added to a great experience.

Much thanks to Isaac for planning this wonderful opportunity and his guidance. Also thanks to Don for his suggestions, shuttling, Go-Devil boat usage, and primo Manatee location encounter; Eyelean (aka Eileen) for her sister's oranges; Fritz's multi-meal cooking; Diane's BBQ; and Doug Dame for the invitation and all his welcoming Lions Club members.



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