

Swamping Through Georgia and Florida

By Ross Brock

Pick up any good road map of the State of Georgia. Look to the southern part of the state, in the vicinity of the Okefenokee Swamp, and you will see place names like Statenville, Tarver, Needmore, Council, Fargo, Edith, Moniac, St. George, and Homerville, one or two of these are fair sized towns. The rest are mostly cross roads with a general store, a home or two, and little more. The countryside consists of sparsely settled pine woods and scrub covered sand flats. I always get the impression that there are more armadillos and rattlesnakes around than people.

The waters that flow through the area as creeks or rivers carry water out of the swamp. Roadsides are dotted with borrow ponds choked with water lilies and other aquatic plants. All the water is stained brown with tannic acid and filled with fish collector's dreams. Not long ago, I spent two days collecting some of those dreams. What follows is a report of my findings.

Left home at 9 a.m. on Saturday morning. Two hours south on the Interstate is Valdosta, the jumping off spot. After a brief refueling stop for myself and the car, headed eastward on Georgia Highway 94 toward Fargo. Along the way passed through Statenville. The Alapana River looks good here, but not as good as it does farther to the north. So it's on to Needmore. Between Tarver and Needmore, borrow ponds begin to appear alongside the road. The first one gets passed by. By the time the second one appears the urge to stop and investigate has become overpowering. Out comes the old dip net and bucket from the car. The pond is abloom with water lilies. The water is low due to dry weather. If any fish are there, it should be easy to get them.

The first dip yields a nice sharpfin chubsucker, *Erimyzon tenuis* and a quantity of the Everglades pigmy sunfishes *Elassoma evergladei*. Another netful of weeds and mud contains another chubsucker, more *Elassoma*, and a large (4") banded sunfish, *Enneacanthus obesus*. This hole produced more of the same plus two big pirate perch, *Aphredoderus sayanus*. The large sunfish are really pretty when they first come out of the water. The anal and dorsal fins give off a beautiful pale blue glow in the sunlight.

There is a lot of ground to cover. So its on to the next stop a few miles down the road. Several cypress snags make this pond. Otherwise, conditions are much the same. Much the same in the way of fish are in this pond with the added bonus of diamond sunfish, *Enneacanthus gloriosus*, and starhead topminnows, *Fundulus notti*. Like all *F. notti* that I have taken out of these acid waters, the females have bright lipstick like red streaks scattered about the facial mask. Change them to less acid water and the red marks fade. The males never seem to have them.

Just west of Fargo, a small slow-moving brown stream runs under the road. At my approach starheads and numerous *Gambusia affinis*

scurry from bankside toward open water. A couple of dips with the net in various spots turn up a redfin pickerel, *Esox americanus* and more *Elassoma*. All are returned safely to the water and I continue on to Fargo, away down upon the Suwanee River.

The famous river presents a beautiful sight as it flows swiftly past town through a grand array of moss draped cypress. Fishing isn't too good here though. The area of the river in immediate proximity to the road is the local swimming hole.

Big Cypress Creek isn't much further down the road toward Edith, Ga. Collecting here turned up black crappie, *Pomoxis nigromaculatus*, fliers, *Centrarchus macropterus*, more redfin pickerel, Okefenokee pigmy sunfish, *Elassoma okefenokee*, and lemon killies, *Leptolucania ommata*. There are a lot of aquarists in this old world that would do flip flops or whatever to have either of those last two. Crappie and fliers are quite delicate under most captive conditions. Any that I need can always be gotten around home. So back to the creek they went. Redfin pickerel are a dime a dozen, and costly to feed. So back they went.

Several brook silversides, *Labidesthes sicculus*, were within easy reach of my net. The angle of the sunlight on the clear water showed off their golden bodies accentuated by deep red snouts. These are really striking fish. But, silversides have such a high oxygen requirement that the fish have to keep moving to keep fresh water flowing over the gills. Stopping them with a net almost always throws them into shock, from which very few recover. So I just avoid them as much as possible. Upstream a gator crashed through the reeds and disappeared into the water at my approach. Cooters and sliders vacated their sunning logs where they had been stacked four or five high enjoying the warm rays. A cottonmouth made lazy ripples in the water as it swam across a large pothole.

With several new prizes in the old bucket, I loaded up the car and turned south through Florida for the fifteen mile drive along Florida Highway 3 that swings back up to the Georgia State Line at the town of Moniac just across the St. Mary's River. At this point Highway 94 resumes and heads eastward across Georgia's big toe to St. George.

Approximately a mile east of Moniac, a small rivulet runs under the highway and then beneath a railroad track fifty yards away. Dry weather separates the stream into five small weed choked pools of varying depths. Past experience had shown this spot to be a real lemon killy lover's paradise. First I brought out the large net and with it captured *Fundulus chrysolus*. Juvenile fliers, a small musk turtle, but no lemons. Back to the car for a fine mesh aquarium dip net, with a twelve inch handle, and results began to appear. Pushing the little net through weedy spots within easy reach began to turn up five or six killies per net haul.

Plant life around this immediate area is most interesting. The air is usually quite humid. The ditch banks are covered with carnivorous plants and scouring rushes. Small patches of sand are red with tiny sun dews. Here and there clumps of large pitcher plants sport their interesting leafy stems. There are plenty of other things to enjoy along with the water and the fish.

Twenty or so lemon killies later, its time to move on to St. George. At St. George, it's south again on U.S. Highway 121 for Florida. The pine and palmetto thickets give way to low lying scrub oak and broom sedge. Water holes are scarce in this area. One good sized pond appears on the left side of the road. Once again the urge to check it out takes over. Stop the car and walk over to the water's edge. Again as so often before, my approach sends *Fundulus notti* scurrying for deeper waters. *Lepomis megalotis*, longear sunfish pairs have the pond edge pretty well divided into territories. Some of the males really look nice in the crystal clear water. But I have a tank full at home and don't need anymore. Then I spy a school of two inch long colorless brown fish moving rapidly along the shoreline. The first stroke with the net and nothing. The water was perfectly clear and the sand bottom was firm enough that walking about the pond in active search of my prey was easy. Soon another group appeared. A quick swipe of the net and "Voila!" it came up with three wiggling banded killies, *Fundulus cingulatus*. More search and swoop activity got me several more of both sexes. Some of the males were almost solid orange red. Fantastic! Since the pond seemed to lack anything else of interest, I packed up and headed south to Florida to look for a place to spend the night.

Claude's is the only motel in Macclerny, Florida. It certainly is no Holiday Inn. But the units are air conditioned, comfortable, and have good showers. All of which mean a lot at the end of a long, hot day in the mud. Supper consisted of a couple of pretty good hamburgers and accompaniments at a restaurant a couple of blocks down the street. The next morning would come too soon. So some sleep was now a top priority.

The next morning started with a fill up at a gas station for the car at 7 a.m. A quick breakfast followed and so down the road (Highway 121). A stop at a little black water pool beneath a bridge produced lemon killies, *Fundulus chrysotus*, a small American eel, and pirate perch.

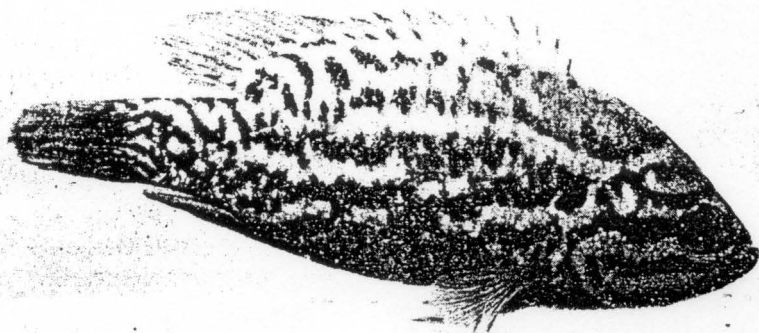
Next stop, Green Cove Springs on the St. John's River at a city park and public fishing pier. A large spring in the park produced green sailfin mollies, *Poecilia latipinna*, rainwater killies, *Lucania parva*, white mullet, *Mugil curema*, mosquito fish, *Gabusia affinis*, and more *Fundulus chrysotus*.

A couple of hours here was all I could afford. I wanted to drive up toward Jacksonville and then turn back up to Georgia to check the Alapaha River before dark. Reentry into Georgia came where I had left just below Fargo. From Fargo, a northward route along U.S. Highway 441 was followed. Just below Homerville, Ga. a brief stop was made at Tatum Creek.

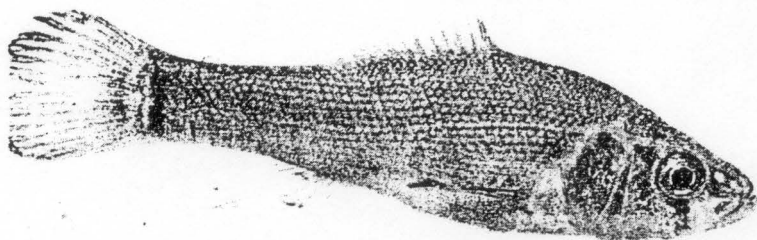
At this point, the drought had brought a fair sized creek down to a point where virtual drying up was certain. Three pools of various sizes were left, one on each side of the bridge and a small depression under the bridge. The first scoop of the net brought up redbfin pickerel, spotted sunfish, *Lepomis punctatus*, banded sunfish, and mosquito fish. Further work produced two fish that I consider to be fairly rare. The mud sunfish *Acantharcus pomotis* is a centrarchid that I feel is probably one of the rarest. If an average catch of one a year is any indication of rarity, this species must be. This time I lucked out and took two from one of the holes.



Enneacanthus chaetodon, blackband sunfish. Photo by Dick Stober



Acantharcus pomotis, mud sunfish. Photo by Ross Brock



Aphredoderus sayanus, pirate perch. Photo by Ross Brock.

Acantharcus is a mustard brown colored fish with several horizontal black bands that vary in intensity with the fish's mood. With a more elongate body than any of the other sunfish, a small round tail, and long dorsal and anal fins with considerably more basal attachment than is characteristic of other sunnies. I plan a profile on this species for a future issue of "Currents". Watch for it.

Also from this spot came more *Enneacanthus obesus* and three *Enneacanthus chaetodon*, black banded sunfish. More lemon killies and Everglades pigmy sunfishes were there too. With the water drying up like it was, I regretted having to leave any fish there to die. But I had to be hard-nosed and practical.

Continuing north to Pearson, I turned the car east on U.S. Highway 82 toward Alapaha. By the time I got there it was already 6 p.m., home was two hours away, and many fish were in need of a good water change. There is a lot of prime collecting water between Wilacoochee and Alapaha. But that is part of my regular collecting ground. So in the interest of time and the late hour, I continued on my way.

Such is the chronicle of a weekend of collecting native fish in the Southeast. Lots of good fish were taken with a shad net, very small mesh netting and a five foot handle. Seines may be all right. But such generally catch large fish that are mostly undesirable. The best fish in my collecting area live in the submerged weeds right up to the shoreline. Water this shallow and with such obstructions isn't conducive to effective seining. Some of the fish can only be gotten by scooping up a little mud. Dip nets with strong aluminum handles are important for this kind of work. With a dip net, it isn't always imperative that you get wet.

What else is there to say except I had a lot of fun, got tired, saw a lot of nice scenery, communed with nature, and filled my tanks. Isn't that what it's all about?