

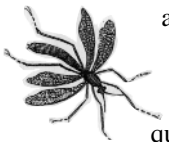
# Konrad Schmidt's "The Tail End"



## Painful Pastimes

*For more than two decades, I have collected, surveyed, and simply watched fish from Alaska to Florida. In all those years and all those places, I have had a few memorable experiences which really stand out. Some directly involve fish while others are encounters with wildlife and people.*

One advantage of living at northern latitudes is that there isn't anything wild and alive that can cause serious injury or worse. However, there are a few goodies up here that can really pack a wallop and put a damper on an outing. Mosquitoes are first and foremost. These insidious little beasts never show any mercy and always find their host. I've frequently been in places where they descend in swarming clouds so thick that I gag on them with every breath. All repellents are useless when they attack at these densities. I can tolerate bites fairly well on my arms and other parts with "ample padding," but it's always excruciating on my fingers and ears.



Another agony is anticipating the next bite. I know defeat again and again when I feel one squeeze pass the bridge on my glasses and settle in the soft, protected corner between my eyelid and nose. By the time I remove my glasses and squash the perpetrator, she's already done her dirty work and the swelling from the bite is quite impressive.



The only real protection I have are the waders on my legs, but on hot, muggy nights I shed them for sandals to drive the car. No matter how careful I am, some of the monsters hitch a ride and inflict the most hideous and longest-lasting bite of all—in the toes.

The second great test of character and fortitude are stinging nettles, which often choke the riparian areas along streams. Again, waders provide leg protection, but arms and hands are always vulnerable. One healthy brush against the formic acid-laced stingers is all it takes to produce a nightmare you can't wake up from. It's over in about 10 minutes, but vivid memories of the encounter linger for quite some time.



Then there's the tadpole madtom (*Noturus gyrinus*). This nocturnal and reclusive catfish possesses a defense mechanism that will temporarily disable any would-be attacker, including a fish collector—poison that's injected from glands through hollow shafts in the dorsal and pectoral fins. I've been stung countless times and it always hurts, but my most "memorable" experience occurred in Savanna State Park near Grand Rapids, Minnesota.



I was doing a nocturnal survey and caught a tadpole madtom. As I reached in to release it, I shined my headlamp into the bottom of the net, but lost sight for an instant and drove the fish's dorsal spine all the way into my finger. The burning was instant, intense, like someone was torturing me with a lit cigarette. Frantically, I yanked the fish out and shook my hand in all directions. My howls of anguish—and maybe some French—echoed through the forest, but my screaming and shrieking brought no relief.

Fortunately, I was alone in a remote part of the park, miles from the campground. If someone had heard me hollering, they would have thought I was a wounded animal suffering a horrible death.

