

Tennessee River Gorge Seinerama 2002, or The Land of Slippery Footing

Steven A. Ellis

4401 Leicester Dr., NE, Kennesaw, GA 30144
sellis2000@earthlink.net



In the afternoon of Friday, April 27, 2002, fish-heads began gathering at the Chattanooga home of NANFA Tennessee Regional Representative Casper Cox. Early arrivals were treated to a tour of his cement pond and a leisurely stroll along the stream that winds around his property. After an excellent dinner prepared by the host and his lovely wife, Miss Connie, the group kicked back in the living room and enjoyed a winter collecting video created by Ray Wolff. (This work has now affectionately been dubbed "Ray's World.") The temperature in Chattanooga was chilly enough to justify the content.

At the end of the evening, Casper shuttled Ranger Bob Culler, Stott Noble, and myself to the spacious guest apartment over his place of business. Klaus Schoening arrived later and spent the night at the Cox residence.

Early Saturday morning, the entire group numbered eight people, representing five different states. The party consisted of Stott Noble (Birmingham, AL), Klaus Schoening (Cincinnati, OH), Chip Rinehart (West Columbia, SC), Casper Cox and Mike Whitfield (Chattanooga, TN), Ranger Bob Culler (Kingsport, TN), Ed Scott (Knoxville, TN), and myself (Kennesaw, GA). After a fine breakfast provided by the host, we all headed for the weekend lodgings.

Casper arranged with the Tennessee Trust folks to allow us to rent their cabin on the Tennessee River called Pot Point. They gave him a special rate based on NANFA's non-profit status. (Your NANFA membership fee saves you money in the long run!) As a modern log cabin, the lodge had all of the amenities we would need and lots of space. The two large bedrooms upstairs contained five bunks each. The kitchen and large dining room were put to good use! After reducing

our caravan down to four vehicles, we were off to the first stop of the day.

Kelly's Ferry, Tennessee River

This location is an old ferry where Civil War soldiers were once carried back and forth across the river. Donning our collecting gear in a church parking lot, we waded into the shallow water and tricky mud. Chip Rinehart was the first to take a fall. By the end of the day, just about everyone else would do the same.

At this site we found the following species: spotfin shiner (*Cyprinella spiloptera*), bluntnose minnow (*Pimephales notatus*), bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*), redear sunfish (*L. microlopus*), redbreast sunfish (*L. auritus*), and western mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*).

Shake Rag, Tennessee River

We got skunked at this location, but there were some cool ruins that merit exploring at a later date.

Ellis Spring

This site opened off the main body of the Tennessee River, forming a wide creek that backed up into a marsh. Not much was found here until several guys worked their way back to the spring itself, finding rainbow darters (*Etheostoma caeruleum*) as their reward. I was the next to fall, with an over-the-waders plunge.

In addition to the rainbow darters, we caught mosquitofish, bluntnose minnow, and redbreast sunfish.

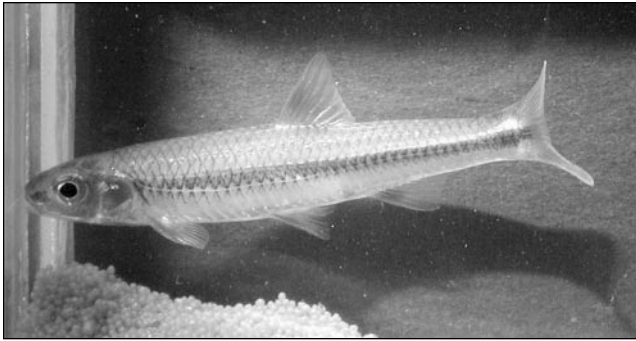


Fig. 1.

Sawfin shiner, an undescribed species of *Notropis* native to the upper and middle Cumberland River drainage (TN, KY), and the Tennessee River drainage (VA, TN, AL). This specimen was collected from the the Big Sequatchie River. Photograph by Klaus Schoening.

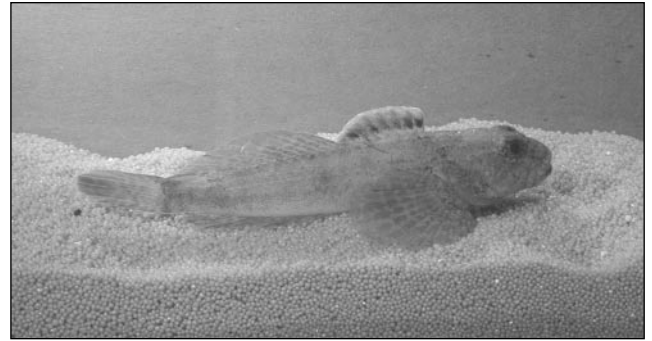


Fig. 2.

The frigid waters of Sequatchie Spring Run yielded up many mottled sculpin (*Cottus bairdi*) that were destined for a midnight snack later that night. Photograph by Klaus Schoening.

Bennett's Ramp, Tennessee River (Nickajack Lake)

By this time, the group was ready for lunch. Casper called ahead to the Davis Bait Store (Fig. 3), where cheeseburgers were cooking as we arrived. We tried to avoid the chilly wind coming off the lake as we sampled the contents of the bait tanks, mostly fathead minnows (*Pimephales promelas*), called toughies.

After the meal, Ranger Bob Culler demonstrated the proper way to throw my castnet. Prior to this, I had only been able to frighten or amuse the fish with this contraption. Ranger Bob knew his stuff, and used the net with good results.

The steep concrete boat ramp proved a bit too slippery for collecting without bathing, so Ed Scott and Casper walked a short distance to another ramp where it was much easier to pull the seine. The result was some very large brook silversides (*Labidesthes sicculus*). Fulfilling a NANFA objective to educate, Casper paused to show some of the collected fishes to a small boy and his mother and answered their questions. The smile on the little guy's face was worth the trip.

Other species collected or observed at this site included warmouth (*Lepomis gulosus*), bluegill, redbreast sunfish, and largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*).

Big Sequatchie River

This beautiful river had, perhaps, the best footing of the day, although there were deep drop-offs and areas of swift current. The riffles yielded some beautiful darters. While some of the guys pulled the seine, we also used dipnets with astonishing success. A stray dog adopted us for a while, but wouldn't venture very far from the bank.

This stop offered the most diversity with 21 species collected or seen: logperch (*Percina caprodes*), dusky darter (*P. sciera*), redline darter (*Etheostoma rufilineatum*), golden darter (*E. denoncourti*), banded darter (*E. zonale*), Tennessee snubnose darter (*E. simoterum*), blotched chub (*Erimystax insignis*), bigeye chub (*Hybopsis amblops*), river chub (*Nocomis micropogon*), sawfin shiner (*Notropis* sp., Fig. 1), rosyface shiner (*N. rubellus*), striped shiner (*Luxilus chrysocephalus*), spotfin shiner, steelcolor shiner (*Cyprinella whipplei*), Ohio lamprey (*Ichthyomyzon bdellium*), mosquitofish, blackspotted topminnow (*Fundulus olivaceus*), longear sunfish (*Lepomis megalotis*), mottled sculpin (*Cottus bairdi*, Fig. 2), channel catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*), and golden redhorse (*Moxostoma erythrurum*).

Owen's Spring Run

Until many feet entered this water, it was crystal clear and unbelievably cold, causing a chill even through insulated waders. It figures, then, that this would be the site where many of us would take turns falling in the water. Klaus Schoening nearly recovered as he tipped over, but the current pushed him down. Nobody could top Mike Whitfield's plunge, however, as he completely submerged after stepping into an underwater abyss.

Our intention at this location was to gather enough sculpins to cook for dinner. That goal was achieved rather quickly by kicking them into the seine.

In addition to sculpins we collected the following species at Owen's Spring Run: striped shiner, whitetail shiner (*Cyprinella galactura*), telescope shiner (*Notropis telescopus*), mountain shiner (*Lythrurus lirus*), blackspotted topminnow, mosquitofish, and redbreast sunfish.



See more photos from this trip at <http://www.nanfa.org/NANFAregions/tn/pointpoint/pointpoint.htm>.

Fig. 3. We stopped for lunch at Nickajack Lake (Bennett's Ramp on the Tennessee River). The proprietors of this bait store made the cheeseburgers responsible for the smiles on the faces of these grizzled veteran fishheads. L-R: Ed Scott (Knoxville, TN), Ranger Bob Culler (Kingsport, TN), Mike Whitfield (Chattanooga, TN), Steven Ellis (Kennesaw, GA), Stott Noble (Birmingham, AL), Chip Rinehart (West Columbia, SC), and Klaus Schoening (Cincinnati, OH). Photograph by Casper Cox.

Little Sequatchie River (at Sequatchie Cove Farm & Dancing Fern Nursery)

The final stop of the day was a section of the Little Sequatchie River that wound its way through the farm of Mr. Jim Wright. The farm itself is impressive, being a family run operation that has passed through the generations down to the Keeners, who work it now. It features cattle, hogs, sheep, chickens, ducks, geese, as well as fresh veggies, grapes, and excellent mushrooms. Mrs. Keener, whose specialty is the propagation and sale of native plants, has an enviable green-

house at the edge of the woods. In today's era of corporate farming and commercialization, it's rewarding to meet a family that is happy living a traditional agrarian existence. Situated at the base of a towering ridge, and beside a pleasant, clear-running stream, the Keeners' farm is a semi-paradise in which to make a living.

The stream itself is very nice, although the bottom is lined with round, slippery stones. It is easily navigated, just not quickly! Because of this, we took most of the fishes with dipnets in the riffles. These riffles were absolutely loaded with colorful darters and juvenile sculpins. Exploring a nearby

spring, Stott came away with a fabulous piece of driftwood suitable for a mantelpiece. Ed, Mike, and Ranger Bob all tried their hands at hook-and-line fishing. Ranger Bob brought in a couple of keepers for dinner. I wanted to snorkel at this location, but the water temperature was only 56-58°F! Despite Casper's encouragement, this Georgia boy just wasn't going for it.

Here's the species list: black snubnose darter (*Etheostoma duryi*), Tennessee snubnose darter, rainbow darter, redline darter, striped shiner, blacknose dace (*Rhinichthys atratulus*), central stoneroller (*Campostoma anomalum*), mottled sculpin, rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), rock bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*), largemouth bass, and mosquitofish.

On the way back out, we stopped at the farm to purchase fresh eggs and 'shrooms, visit Mrs. Keener's fine array of plants, and chat with Mr. Keener about his farm. He was duly impressed with the darters Casper showed him and shared a copy of the farm newsletter. He also agreed to take a couple of group photos beneath his cartoonish sign post that pointed every which way.


Happy and exhausted, the collecting party made the long drive back to the lodge. A thoroughly soaked Mike Whitfield bid the group farewell at this point and headed home. To Mike's credit, he is the gentleman responsible for introducing Casper to NANFA. (Thanks, Mike!)

The lodge quickly became a flurry of activity as fish coolers were stashed on the porch, viewing tanks were set up

in the living room, and a couple of folks sneaked in hasty showers. While the wandering fishheads were in the field, Miss Connie had been busy preparing a wonderful, tasty supper. If anyone went away hungry, it was their own fault! As we feasted, the Cox children chased a huge green moth through the lodge. Can there be any dinner music more delightful than the laughter of children?

The evening was very relaxed. Waistlines expanded, beer appeared, and fish tales were swapped. Oddly, the evening hours were the warmest it had been all day. Still, Chip's campfire was more than welcome. The stories grew along with the shadows. Ranger Bob once again worked his magic, tricking the photocell that controlled the exterior lights with a flashlight. Once the lights were out, the campfire regained its proper appeal. A few folks retired early (midnight), and missed Ed's dish of sculpins, rock bass, rainbow trout, and telescope shiners.

Early Sunday morning, Chip and Steven departed, sadly missing Casper's fine breakfast of multi-colored free-range scrambled chicken eggs mixed with sautéed Shiitake 'shrooms and Vidalia onions.

Editor's note: Casper Cox charged each attendee \$25 to cover the cabin rental fee and to raise a few extra dollars for NANFA. Although Casper spent approximately \$100 of his own money on food (and "bribing" his wife!), he nevertheless donated the extra \$50 he raised to NANFA. Thanks, Casper! 



*Home of the
Perfect Dipnet*

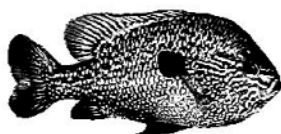
- Live Aquarium Fishes
- Aquarium & Pond Supplies

jonahsaquarium.com

Jonah's Aquarium

1/16 and 1/8 inch mesh now available on our large and small dipnets.

Native fishes delivered to your door.



On the web at jonahsaquarium.com
Email – jonah@jonahsaquarium.com

Toll free – 877-417-4871

Phone – 614-431-9862

Jonah's Aquarium PO Box 1231, Worthington OH 43085 USA