

# Welaka!

By Bruce Gebhardt

After finishing a two-week job in New Orleans last February, I was ready for a vacation. After the NANFA board meeting in Mobile, I motored east, then south as far as Miami, but it was cold and rainy all the way. The creeks along the route were mostly dirty and swollen, and it was too cold to enjoy much collecting. And so, like many other tourists, I packed it up and headed north, defeated.

I was especially disappointed that I'd had no real chance to look for some *Notropis welaka*, AC's cover fish.

Although the temperature was in the mid-30's as I headed north, finally the sun came out. My collecting mood came on me again as I arrived at Crescent Lake in northeast Florida, since I'd caught some nice *Fundulus chrysotus* there on previous visits. The water was too high, though, so again I hit the trail, crestfallen.

Just a few miles north, I came upon a sign pointing to a U. S. fish hatchery. And it was located in a town called . . . Welaka!

I went to the hatchery, and found an impressive little aquarium, exhibiting mostly game species. The superintendent seemed quite knowledgeable about the species and specimens represented in the tanks; however, he was unaware of his town's sole claim to international scientific fame, *Notropis welaka*. He suggested I ask at the minnow dealer's across the road, but the proprietor there, it turns out, imports his minnows from Missouri. He had no local minnows to look at, and had not heard of the cyprinid symbol of the town of Welaka.

Because of the height and temperature of the local waters, I didn't find them too conducive to serious searching; after a few hours, I gave up.

I did come away with one souvenir of my visit - a pamphlet given out at the hatchery. Because it is an interesting piece, and because the hatchery would be a worthwhile place to visit when in northern Florida, I'll summarize its contents.

The hatchery includes two large areas of ponds; one gets its water from a spring with a temperature of 72 degrees; the other, from a 423-foot well and from the nearby St. John's River. The hatchery concentrates on raising - unsurprisingly - warm-water fishes: striped bass, largemouth bass, redear sunfish, bluegills, and channel catfish.

In an area which promotes itself as the bass capital of the world, obviously largemouths are the most important product of the hatchery.

According to the pamphlet, bass producing begins in spring,

when water temperatures reach the mid-60's. The male builds his nest and spawning occurs. Eggs hatch in a week or two. Fry are transferred to rearing ponds, so they won't be eaten by their parents. These ponds are fertilized to develop "plankton," which term includes plants and animals; it would be interesting to know what kind of live food is developed. The baby bass are harvested at one to two inches.

The hatchery seems very receptive to visitors; the pamphlet touts local tourist attractions, and calls attention to the many forms of wildlife to be found roaming the grounds. I can testify to the abundance of bird life there.

Of special significance, I think, is the following paragraph:

The Welaka National Fish Hatchery welcomes visitors and invites you to return often. Special group tours can be arranged with the Hatchery Manager.

My "vacation" was a miserable failure, but I'm glad I found Welaka and its hatchery. For the future reference of other NANFA members and myself, the following points occur:

- 1) for anybody looking for *N. welaka*, Welaka might be a logical place to start.
- 2) the Welaka National Fish Hatchery is an interesting place to visit;
- 3) the hatchery's openness to visitors, especially in groups, suggests it as a good field trip for a group of NANFA members in Georgia or Florida;
- 4) maybe other hatcheries around the country would be similarly receptive; and
- 5) maybe hatchery workers would be a good group to evangelize on NANFA membership.

Welaka is located about 40 miles southwest of St. Augustine. Specifically, take Fla. Rte. 309 southwest from Satsuma. Coming North on U.S. 17 from Crescent City, go west on Fla. Rte. 309-A. There are signs pointing towards the hatchery at many intersections in the area.