

WHY DO I COLLECT?

by Konrad Schmidt, St. Paul, Minnesota

I have long wondered why pursuing little fish of no known allure holds so much fascination and pleasure for me. Rain can pour and bugs can bite, but I remain oblivious to these distractions and content in my little Eden. Physically, my energy, endurance, and drive seem endless. No obstacle or problem is too great to overcome or crush outright. For a very short time, I do feel invincible.

Certain situations and events enhance and magnify these experiences. Collecting in streams where no surveys have ever been done makes me feel like the first explorer venturing into uncharted frontiers. I admit this is pure fantasy, and realistically the findings of these "expeditions" are no cures for cancer or even the common cold, but a small unknown finally does become known. Another ego-boosting bonus is finding a fish in a watershed or above a barrier where it has never been reported before. Almost always, these "little trinkets" are completely unexpected, but very welcome surprises.

Night collections are an entirely different affair. Through the years they have given me several exhilarating thrills and memories. Sight is restricted to the small circle the headlamp illuminates. Patches of fog move in and further encroach on my tiny world. Hearing sharpens; sounds assail me from every direction. Chirping crickets and croaking frogs provide the soothing and constant chorus which is interrupted by hair-bristling noises of hooting owls, squawking herons, and tail-slapping beavers. Frequently, I catch something moving out of the corner of my eye and reflexively cast my light up on the bank. A pair of eyes reflect back at me. My heart pounds in my chest and I can hear it. Recognition and relief! Only a raccoon meticulously cleaning his clam dinner in the shallows. Several shooting stars streak across the evening skies every hour, but I miss many with my attention focused down in the stream and in my net; however, once the night turned into day and actually cast my shadow on the water. I swung around expecting to see a game warden on the bank with a two-million-plus-candlepower flashlight, but just caught a glimpse of the meteor disappearing below the horizon. I was not the only one startled by this spectacular show. A pack of coyotes across the river nervously yipped long after the darkness returned.

Northern Lights are another "distraction" which detour me from my cherished collecting. Ghostly green clouds fill the northern skies. Beams of light erupt suddenly and randomly,

change direction constantly, and vanish. The great mass slowly descends until it seems to touch the earth. The performances can be so spellbinding that the lapse of time is forgotten, but definitely not wasted.

Perhaps the most climactic and self-gratifying experience I have received from my collecting trips is finding fish which have not been found for several years in Minnesota and were believed to be extirpated. This has only happened twice since I began collecting fish almost 20 years ago. In 1983, I started with the Plains Topminnow, which had not been found since 1974. Every year, I would plan at least one collecting trip to re-check the historical sites. Absolutely nothing for five years. Then in 1988, I dipped my seine in the headwaters of the Rock River and watched what I thought was just a Central Mudminnow attempting to dive under some floating vegetation. I could not have been better positioned as I lifted the seine and laid it out on the bank. There it was, not a mudminnow, but the treasure I had sought for so long. An intense euphoria swept through me. I sprang up and began jumping and screaming obscenities, not in anger, but total joy. My good luck continued as I found more Plains Topminnows at every site I tried. The euphoria lingered and the five-hour drive home seemed like minutes. Yes, it was a great day to be alive!

In 1990, I almost did it again when I found the Slender Madtom in Iowa about four stream miles from the Minnesota site where it was collected once before, in 1954. I grinned from ear to ear when I uncovered the single Slender from a fold in my kick net. This time, I only performed a brief and restrained jig on the bank because I had company with me, but still felt that same incredible ecstasy! I knew it would not be very long before I or somebody else would again find the Slender Madtom in Minnesota.

Now, I can divert all my attention and energies to stalking my final and most challenging quarry - the Bluntnose Darter. Not collected since 1944. If I achieve this goal, the euphoric rush could be lethal.

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Scientific Names of Species Mentioned in This Article

Plains Topminnow: Fundulus sciadicus
Central Mudminnow: Umbra limi
Slender Madtom: Noturus exilis
Bluntnose Darter: Etheostoma chlorosomum