

## THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

## Why Keep Natives?

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Why keep natives? Store-bought fish are easy enough: a few zebra danios or guppies. Just drop a heater in the tank and feed them flake food twice a day. Why bother with drab-colored fish that will only eat live or frozen foods? That you can't buy in a store but have to collect yourself?

For me, the answer goes back long, long ago to when I was a 10-year old kid. On Saturdays I'd bring my fishing rod to Lincoln Park Lake in my home town of Jersey City, New Jersey. I baited my hook with a half-cooked piece of macaroni, then cast it into the murky depths of Lincoln Park Lake.

In those days, the Park's fields were over-fertilized. The runoff turned the water a deep, dark-algae green, and it was impossible to see anything in the hidden realm below.

I can still remember my first fishing trip there. I cast my macaroni-baited hook about 75 yards or so. I pulled the line tight, then sat and waited in the drizzling early spring cold.

The rod scraped across the concrete shoreline, heading straight for the water. I grabbed it just before it went into the water. It took all the strength I had to crank whatever it was to shore. For the briefest of moments I saw the bronze scales and dull yellow underbelly of a monster carp. Then the hook pulled loose and that was the last I ever saw of the mysterious leviathan from the emerald darkness below.

But that childhood disappointment also piqued my curiosity. I was back the next day, with more macaroni. My stringer soon held a half dozen small carp and wild goldfish.

I brought home a fat, 12-inch goldfish and put it in my father's 29-gallon tank. But within an hour the fish produced so much waste that the tank water turned a fuzzy milk-white. My father drove the goldfish and me back to the park.

Of course, I brought more fish home. One day, a brown bullhead took the macaroni bait and ended up in my 10-gallon

tank. He spent most of his time trying to hide behind the corner box filter, but would always lumber out for food. His tiny, pinhead eyes were probably all but blind. But he seemed to home in on his food with his stringy black barbels. With a kind of awkward grace, he zeroed in on the bologna pieces I fed him, swallowing them in a wide-mouthed gulp. I've since learned that ictalurid catfishes like brown bullheads have taste receptors on their barbels and most of their bodies.

I soon began bringing home the little sunfish that I pulled out from the lake's shoreline. They were beautiful in the summer sun—iridescent blue-striped gill covers and yellow-orange bellies. Their colors faded under my incandescent lights.

But once again, the emerald darkness had given up one of its secrets. A nesting male shimmied like a black mollie, using his tail to sweep a circular depression in the gravel. I was so amazed by the display that I didn't mind that he tore up the stands of *Hygrophila* that had taken so long to grow.

Once, I videotaped longear sunfish spawning in my 65-gallon aquarium. The male and female developed bright purple stripes. They circled the nest for nearly 20 minutes, their ventral fins pressed together, the male upright, the female swimming at a right angle to him, almost horizontal. A few days later, tiny fry appeared. They were no larger than a pinhead, too big to carry around the yolk sac on which they perched.

Like Lincoln Park Lake, nearly every pond, stream, lake, river, bay and inlet near my home has its own veil of mystery. With a seine, dipnet, or small fishing rod, I can take home a few of its mysterious underwater denizens. And with some careful aquarium care and a little luck, they will reveal their secrets and I'll discover something about their hidden lives.

This childhood sense of wonder, at things that I wouldn't otherwise have seen, has brought me back to ponds and streams many times since.

In future installments of this column, which is dedicated to the beginning native fish enthusiast, I hope to share a little of this wonder with you. 