

MICROFISHING FOR DARTERS



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Darters are among the most diverse and beautiful of all North America's fish species. I have always had a passion for darters, which are in the family Percidae, along with the Yellow Perch (*Perca flavescens*), Walleye (*Sander vitreus*), and Sauger (*S. canadensis*). Kick-seining with a dip net was always my preferred method for catching darters, and I managed to catch over 40 species in a three-year period around the eastern US. This spring, when I decided to start trying for them on the hook, well, I was a little more than intimidated. Darters are among the most difficult species to catch on hook and line, some species more than others. Sight fishing is the preferred method for catching darters, and some if not most darters are well adapted at hiding, and of course are naturally camouflaged. I decided to challenge myself. I would attempt to re-catch every species I had dip netted in those years, some 40 species. I'm already halfway there (Table 1).

I started locally, with a creek right down the street from my home in Waxhaw, North Carolina. The creek was one of my favorite microfishing locations for shiners, and I had dip netted Tessellated and Carolina darters there before. I was using a ten-foot collapsible fishing pole, with five feet of two-pound monofilament and a size 30 Tanago hook with a small split shot. Bait was of course, red worms, my personal favorite. I located a bend in the creek with undergrowth and vegetation, habitat I had previously dip netted Carolina Darters in reasonable numbers. This was an area where the riffle made the

stream bottom difficult to see, so sight fishing was out. I dropped my bait and waited, moving and dragging it along the bottom, anxiously awaiting a bite. Nothing happened. I waited, and soon enough decided to move on. I located a pool to the side of the main stream with direct sunlight. I saw movement as I approached it so I slowly edged my way up to the pool, inching closer. There he was, a beautiful Carolina Darter (Figure 1) was sitting in the pool in less than two inches of water. I slowly maneuvered my bait closer to him, dragging it across the bottom. His head twitched in the bait's direction; his eyes followed my worm. I brought my bait closer and closer and then millimeters away from the fish's mouth. Sweat dripped down my brow and I crouched down, waiting for the moment that was sure to come. I saw a cloud of debris in the water where the Carolina Darter once was; I then noticed my bait had moved, and I quickly realized I had hooked the fish. My first darter on hook and line! I snapped a few photos of the beauty and quickly released him to live another day. The exhilaration of the moment was incredible, and I will never forget that moment. After that day early this spring, I became a darter fisherman.

Table 1. Twenty darter species I have so far caught on hook and line.

COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Greenside Darter	<i>Etheostoma blennioides</i>
Rainbow Darter	<i>Etheostoma caeruleum</i>
Greenfin Darter	<i>Etheostoma chlorbranchium</i>
Carolina Darter	<i>Etheostoma collis</i>
Fantail Darter	<i>Etheostoma flabellare</i>
Swamp Darter	<i>Etheostoma fusiforme</i>
Tuckasegee Darter	<i>Etheostoma gutselli</i>
Turquoise Darter	<i>Etheostoma inscriptum</i>
Blueside Darter	<i>Etheostoma jessiae</i>
Pinewoods Darter	<i>Etheostoma mariae</i>
Johnny Darter	<i>Etheostoma nigrum</i>
Tessellated Darter	<i>Etheostoma olmstedi</i>
Waccamaw Darter	<i>Etheostoma perlongum</i>
Redline Darter	<i>Etheostoma rufilineatum</i>
Snubnose Darter	<i>Etheostoma simoterum</i>
Tangerine Darter	<i>Percina aurantiaca</i>
Gilt Darter	<i>Percina evides</i>
Mobile Logperch	<i>Percina kathae</i>
Bronze Darter	<i>Percina palmaris</i>
Westfalls Darter	<i>Percina westfalli</i>



Figure 1. Carolina Darter from Blythe Creek (Union County, NC).

Photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Tim Aldridge is a fisherman and microfisherman from North Carolina. One of Tim's goals is to catch every species of fish in North and South Carolina on hook and line. Another of his goals is to catch 700 native freshwater fish species in the United States on hook and line. Tim travels frequently for fishing trips all over the United States and has been to foreign countries to fish. You can follow Tim and his fishing adventures on his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/tim.aldridge.5074>. He also shares his fishing posts on the NANFA Facebook page.



Figure 2. Swamp Darter from Black Creek (Lexington County, SC).

Modifying my microfishing gear for darters wasn't a problem. I kept the same hooks, the hooks I use the most, Owner "Smallest" Tanagos in size 30. These hooks are my go-to hooks for most of the micro species I go after. I would need heavier weights than I normally used for microfishing, and I found size 5 split shot to be the best size. The best place to put the split shot was about one inch from the hook. If the weight is too close, it may scare the darter off. For a darter fishing rod, I found a short 1½ to 3-foot collapsible rod on Amazon for under twenty bucks. This rod would work great for darters, since you are standing almost on top of them when you sight fish. The Owner and most every brand of Tanago hooks come pre-snelled with a ten-inch strand of red line. This is very convenient, as the hooks are extremely difficult to thread and tie in the first place, and the pre-snelling save a lot of time and effort. What my fishing partner and girlfriend, Casey Elam, and I do is simply tie the ten-inch piece of line attached to the hook onto the tip of the darter rod. This gives you a little bit of reach, but you don't really need much reach for darters. For bait, I use red worms or nightcrawlers. Both work well, but I prefer red worms for a number of reasons. First, they survive longer in warmer temperatures. Second, red worms are easy to put on the tiny Tanago hooks, while night crawlers are a little more difficult. Third, in my experience, it seems fish prefer red worms more. I have noticed this on several occasions and I believe it is due to the red worm being more visible in the water. They also seem to squirm more than the nightcrawlers do, although you are only using a tiny piece of bait. With all this in mind, and my gear primed, I was ready to tackle any darter I ran into.

I set out for Pelion, South Carolina, around four in the morning. Pelion is one of my favorite locations to collect and fish, and I was itching to catch a Swamp Darter on hook and line (Figure 2). I arrived at the spot where I had collected several Swamp Darters easily in the past just at daybreak. My friend and fellow angler, Nick



Figure 3. Turquoise Darter from Bridge Creek (Aiken County, SC).

Viole, arrived to meet me as well. Nick and I had started microfishing around the same time and learned a lot from each other as time went on. We fished a little for Chain Pickerel (*Esox niger*) and Largemouth Bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) until the sun was bright enough for us to see the bottom of the swampy creek. Nick and I walked slowly about ankle deep in the mucky water and waited. Much to his delight and my dismay, Nick caught the first one. Although I was happy for him, I wanted my very own Swamp Darter. I tried not to move an inch because I was right on top of the spot where Nick caught his, and I had a feeling there were more. I finally saw one peek its head out and that was my key. I slowly dragged my bait and split shot across the bottom of the silty creek, getting the Swamp Darter's attention very quickly. He was interested and bit my tiny piece of worm and I had my second darter ever on hook and line! Later that morning, I caught another darter at a separate location, a beautiful Turquoise Darter (Figure 3). I was very happy with the way the trip to Pelion turned out. Each time I was successful at catching a darter, I became more confident to tackle new, more elusive species.

The Pigeon River near Canton, North Carolina, is one of the most beautiful and darter-friendly fishing spots that I know of. The river has Tangerine, Redline, Banded (*E. zonale*), Tuckasegee, and Greenfin darters, along with good numbers of Central Stoneroller (*Camptostoma anomalum*), Whitetail Shiner (*Cyprinella galactura*), Warpaint Shiner (*Luxilus coccogenis*), and Black Redhorse (*Moxostoma duquesnei*). Catching Tangerine Darters with a hook is surprisingly easy (Figure 4). They are a very aggressive fish, especially when they are with their friends and a bait is dropped down in front of them. After I caught a dozen or so Tangerine Darters, it became, well, boring. Redline Darters were among the hardest in the Pigeon River to catch (Figure 5). They are super smart, and any movement or even a shadow going across the water will scare them under a rock, unlikely to come out again. I was finally able to catch one and it



Figure 4. Tangerine Darter from Pigeon River (Haywood County, NC).



Figure 5. Redline Darter from Pigeon River (Haywood County, NC).



Figure 6. Greenfin Darter.

was a beauty, but it took quite a lot of time and effort. I caught a nice Greenfin Darter (Figure 6) in the Pigeon by placing my bait inside of a crevice and waiting. When I saw the slightest movement in the dark crevice, I pulled my hook up and the fish was on! The fish that I really wanted out of the Pigeon was the Tuckasegee Darter (Figure 7). They weren't too common, but I knew if I fished the river long enough, I would find one. It took me several attempts in the following weeks, but I finally spotted one and was able to hook it. It was a beautiful fish and I was lucky to have caught it. Over a month-long period, I managed to catch all the darter species except the Banded Darter out of the Pigeon River. It was time to focus my attention elsewhere for new and more challenging darter species.

I was on the Conasauga River in Tennessee watching my friend Casper Cox snorkel along the riffles right in front of me. I was searching for darters, but the water was just too deep to see them. I



Figure 7. Tuckasegee Darter.

curiously watched as Casper had a trail of Alabama (*C. callistia*), Tricolor (*C. trichroistia*), and Coosa (*Notropis xaenocephalus*) shiners following in his wake. Why were the fish following him? Casper began to notice that I was standing there, almost in awe, watching him as he popped his head up every few seconds and called out a species that was near him. Apparently, there were darters everywhere, but I couldn't see them. Casper later explained that the fish follow in the wake of the snorkeler, gathering food that is kicked up from the river bottom. The idea struck me as I watched Casper: why not fish underwater? Why not snorkelfish? Later that evening at the campsite on the river, I ran my idea past Casper. He agreed that it would likely work, but it would have to be tested. Casper gave me a shortgear list for snorkeling and I wasted no time getting my gear. I purchased a mask and snorkel, wetsuit, and boots online for a bargain price. My telescopic darter rod was too long to effectively fish underwater, so



Figure 8. Top left: Tim and Casey searching for Alabama Hog Suckers in the Conasauga River. Bottom left: Tim angling for his quarry. Top right: Voilà! Bottom right: Alabama Hog Sucker. (Photos by Amber and Casey Elam)



Figure 9. Bronze Darter from the Conasauga River (Polk County, TN).

I opted for a foot-long stick from the backyard. I simply tied on the ten-inch snelled Tanago line and hook onto the tip of the stick and I was ready to go. I was optimistic about the results of snorkelfishing, but I was also not completely sure it would work. This would be both a challenge and a test of my angling skills.

I arrived at my favorite spot on the Pigeon River one fine afternoon. I find that when fishing for darters, it is best to have a nice sunny day where visibility on the bottom is increased. This was a perfect day, and my targets were Tangerine, Redline, Greenfin, and Tuckasegee darters. I slipped into the water and began my search with my head slightly underwater, knees on the bottom, and occasionally checking for fish in the eddy behind me created by my body. Whitetail and Warpaint shiners, along with thick schools of Central Stoneroller, followed closely behind, but they weren't my quarry today. The underwater world was astonishing to me. I was no longer in my world, but in the fishes' world. I could see fine detail and fish



Figure 10. Top: Tim searching for Pinewoods Darter in an unknown stream near Southern Pines (Moore County, NC). Bottom: Success again! (Photos by Casey Elam)

inches from my feet that I couldn't see above the water. I knew that snorkel fishing would be something special that I would incorporate into my angling routine. Snorkel fishing, I realized, would be perfect for deepwater darters, fishes that are impossible to see from above the water. I kept this in mind as I moved along slowly to where the Tangerine Darters usually were. It was almost too easy to catch a couple of them, and I targeted the largest male of the group and caught him as well. After snapping some photos of the beefy male Tangerine Darter, I resumed my search for more darters. Later that day, after catching a second Tuckasegee Darter, I called it a day on the Pigeon. In the weeks that followed, I snorkel fished every chance that I got, learning, improvising, and adapting my gear and tactics. The Conasauga River was constantly on my mind however, and I knew I needed to make another trip there soon.

Alabama Hog Suckers (*Hypentelium etowanum*) are thick in the Conasauga River in Tennessee. This species, I decided, was a perfect candidate for snorkel fishing, since they were shy biters and often elusive. I knew I would have to sneak up on one, and I would have to get close to have a chance. While conducting my first search underwater in the fish's probable habitat, I was lucky enough to spot two. I made a wide arc in the water to get behind the fish, as they fed facing upstream. As I slowly maneuvered into position, I spooked the larger Alabama Hog Sucker, but the medium-sized one was still in the zone feeding. I set my bait down slowly in the path of the feeding sucker (Figure 8), and watched as his large protruding mouth picked up small rocks and debris, searching for food. I froze and waited, and the Alabama Hog Sucker eagerly picked up my worm, and with a quick shake of his head, the fish was hooked! I was elated and took several photos before releasing the fish unharmed back into the Conasauga (Figure 8). That day I also hooked five Bronze Darters, including a beautiful and quite large male (Figure 9). I was content with my trip to the Conasauga River and headed home with a smile on my face.

Snorkel fishing was a great success, and I was happy with it and how many difficult fishes I had managed to catch. In the Sandhills of North Carolina, I was able to snorkel fish a Pinewoods Darter, which to my knowledge, has never been caught before on hook and line (Figure 10).

Since my darterfishing experimentation started this spring, I have managed to catch 20 species on hook-and-line, some while snorkel fishing of course. Then again, I am quite a few species shy of the 200-plus species of darters in North America. As fall approaches in the next few weeks, I am sure that darters will become less active, and I will have to wait until the following spring to fish for them again. Until then, I will most likely be refining my gear, studying fish habitats, and of course, taking notes and locations from Fish-map. Since I target hundreds of fish species, my angling success depends on constantly learning about fishes. Every species has different habits, habitats, and of course, diets. All of this however makes it more fun for me, as the thrill of the chase is certainly part of the adventure. My next goal is to catch 50 darter species by Fall 2019. Although I get strange looks from passers by and questions from game wardens, I will try to maintain my goals. Darter fishing is fun, challenging, and exciting, and I hope more anglers will give them the chance they deserve.

Editor's Note: Please consult state and provincial angling regulations to confirm whether or not a fishing license is required for this activity.