

PURSUING NATIVE FISHES IN SAN DIEGO

Arthur Kosakowski

Davie, Florida

Memorial Day is traditionally the unofficial kickoff to summer. Trips to the nearest beach and barbecues in the backyard are probably the most common ways to get into the summer spirit while remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice while defending their country.

Pre-covid, I had taken two short Memorial Day trips to Central America: Panama in 2019 and Belize in 2018. While travel restrictions made it impractical, if not impossible, to make a similar trip in 2020, I was determined to make it happen in 2021. In early spring I began researching places I could go safely and do some fishing but was unimpressed with the available choices and frustrated with the hoops I would have to jump through to make it work.

As they say, when one door closes, another door opens. I restructured my research to include the United States, and several options presented themselves. The winner ended up being San Diego, California. Living within a few miles of the Atlantic Ocean all my life, I had barely spent any time on the west coast. In fact, I had spent more time in Europe and Asia than in the Pacific Time Zone. Southern California's weather, as well as the plethora of fishing opportunities, made this an easy decision.

After booking my trip for late May, March and April seemed to drag on forever. I spent those months doing a bit of research on the fishing opportunities available. As a somewhat new member of the life-listing community, I was excited at the prospect of adding a new species to my list with every cast. I had never fished the west coast before and was awestruck at the great diversity of species available in the coastal waters of San Diego.

Finally, the day came. On Wednesday, May 26, I went to work in the morning, then made a quick stop at home to pick up my gear and luggage before heading to Miami International Airport for my 7:00 PM flight. An uneventful flight put me in San Diego around 10:00, and I was asleep at the hotel by midnight.

MAY 27, 2021

After exploring Torrey Pines State Reserve with a friend in the morning, it was time for the first fishing session of the trip. I picked up frozen shrimp and frozen mussels from a local bait shop and walked from my hotel to Shelter Island, an area in the Point Loma section of San Diego. After meandering through several marinas looking for a place to set up for the day, I found some rocky accesses on San Diego Bay.

Photos by the author.

Originally from Bayonne, New Jersey, Arthur Kosakowski is a recreational fisherman currently living in Davie, Florida. He has a passion for finding beauty in every fish species no matter the size. Since moving to south Florida four years ago, he has been mesmerized by the vast variety of both native and exotic fish species. You can follow his fishing adventures on his YouTube channel at www.YouTube.com/c/TheFishingNomad.

I rigged up a small size 8 bait holder hook on a dropper loop rig with a small piece of frozen shrimp and casted out from the rocks into open water. After no more than a minute on the bottom my shrimp was picked up and I set the hook: a swing and a miss. I re-baited and returned the shrimp to the bottom, where it was picked up again a few seconds later. I set the hook: a swing and a home run. After a brief fight I pulled in my first North American native fish from the Pacific, an Opaleye *Girella nigricans* (Figure 1). This grayish brown fish is rather bland in color until you notice its eyes: a beautiful dark but bright blue that sparkles in the sun like a sapphire. A quick picture and back in the water it went.

Another small piece of shrimp went out and within a minute of it hitting the water I had another fish on. This one put up a bit more of a fight, and I managed to pull in my second new species in as many minutes: a Rock Wrasse *Halichoeres semicinctus*. This rather slippery fish was incredibly difficult to get a hold of, but the neon green and pink colors made it look like it belonged in an aquarium.

Over the next several minutes I got many small bites but was only able to hook up with three of them. I caught two Kelp Bass *Paralabrax clathratus* and one Barred Sand Bass *Paralabrax nebulifer* (Figure 2). Both species showed beautiful color patterns that I hadn't seen before. It's just amazing how there are so many different fish out there yet each one looks different from the last.

Between a couple more Rock Wrasse and Opaleye, the most interesting catch of the day, a California Scorpionfish *Scorpaena guttata*, ended up on the end of my line (Figure 3). When I see a fish like this I am just amazed by evolution. What told this species over mil-



Figure 1. Opaleye.



Figure 2. Barred Sand Bass.



Figure 3. California Scorpionfish.



Figure 4. Woolly Sculpin.

lions of years to evolve to look the way it does? The shape, the spines, the fins—everything about this fish is unique and fascinating.

After the California Scorpionfish it was time to go. I was fishing the outgoing tide and, by this point, it was as low as it was going to get. Bites were decreasing as the water level fell. Day one had added five new species to my lifelist. Not a bad way to start a trip.

MAY 28, 2021

After so much success the previous day, I decided to make a return trip. I went to the same spot, used the same rig, and the same bait. I should get the same results, right? Wrong.

Immediately the action was great. Lots of small hits, but I was unable to hook up with many of them. It reminded me of the time the day before when I caught the two *Paralabrax* species, the Kelp Bass and Barred Sand Bass. Eventually I managed to catch a small Kelp Bass. And then another. And then another. The first thirty minutes here produced more bites than I could count and a handful of small Kelp Bass. Nothing really exciting, but I was hopeful things would turn around. I only managed a few small bites over the next two hours and only caught a single Rock Wrasse.

With the sun beating down on me, bait running out, and the tide low, I decided to cut my losses and call it a day. A rather disappointing zero species were added to my lifelist on day two.

MAY 29, 2021

I wasn't about to risk going to the same spot again, so this time I took a trip to the ocean side of San Diego. I went to the Ocean Beach tide pools with the plan of doing a little microfishing in the pools at low tide. I arrived about 30 minutes before low tide, and I explored around the pools to see which ones I thought would be the most productive. Almost every one had a multitude of crabs



Figure 5. Notchbrow Blenny.



Figure 6. Chameleon Goby.

picking away at algae, but few had any visible fishes. I finally found a deeper pool close to the waves, where I saw some smaller fishes.

I rigged up with just a small (size 16) hook and a split shot a few inches above it, put a small piece of mussel onto the hook, and dropped it into the tide pool near some small bottom fishes. After hooking my first fish and losing it right as I pulled it out of the water, I managed to convince a second one to bite and get my hands on it. Another distinctive fish, similar in shape to the California Scorpionfish, ended up in my phototank. The Woolly Sculpin *Clinocottus analis* (Figure 4) is another fish that intrigues me with its evolution. How does an organism evolve to look like this?

During the low tide I fished around two of the larger pools and managed several more Woolly Sculpin and Opaleye. Toward the end I hooked what I at first thought was a Woolly Sculpin, but it had smaller pectoral fins and a longer dorsal fin. This Notchbrow Blenny *Hypsoblennius gilberti* was another new catch for me (Figure 5). Another fish that is just perfectly evolved for hiding in and around the small rock openings in tide pools. Isn't evolution great?

After catching more Woolly Sculpin and Opaleye, and another Notchbrow Blenny, the tide started to come in, waves were crashing over the tops of the tide pools, and it was time to call it a day. Day three of this trip added two more species to my lifelist, and they were some of the more interesting looking ones.

MAY 30, 2021

Time always flies when you're having fun. My last day in San Diego had arrived. I had a 2:00 PM flight back to Miami but still had a few hours to fish in the morning, so I made the short walk from my hotel to Shelter Island and fished near a boat launch among some rocks. This time I brought my smaller gear with me and fished with shrimp on the same size 16 hook I had used the day before.



Figure 7. Bay Blenny.

After seeing some Opaleye and Garibaldi *Hypsypops rubicundus* swimming around the rocks, I knew I had a chance at catching fish. As Garibaldi are illegal to target, I wasn't going to make any casts to them, but I had hoped one would hit my shrimp. Instead, I ended up getting an Opaleye. I caught several on this trip, and each time I was amazed at the beautiful deep blue of their eyes.

I could see the Opaleye and Garibaldi swimming around and could see when one got close to my bait, but then I saw my bait disappear without any fish nearby. I set the hook and pulled up a micro I couldn't see in the water: a Chameleon Goby *Tridentiger trigonocephalus* (Figure 6). Another interesting-looking fish, but the first species of the trip that isn't native to North America. First spotted in California in the 1950s, this Asian native was most likely introduced by either ballast water or by hitching a ride as fertilized eggs on Japanese oysters (<https://nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/factsheet.aspx?SpeciesID=717>, accessed 9/17/2021).

After catching another Kelp Bass, I hooked into another micro, this time a blenny. It looked very similar to the Notchbrow Blenny from the previous day, but ended up being a Bay Blenny *Hypsoblennius gentilis* (Figure 7). Another master of its domain, on release it jetted for a small crack between rocks. With so many different habitats in the water, it is remarkable to see that a different fish has evolved to take advantage of each one.

After more Opaleye, Kelp Bass, Chameleon Goby, and Bay Blenny, it was time to wrap things up so I could get to the airport on time. Day four had produced two new fishes for my lifelist, and I left San Diego with a total of nine new species. More species is always better than fewer, but I was very happy with the nine I caught. San Diego treated me very well and I hope to make a return trip soon to catch more new species for my lifelist.

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

Shawn Beaumont, ON

Steven Bidy, NC

Jacob Buxton, MD

Eric Carr, TN

Erin Feichtner, GA

CJ Grabenstein, MO

Gerald Griffin, OK

Andrea Hamilton, GA

Kathryn Langlois, RI

David McGrew, MD

Kirby Nelson, WI

Amber Olson, NC

Owen Reeves, NE

Nick Rogers, SC

David Schultz, LA

Jesse Sherlock, PA

Leah Smith, AK

Alan Stutzman, IL

Nathan Triemstra, MI

Collin Willson, SC

Zimmerman's Fish





Home
www.ZimmermansFish.com
Pricing & Availability
330-417-9476
Captive Care
Email: smbass444@yahoo.com

Sunfish - Killifish - Minnows - Darters
Phone: (330) 417-9476
Email: smbass444@yahoo.com

NANFA members can help make a great organization & its publication even better.

Contact the editors with ideas for articles you'd like to write and to suggest authors or topics you want to read. • Mention AC to people who have interesting things to write about. • Submit your photos and artwork. • Suggest items for Riffles. • **Tell us what you want to see in these pages.**