

WHY MICROFISHING?

Timothy Aldridge

Waxhaw, North Carolina

I'm often asked why I microfish. I asked myself that question last fall when I retired my dip net and seine and picked up a fishing rod. At the 2017 Missouri NANFA convention I witnessed a few NANFA members microfishing and I was intrigued. I thought about the idea for weeks following the convention, until I decided to give it a try. I purchased a ten-foot collapsible pole and the appropriate micro-gear and went to work in the fall of 2017. The most challenging part was tying the small line to the extremely small hooks. (I later learned to appreciate pre-tied snelled hooks.)

In a backyard creek, I quickly caught Eastern Mosquitofish (*Gambusia holbrooki*), Rosyside Dace (*Clinostomus funduloides*), Bluehead Chub (*Nocomis leptocephalus*), Creek Chub (*Semotilus atromaculatus*), Green Sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*) and Bluegill (*L. macrochirus*). It was just like fishing, except, well, smaller.

Everything in microfishing is small, as the name implies. The appeal to me was the fact that the fish had to take the bait, it wasn't trapped or netted. Microfishing takes some skill on the part of the angler to maneuver into position and present the bait to the fish without spooking it. It also takes a bit of luck. It's more of a challenge than traditional fishing.

Microfishing is a phenomenon that has recently gained more attention and is on the rise. To outsiders, microfishing may look like a combination of fishing and bird watching, and that may not be a bad way to picture it. Microfishing is more popular with "life listers." This would be the equivalent of birders keeping a bird count list. Lifelisters usually have specific goals to reach, as in a certain number of species. I decided to keep my goals simple. I decided to re-catch all 283 fish species I had caught in my dip and cast nets, but this time on hook and line. I started out with catching most of the local fish I could get my hands on, excluding darters which are difficult to catch

in the winter. I was surprised at how quickly my lifelist grew and before I knew it, I was a microfisherman and lifelister!

As I experimented more with microfishing, I learned what gear did and didn't work. Hooks are the most important piece of gear in the microfisherman's tacklebox, and I found the pre-tied snelled ones to be the best option. Today there are a variety of options, but several years ago the only small hooks available were from fly tying shops. In my experience, the Owner brand "Smallest" hook and the Gamakatsu Ultimate Tanago hook are the two best options. Both are pre-snelled and are easily tied to a main line or swivel (Figure 1).

For rods, my advice is to go simple. Specialty "Tanago" rods are a lot more expensive, but I've always used a collapsible Crappie pole. B 'n' M Poles (www.bnmpoles.com/) sell 10-foot



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.

Tim microfishing in Mexico. (Photos by Stephen Beaman)



Figure 1. From left to right Gamakatsu Ultimate Tanago Hook, Owner Smallest Hook, and an Eagle Claw size 8 Bait-holder hook for comparison.

and 12-foot collapsible poles on Amazon.com for under \$20. This is the best option for the beginner and I still use them today. This type of pole gives the angler reach, which helps avoid spooking the fish. The 10-foot pole is what I use most of the time when I microfish. The line I use is Frog Hair Technologies Tippet/Leader Material in size 7x. This is available on Amazon.com and lasts a long time. You will want to use half the rod length of line; for example, I use five feet of line for the ten-foot pole. Small weights are available as well, but really small standard lead spilt shot will work. This will be the basic rig for microfishing: pole, line, hook, and weight. Small floats can be of some use for particular species, and I keep some in my tackle box, but I don't often need them. Bait selection can often be over-thought and complex, but this really doesn't need to be the case at all. Red worms or nightcrawlers work the best in my experience, end of story. Berkley Gulp in "White Maggot" flavor works well too, but natural worms should be the first

choice. I prefer red worms, as they are more visible to both the angler and the fish and are easy to put on really small hooks. With less than \$45, an angler can purchase everything he or she needs to start microfishing.

USES OF MICROFISHING

Most of the 1100 plus and growing North American fish species are not large fish. In fact, most of them could be considered "micro species." For the lifelister, microfishing is in fact necessary if they want to add species to their lifelist. For the American angler, microfishing is a paradise. There is no need to look to other continents for diversity when there is a plethora of species here. I started focusing mainly on minnows and shiners in my area. These are the easiest fish to target along with Creek and Bluehead chubs and sunfish. The best time to go after these fish is usually in May or June, when their spawning colors are present (Figure 2). Some of the most basic silver fish can transform into stunning hues of red, purple, pink, and yellow during this time. A good phototank can be useful, especially during the height of spawning season.

Darters are also present (Figure 3), and the males will frequently be seen chasing females around in an almost amusing sort of way. Microfishing is a great way to catch darters, but they will require more dedication on the part of the angler and are some of the more difficult of North American fishes to catch on hook-and-line microfishing. A shorter rod is a good way to go after darters, although we do catch them regularly on ten-foot



Figure 2. Nuptial males: Rainbow Shiner (*Notropis chrosomus*) Conasauga River, TN, top, and Whitetail Shiner (*Cyprinella galactura*) Walland, TN.

Figure 3. Redline Darter (*Etheostoma rufilineatum*) Walland, TN, top, and Tangerine Darter (*Percina aurantiaca*); Tuckasegee River, NC.



Figure 4. Spotfin Shiner (*Cyprinella spiloptera*), Chattanooga, TN.

poles. Generally, darter fishing is up close and personal, with the angler standing inches away from the fish. Using the front half of a medium fishing rod is a cheap alternative to buying a separate darter fishing pole.

Microfishing is also a great way to sample creeks and small rivers. I have noticed that I tend to catch larger and more aggressive males of the species I am targeting while microfishing. I never had the same results with the seine or dip net. While I was microfishing the Conasauga River in Tennessee earlier this spring, I noticed I was catching only the aggressive males while the females would hang back in a tighter school, inactive. I noticed this for the Bronze Darter (*Percina palmaris*) I was targeting as well. The fishes I caught there had the most spectacular colors, and I can't wait to go back to catch the remaining darter species I missed. I have used microfishing to sample waters where I was earlier, and I usually have about the same results as dip netting or seining, with the exception of catching larger and more colorful males of the species. I have also found microfishing to be of great help when trying to find a specific fish in a body of water. This may be an easy task for a crew with a seine net, but a single microfisherman can have the same results. I experienced this in Tennessee with my friend Casper Cox, in his backyard creek. The "creek" was more of a swollen river from recent rain, and I needed one species out of the many that were there. I did a basic river study, checking for eddies, current breaks, structure, then found the location I wanted to fish. On the first drop in the area I picked, I pulled up the fish I was looking for, a nice Spotfin Shiner (*Cyprinella spiloptera*) (Figure 4). After catching the fish I wanted, I dropped my bait again and pulled out another for good measure and called it a day. All in under ten minutes. Microfishing is a great way to sample waters, especially when targeting a specific species.

I have used microfishing to catch specific fishes that were otherwise just short of impossible to catch. For example, while spending several weeks chasing after Whitemouth Shiners (*Notropis alborus*) in North Carolina and South Carolina last year with my nets, I was striking out left and right. I decided to microfish for them. There was a small school of Whitemouth's under a bridge, with no way to get to them besides microfishing. With the reach of my ten-foot pole, I quietly dropped a bait near the school and I had my Whitemouth Shiner immediately! I have also noticed this in Mexico, where I was this spring with a group of biologists



Figure 5. Chairel Cichlid (*Herichthys pantostictus*), Rio Tancuilin, State of San Luis Potosi, Mexico.

studying their native fishes. There were cichlids in abundance, almost everywhere we went, and they were almost impossible to catch in the nets. I microfished for them and was able to catch five different species of cichlids with the hook that otherwise we wouldn't have seen (Figure 5). This worked out great, as I was in Mexico also to help others understand and appreciate microfishing.

Microfishing may be an underappreciated form of fishing, but for some anglers and lifelisters, it is downright fun and maybe even addictive! Personally, I have experienced putting off more important things in my life to go microfishing, on more than one occasion, I have found that children are especially fond of microfishing. They seem to enjoy the diversity just as much as we do, and even a small *Gambusia* caught with a hook is good entertainment for them. I truly hope that microfishing will become more widespread, although by now I am used to the strange looks I get as cars pass me while fishing in a roadside creek with a ten-foot pole. I have yet to run into another microfisherman while I was microfishing; however, I hope that will change someday. Catching a fish with a hook is different than catching a fish with a net. The hook and line connect the angler to the fish, the fish must bite the hook, the angler must pick the best time to set the hook, the angler must land the fish—have possession of it—before it counts. But there is a similarity between microfishing and using a dip net, which is: You never know what you will pull up! Hopefully more and more people will take up microfishing, or at least understand something about it. My lifelist is growing with every trip I take, and I try to get out at least a couple times a week. As of July 2018, I have caught 227 species of fish, ever closer to my initial goal of 283. With a lot of hard work, traveling, and of course patience, I hope to reach an even greater goal of 1000 fish on hook and line. I know I'll still get the weird looks and questions, but by now I am used to it. I will keep on microfishing and catching unique little fishes, smiling all along the way.

Websites for microfishing gear include <https://microfishing.com/tackle/> and <https://www.tenkarabum.com/microfishing-gear.html>.