

TRIP REPORT: KENTUCKY, NORTH CAROLINA, AND SOUTH CAROLINA

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Eight members of the Ichthyology and Aquarium Sciences Society of Stevens Point (IASSSP) were set on taking a trip south over spring break to attend the 2020 NANFA convention in Columbia, South Carolina. The plan was to camp and explore the biological diversity of Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina on the way down from Wisconsin. On March 11th, just three days before the intended departure date, the group learned that the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point (UWSP) would be extending spring break for an extra week, switching to online classes, and canceling all university-sponsored travel due to the Coronavirus. On March 12th we received an email stating that the 2020 NANFA convention would be postponed. That left the group with a difficult decision to make. Should the trip be cancelled, thus leaving potential travelers at home daydreaming about the mountain streams and Congaree swamps that they had anticipated exploring for months? Or should they take the leap, pay for the trip out of pocket, and escape the craze of the current societal state? Four of the original eight members of the group decided on the latter. Although the trip was structured around exploring the biological diversity of fishes, there was a nice diversity of interests within the group. Noah and Jason are fish-species nerds and had the goal of seeing and catching as many species as possible for their life-lists. Recently, Noah has also been working on a birding life-list. Nathan is an adventure seeker, 5-star camp chef, and is more of a “standard” fisherman who still appreciates diversity. Conner is a mammal specialist with a passion for all biological diversity and was interested in expanding his iNaturalist (<https://www.inaturalist.org/>) life-list on the trip.

The first spot on the route was the Daniel Boone National Forest in southern Kentucky. We arrived on March 14. The campground was empty with the exception of our group,

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Jason Lins is a lotic fishes enthusiast who also loves hunting and wilderness exploration. He recently completed his Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences undergraduate program at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point and will be spending the summer working for the National Park Service in the streams of the Smoky Mountains. He also enjoys sharing his adventures on YouTube and Instagram under the username FishesbyJ.



Figure 1. Noah holding the seine as Jason kicks. (Photo by Conner Ties)



Figure 2. A Palezone Shiner moments before release. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 3. A Popeye Shiner caught while microfishing. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 4. A male Cumberland Darter. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 5. A Barcheek Darter. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 6. Rainbow Darter from the seine. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 7. A Kentucky Banded Sculpin. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 8. A microfished Whitetail Shiner. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 9. Conner's River Chub. (Photo by Conner Ties)



Figure 10. A Gilt Darter on a micro-hook. (Photo by Noah Daun)

maybe due to low nighttime temperatures, which were still falling to the low forties. We spent our time here exploring various tributaries and access points of the South Fork Cumberland River. The water was high, and hook-and-line fishing wasn't very productive, as we only caught a few shiners on micro gear. However, nets provided more diversity (Figure 1). Quite a few shiner species turned up, including the endangered Palezone Shiner *Notropis albizonatus* (Figure 2). All Palezones (and other fishes) were released healthy and quickly, after a few pictures of course. The nets also produced some other cyprinids, including Sand Shiners *N. stramineus*, Popeye Shiners *N. ariommus* (Figure 3), Striped Shiners *Luxilus chrysocephalus*, and a Scarlet Shiner *Lythrurus fasciolaris*. Not to be outdone, some stunning darter species showed up in the nets as well. The Cumberland Darters *Etheostoma gore* (Figure 4) were colored-up and had a vivid, almost electric light-blue coloration. We also saw a few Barcheek Darters *E. obeyense* (Figure 5) and Rainbow Darters *E. caeruleum* (Figure 6), as well as a single Stripetail Darter *E. kennicotti*.

Northern Hog Sucker *Hypentelium nigricans*, Banded Sculpin *Cottus carolinae* (Figure 7), and Brook Silverside *Labidesthes sicculus* rounded out the fish species seen in Kentucky. The campsite in Kentucky also had many bird species for Noah's and Conner's lists, including Yellow-rumped Warbler, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Flicker, and Carolina Chickadee.

The next campsite was at Lake Powhatan Campground near Asheville, NC. The area was also good for birding, as Noah and Conner saw many species including Pied-billed Grebe, Eastern Towhee, Brown Thrasher, and Chipping Sparrow. The new campground had many more campers, and the effects of a much more populated area were also felt during fishing. Stocked trout were difficult to avoid, and trout regulations made it difficult to find spots. However, we were still able to find fish! Mirror Shiners *N. spectrunculus* were abundant at the first spot on the Pigeon River, and would be at most of the spots in North Carolina. We also caught a few Central Stonerollers *Campostoma anomalum* and Jason caught a Whitetail Shiner *Cyprinella galactura* (Figure 8).



Figure 11. An adult Warpaint Shiner caught while microfishing. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 12: One of several Mirror Shiner caught in North Carolina. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 13. A Western Blacknose Dace fooled by a microhook. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 14. A Saffron Shiner from a Green River tributary. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 15. Microfished Fieryblack Shiner. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 16. Tessellated Darter from the island creek. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 17. A Mottled Sculpin on micro gear. (Photo by Jason Lins)

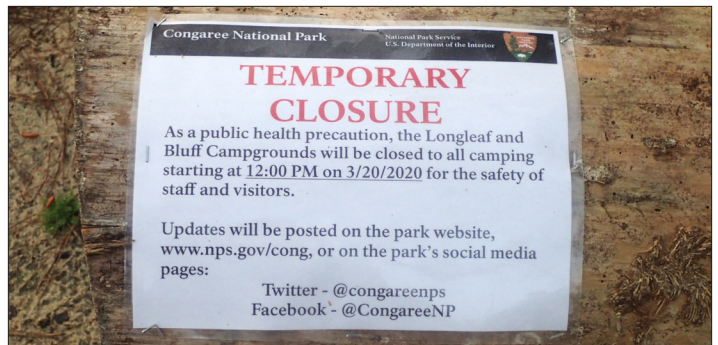


Figure 18. Bad news for the group. (Photo by Noah Daun)

Our next stop was at the Swannanoa River, but the only fish seen here was a beautiful River Chub *Nocomis micropogon* that Conner caught (Figure 9). The final spot of the day was on the Mills River. The current was fast, but the water was clear. Jason and Noah both managed to finesse their microhooks in front of a Gilt Darter *Percina evides* (Figure 10). In addition to the Gilt, they also caught River Chubs and Warpaint Shiners *L. coccogenis*. Seining was difficult here, as Jason's water-filled waders would be quick to confirm, and he only got a Fantail Darter *E. flabellare* to show for it.

The following day we began our day fishing the Horsepasture River. The area was beautiful, with many rapids and waterfalls. We managed a few fishes, and Jason caught a handsome Warpaint Shiner (Figure 11). We also caught a few River Chubs, and Nathan caught a Redbreast Sunfish *Lepomis auritus*. The drive was somewhat long, so we made only one stop on the way back. This spot produced many Mirror Shiners (Figure 12) and a few Western Blacknose Dace *Rhinichthys obtusus* (Figure 13).

The next day, we searched for Notchlip Redhorse *Mox-*



Figure 19. Small pickerels from Congaree. Top: Jason’s Chain, Bottom: Noah’s Redfin. (Photos by Jason Lins & Noah Daun)



Figure 20. Jason concentrating on very small piscivores in Congaree as Nathan watches. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 21. The Boardwalk through the Cypress Swamps of Congaree National Park. (Photo by Noah Daun)



Figure 22. The sexually dimorphic Lined Topminnow. (Photos by Jason Lins & Noah Daun)



Figure 23. A beautiful Savannah Darter prepares to swim off. (Photo by Jason Lins)

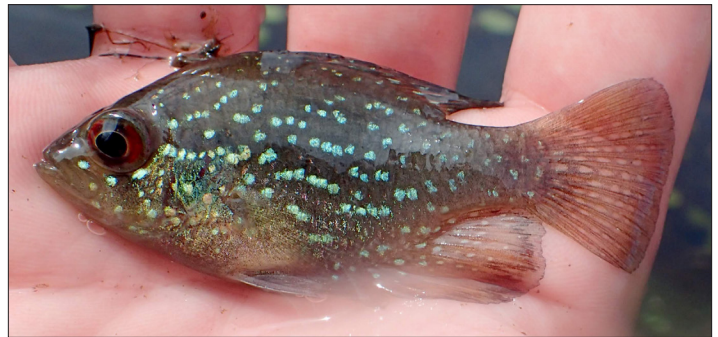


Figure 24.: A gorgeous Bluespotted Sunfish. (Photo by Noah Daun)

ostoma collapsum in the Green River basin (of the Broad/Congaree drainage). The first spot was rich in new micro species, especially in a small creek running through an island in the river. Jason and Noah caught Saffron Shiners *N. rubricroceus* (Figure 14), Fieryblack Shiners *C. pyrrhomelas* (Figure 15), Tessellated Darters *E. olmstedii* (Figure 16), Central Stonerollers, and Mottled Sculpin *C. bairdii* (Figure 17). In addition to the fishes, Conner found a Queen Snake and a Common Garter Snake sunning themselves a few feet from each other on the streambank. We then moved downstream

to a few different spots. Both Conner and Jason hooked into redhorses, but unfortunately, none were landed. Noah did get his lifer Sandbar Shiner *N. szepticus*. Redbreast Sunfish, Spottail Shiners *N. hudsonius*, and a Smallmouth Bass *Micropterus dolomieu* were also caught.

We then drove to South Carolina that night and set up camp in Congaree National Park. However, this was the last night the campsite was open, as papers were plastered all over conveying the closure of the campground due to the Coronavirus (Figure 18), but the park would remain open. We spent the next day explor-



Figure 25. The Blackbanded Sunfish Jason microfished. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 26. Nathan trudges through the mud in search of larger Dollar Sunfish. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 27. The group of satisfied naturalists after exploring the diversity of the roadside wetland. From left to right: Jason, Noah, Conner, Nathan. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 28. A Lowland Shiner Jason caught microfishing. (Photo by Jason Lins)



Figure 29. A Westfall's Darter caught on micro gear. (Photo by Jason Lins)

ing the park and fishing the streams and lakes within. We caught Black Crappie *Pomoxis nigromaculatus*, Bluegill *L. macrochirus*, Redbreast Sunfish, and microfished a few Eastern Mosquitofish *Gambusia holbrooki*. Using the mosquitofish as bait, Jason got his lifer Chain Pickerel *Esox niger*, and Noah got his lifer Redfin Pickerel *Esox americanus americanus* (Figure 19). Jason also got his lifer Dollar Sunfish *L. marginatus* here (Figure 20). We could see many larger fish surfacing in Weston Lake, likely Bowfin *Amia calva* or Longnose Gar *Lepisosteus osseus*. Nathan had a large fish on his line at one point, but his light tackle couldn't bring the fish in. Walking the boardwalks through the cypress swamps of the park was a very neat experience (Figure 21), and we saw a great

deal of other wildlife while exploring the park, including Brown Watersnake, Five-lined Skink, Hermit Thrush, Tufted Titmice, Anhinga, and many crayfishes. Since the park's campground was now closed, the group found another campground nearby, this time at a state park. On the way there we made a stop at Colonels Creek, where Jason and Noah both got their lifer Lined Topminnows *Fundulus lineolatus* (Figure 22)! However, this was the only species caught here, and we continued to the overcrowded campground at Sesquicentennial State Park.

That night Noah called Dustin Smith (South Carolina's NANFA Regional Representative), who was kind enough to give us a few spots that he had marked for the NANFA con-



Figure 30. Jason closely scanning the stream bottom for darters. (Photo by Conner Ties)



Figure 31. The frustratingly beautiful Turquoise Darter. (Photo by Noah Daun)

vention field trips. These spots turned out to be some of the best of the trip! At the first spot we saw Yellowfin Shiners *N. lutipinnis*, Northern Hog Suckers, and a few beautiful Savannah Darters *E. fricksium* (Figure 23). The next spot looked perfect for the *Enneacanthus*, and it did not disappoint! Almost immediately, we caught Bluespotted Sunfish *Enneacanthus gloriosus* (Figure 24) and Blackbanded Sunfish *E. chaetodon* (Figure 25) with the dip nets! We then went to work with the microhooks. Jason managed to catch both species, while Noah was “cursed” to only catch Bluespotted Sunfish. Noah and Jason also caught Lined Topminnows, and everyone caught some big Dollar Sunfish. Nathan also landed multiple Largemouth Bass *M. salmoides* (Figure 26), which we could frequently see chasing the topminnows and sunfish around (Figure 27).

The next of Dustin’s spots was at a very small stream, Big Branch Creek. There was only one species visible here, but it was one that we had been really hoping to see. After a bit of effort,

Noah and Jason both caught their first Lowland Shiner *Pteronotopis stonei* (Figure 28)! They were very excited to get their second *Pteronotopis* species on their lists. They are such beautiful little creatures. Our last spot was another small creek at a road crossing. Here Noah and Jason caught the recently split Westfall’s Darter *P. westfalli* (Figure 29) as well as more Lowland Shiners on micro gear (Figure 30). Noah had a relatively huge Turquoise Darter *E. inscriptum* in his hand on the microhook, but it flipped away and back into the stream before he could get a picture. It was a bummer for him, but we were still able to get some pictures of it after Noah caught it in a dipnet. Noah also netted a small pickerel and another Savannah Darter before leaving (Figure 31).

We made a quick stop at the Savannah River at the end of the day to try for Bartram’s Bass, but to no avail. We started our journey back northward that evening, as the Wisconsin governor was implementing a “safer at home” order to go into effect the following evening. Despite the many inconveniences we faced, all members agreed that the trip was worth the extra cost. We got to see some incredible diversity in a beautiful region of the country. We saw 45 fish species on the trip. Jason added 16 new species to his hook and line life-list, and Noah added 10 new species to his. Conner observed 93 new animal species for his iNaturalist list. We want to extend a huge thank-you to Dustin for his help, as he helped make our time in South Carolina very memorable. The Carolinas were an incredible place to explore with great fish diversity, and all four participants of the trip hope to return to very soon, perhaps this fall.

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