

# THE SEAGREEN AFFAIR



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The Seagreen Darter *Etheostoma thalassinum* occurs in North Carolina and South Carolina (Figure 1) and was one of the last darters occurring within a two-hour radius around my home in North Carolina that I hadn't yet caught. In late August of 2019, I decided to go after this fast stream dweller with hook and line. I knew I would have a difficult task ahead of me, as this fish typically lives in small streams where I would have difficulty snorkel fishing. I hoped to catch this darter, which attains a maximum size of 3¼ inches, in one trip since the drive to Lincolnton, North Carolina, was close to two hours from where I live in eastern North Carolina. At the end of August, I packed the ap-

propriate gear, most notably my custom darter fishing rod made by NANFA member David Smith especially for me. The rod was made of a golf club handle minus the club, with a fishing rod attached and glued to the grip (Figure 2). The rod was eleven inches long, which is my ideal length for a snorkel fishing darter rod. My hook of choice would be Owner Smallest brand, which is pre-snelled with a foot of red line, making it a relatively easy task to tie. For weight, I would use a size five split shot about an inch above the hook, then a bit of red worm. Voilà!

At the very end of August, I arrived around 9 A.M. at Leeper Creek (my favorite stream) in Lincolnton, North Carolina. It was a beautiful, bright sunny day, ideal for darter fishing which is a sight fishing sport. My plan would be to enter the creek downstream of the darters and then slowly crawl in the foot-deep water, stalking slowly until I saw an ideal candidate. The creek is a beautiful ecosystem, containing other darter species such as Carolina Fan-

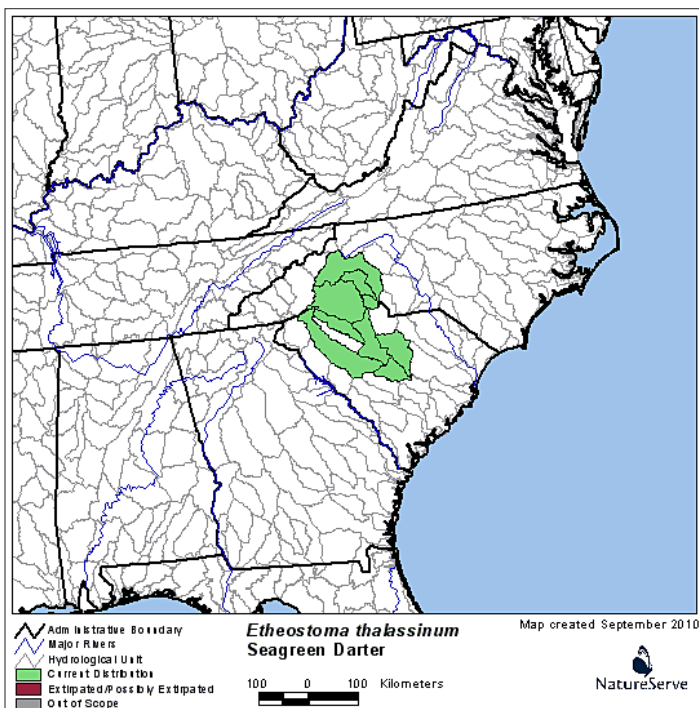


Figure 1. Distribution of Seagreen Darter. From Nature Serve 2019.

Photos by the author.

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. Custom darter rod made by David Smith.



Figure 3. Seagreen Darter riffles in Leepers Creek.

tail *E. brevispinum*, Tessellated *E. olmstedii*, and Piedmont *Percina crassa* darters.

Several minnow species also thrive here, most notably Greenhead Shiners *Notropis chlorocephalus*, which turn a brilliant green and purple color during the height of their spawning season. These are easily caught by accident when snorkel fishing, and I have learned to hold my hook and bait in my hand while underwater, lest a minnow grabs my bait. That morning, I saw several hungry Tessellated Darters, and I accidentally caught one as he grabbed the bait from underneath my hand—smart little buggers. As I continued forward, with my face barely underwater, I saw a nice male Seagreen Darter, but he had noticed me and vanished under a rock. I nudged myself forward, trying to put my bait in the rock crevice. I waited for what seemed like an eternity, but the Seagreen Darter didn't take my bait. I only saw one more Seagreen that day, which was further up the stream right under a main riffle of the creek (Figure 3). Once again, I spooked the fish, and afterwards he showed no interest. I did manage to catch some beautiful Greenhead Shiners, which I photographed, but I was upset that I didn't have better luck with my main target.

The next morning, I returned to the same site. I had an itch I couldn't yet scratch: catching a Seagreen Darter on hook-and-line! I had spooked both fish the day before, and I was determined to succeed this time. After a peaceful and scenic drive, I arrived and immediately donned my wetsuit, snorkel, and mask and entered the water. With my David Smith Special Darter Rod, I repeated the same tactic as before, snorkeling with my face upstream, where the darters faced, so I could sneak behind them and hopefully not spook them. I quickly saw the usual bunch of fish, which were almost becoming friendly at this point, since we had spent so much time together: Tessellated Darters in groups of three or four, a hungry Piedmont Darter, Bluehead Chubs *Nocomis leptoccephalus*, and Greenhead Shiners. I also saw two smaller female Seagreen Darters under large rocks, but those were too small for me to hook.

Nearer the main rocky riffle, I saw my target: the same male Seagreen Darter that occupied that riffle. I had grown accustomed to his pattern from the day before, and he stood out.

I slowly (and for what felt like an eternity) positioned myself behind the beauty, and I brought the darter rod to where my bait was drifting towards him in the current. I had to avoid several hungry Bluehead Chubs, but finally my bait was near the darter's mouth. In what seemed like snake bite speed, the hungry Seagreen Darter inhaled the bait, and I quickly snapped my wrist, setting the tiny hook into the fish's mouth. Pulling myself out of the water, I reached with my left hand to grab the fish, which are renowned for falling off the hook at the worst moments. I gasped as I witnessed the fish wiggle and set itself free just before I could grasp it. I sat in the creek for a few moments in a state of disbelief. I was so close to catching the fish, and I lost it at the last moment. I regrouped and called it a day only to have the Seagreen Darter in my head all night long.

I was back at the creek the very next morning around 10 A.M. on another bright sunny day. I had the same darter in mind for that day: the larger male Seagreen with the pattern I couldn't get out of my head the night before. I skipped the lower riffle and entered the water a short distance below the main riffle. I was confident that he would be in the same spot as yesterday. As I submerged and drowned out the sounds of the world above, I made my way slowly inch by inch to the darter's hideout. There



Figure 4. The Seagreen Darter: the third time was the charm!



Figure 6. A Fireyblack Shiner for Dr. Nick's life list.



Figure 5. Dr. Nick stalking Seagreen Darters in Leepers Creek.

he was! And this time I hadn't spooked him. The male Seagreen Darter was out and not hiding under a rock: he was darting along right under the main riffle of the creek. I inched closer and was within striking distance. I put my bait near the current on the bottom, drifting it slowly towards the fish. At last the bait was there within the fish's reach. He snapped his head immediately and inhaled my bait. In a flash I sat up out of the water onto my knees as I simultaneously set the hook and lifted the fish from the water. It was hooked but only for a moment. The fish fell from my line, but I instantly grabbed the falling fish with my left hand, and the precious quarry was mine! I quickly made my way to the sandbar beside the creek and flashed some photos of my newest darter caught on hook-and-line. The Seagreen Darter was number 28 for me, and this was an exception-

ally challenging species to get. I was, to my knowledge, the first to catch a Seagreen Darter on hook-and-line (Figure 4). I was very happy and very proud of myself, especially for having the patience to successfully tackle this fish.

One of my best fishing friends and NANFA member Nick Viole (aka Dr. Nick) was on my mind the next day. He had heard about the Seagreen Darter and agreed to meet me back at the spot on Leepers Creek at Lincolnton with the intention of catching a few interesting species for himself. I met Dr. Nick on another bright and sunny Carolina morning, and we went to work again in Leepers Creek (Figure 5). Dr. Nick had recently started snorkel fishing himself and had caught a beautiful Roanoke Darter *P. roanoka* on our last outing together. He was eager to get a Seagreen Darter himself, and without a wetsuit he jumped right in. Almost immediately he sighted a Seagreen and paused. I watched for several minutes as he attempted to get the stubborn fish to bite, but it was not to be. I watched him catch several Bluehead Chubs and Greenhead Shiners, but that day he wasn't able to pull in a Seagreen Darter. I commended him on the great work. He would come back another day and hopefully have better luck.

Afterwards we went on a drive further west and caught a mixture of Fieryblack Shiners *Cyprinella pyrrhomelas*, Redlip Shiners *N. chiliticus*, Highback Chubs *Hybopsis hypsinotus*, Santee Chubs *C. zanema*, and Sandbar Shiners *N. scepticus*. It was a productive day. As luck would have it, Dr. Nick needed a Fieryblack Shiner (Figure 6) on hook-and-line for his personal life list.

I learned a lot from my Seagreen Darter fishing experience. Most of all, I learned resilience, as this fish pushed the level of my patience and endurance. I was happy to have my 28th darter species on hook-and-line, and I was already making plans to catch number 29: the swamp and tannic water dwelling Sawcheek Darter *E. serrifer*.

#### References

NatureServe. 2019. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.1. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://explorer.natureserve.org>. (Accessed: October 28, 2019).