

THE TRIP TO THE 2006 AMERICAN KILLIFISH ASSOCIATION CONVENTION TRIP IN TAMPA

By Allan Semeit

A group of Arizona Rivulin Keepers (ARK) members decided to attend the 2006 American Killifish Convention in Tampa, Florida over the Memorial Day weekend. We also wanted to do some serious collecting. To accomplish the latter, we arrived on Wednesday to have a few extra days in Tampa before the convention

Our group consisted of Gary and John Kukowski, Craig McGowan, Allan Semeit, Bruce Bernard and Wright Huntley (the last two are friends from the Bay Area Killifish Association). Sue Katz, a former Phoenix resident transplanted to Oklahoma, was attending an educational conference in Orlando and could not join us until Thursday. Dan Pape, another ARK member, was visiting with his Florida relatives and could only be with us for the convention portion of the trip.

WEDNESDAY: Gary Kukowski was instrumental in organizing our efforts. He surveyed our options for housing, dining, and car rentals. As a result, we selected the Motel 6 near the Fairgrounds for our housing and Gary obtained a Dodge Durango as our rental vehicle.

Gary and John Kukowski were the first to arrive in Tampa. They picked up Craig McGowan, Allan Semeit, and Bruce Bernard at the airport. Fortunately, the three arrived within a few minutes of each other and were soon whisked off to the motel. After checking in (and getting our

convention-bound fish out of the heat), our group headed out for dinner at Mike's Southern Classic BBQ, a nearby restaurant featuring slow-smoked beef, chicken, and pork. The place wasn't much to look at (Gary would say that it had "character"), but the food was excellent, the staff was friendly, and the beer was only a dollar. After stuffing ourselves, we went to Wal-Mart and obtained our Florida fishing licenses. The rest of the evening was spent unpacking and relaxing. Wright Huntley, who was also visiting family in Florida, arrived about 10 PM (only 7 PM Arizona Time).



John and Gary Kukowski, Allan Semeit and Sue Katz outside the Motel 6

THURSDAY: The day started with breakfast at a "truck stop" restaurant across the street from our motel. At this time, we were joined by Sue Katz. Wright Huntley had some urgent family affairs to attend to and could not join us for the day's collecting trip.

Based upon suggestions from Brian Skidmore of the Suncoast Killie Club (SKS), we headed north to try

collecting at several locations along the Santa Fe River. Brian recommended the Santa Fe River because the fish fauna there was different from that further south. The Santa Fe River is also a spring-fed system, so there would be plenty of water compared to other areas which were experiencing a serious drought. We gathered our collecting gear, piled into two cars, and headed to an area north of Gainesville. This was about a 2 ½ hour drive.

Our map provided general directions and was not very detailed. Despite a diligent search, we could not locate the first collecting site. Instead, we tried our luck at Oleno State Park.

Despite a sign warning of alligators, we waded in with our seine and dip nets. The river was somewhat



Looking downriver from the first collecting site



Allan and John working the seine at Oleno State Park (looking downriver)



Looking at Craig and the picnic area from the river



Looking upriver at the first collecting site



Sign at the swimming area at Oleno State Park

sluggish where we first collected. Aside from a multitude of water scorpions, we managed to catch several pickerel, brook silversides, *Gambusia*, a number of sunfishes, *Heterandia formosa*, a turtle (possibly either a small snapper or a musk turtle) and one *Fundulus chrysotus*. We only kept the smallest sunfish, the *H. formosa*, and the *F. chrysotus*. We also moved

downstream to an area with a higher flow and a slight riffle. Here we found a species of shiner which we also kept. After a short time to relax and munch on some snacks we



Bruce and John at the riffle



John netting fish in the riffles at Oleno State Park



Allan working a small channel at Oleno State Park brought, we headed for the second location - Rum Island County Park.

Rum Island has an almost mystic quality and we were enchanted with it's beauty. Although not on a paved

road, we were able to find the park without much difficulty. As we walked from the parking area and looked into the river, we spotted a pair of Bowfins that were being cozy with one another. Right after that, three gars, maybe 2-3 feet each, appeared to be spawning in midstream.



Looking just upstream at Rum Island



Looking further upstream at Rum Island



A closer view of the small island upstream



Across the Santa Fe River at Rum Island



Craig netting around a fallen tree



Bruce checking his catch



Plastic containers used to sort and store our catch



John and Bruce netting in the dense aquatic vegetation at Rum Island



Cypress trees and roots



Allan collecting in the shallows



Pennywort grew along the banks

The edge of the river had some dense patches of aquatic vegetation that looked promising - and we were soon plying through these with our dip nets. Besides *Gambusia*, mollies, tadpoles, and another small turtle (all of which we did not keep), we collected small unidentifiable sunfishes, one pygmy sunfish, Pirate Perch, a few madtoms, darters, and *Heterandria formosa*. This location had several clear springs feeding into the river and these added to the enchantment of the park.



Heterandria Formosa

It was about 5 pm by the time we decided to quit. The third location recommended by Brian was about an hour south and out of our way home so we decided that it was too late to try and find it. To be honest, we were pretty exhausted too. We packed up and headed back to Tampa. Despite some adventures with directions, we arrived safely back at the motel. That bed was calling to one exhausted collector...

FRIDAY: We arose and convoyed to a Denny's for breakfast. Brian Skidmore had also provided us with a collecting location not too far from the motel where we were staying, so we decided to check it out. Brian had circled a section of Bruce B. Down Blvd on both sides of the road near Amberly Drive. We could not find any roadside ditches or pools along Bruce B. Down Blvd, so we drove north on Amberly where we found some ponds. We parked at a



It's a gator!



Allan and Bruce checking a mudhole



Bruce and Allan checking water in the underbrush (it was a jungle!)

church as we noticed a drainage ditch that looked promising. Unfortunately, it only contained hundreds of tadpoles and a small alligator. We checked several nearby ponds but came up empty-handed. As the day was extremely humid, we were soon drenched and decided to return to the motel to freshen up.

Our next stop was a visit to the Florida Aquarium. This turned out to be a delightful experience. The highlight was seeing either the seahorses (they had a variety including sea dragons) or their collection of saltwater killifishes.



Looking into one of the brackish water displays



Cyprinodon variegatus spawning at the Florida Aquarium

From the aquarium, we went to the Wyndham Hotel to sign in at the American Killifish Association Convention. Here we met up with



Wright Huntley with his registration packet



Several views of the convention registration room



ARK member Dan Pape. We received our packets, visited with old friends and met new ones, and checked the fish room and displays. As we were getting hungry, Gary

Kukowski led us to Tito's Latin Café, a top-rated Latin restaurant not too far from the Wyndham Hotel for a late lunch/early dinner. Although the food was good, in my opinion, it wasn't exceptional.

We returned to the convention and spent the evening there. Show fish were benched and we were constantly checking the Fish Room to see the new entries. Our group came up big for the first raffle of five pairs of new and rare fish - Bruce Bernard won two pairs of killies and Allan Semeit won another. We also attended the first workshop on *Epiplatys* by Jim and Liz Hutchins, which was excellent. Finally, we enjoyed the hospitality suite.

SATURDAY: Since we had members with low registration numbers, we had to be back at the convention for the 8 AM opening of the Fish Sale. That meant an early wake-up call.

Henri DeBruyn of the Suncoast Killie Society, and also a member of the Belgian killifish club, brought about 350-400 pairs of killies from Europe and many of these rare fish were offered in the Fish Sale. Groups of ten, based upon their registration number, were admitted to the Fish Sale Room for 10 minutes and allowed to purchase two bags of fish for each of the first rounds. When everyone had the opportunity to select fish two or three times, the room was opened for unlimited purchases and this was when we were able to obtain a variety of killies for ARK.



Tables of killies at the Fish Sale



Close up of a Fish Sale Table

While the Fish Sale was progressing, new workshops were presented. The first by Lee Harper covered how to drill tanks and set up a flow-through system. Henri DeBruyn then presented "Collecting in Gabon". This was followed by Jack Heller "The Killifish Fishroom".

When the convention paused for a lunch break, Gary Kukowski led our

group to an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet called Hao Wah. The food was very good and we all ate too much! Then it was back to the convention!

The afternoon session featured three more workshops. Monte Lehman reviewed The Kathetys Group, several Suncoast Killies members discussed their techniques for culturing live foods, and then there was a roundtable of prominent killie breeders who answered questions and provided tricks for success.

Following the afternoon workshops, most of us drove back to the motel to "dress up" for the banquet. In other words, we exchanged our t-shirts for Hawaiian shirts. Actually, a few of our group did change to more formal attire. We returned to the convention and found that the members who stayed behind had obtained a table for us and we were all able to sit together. The banquet was excellent. In fact, Craig McGowan stated that he thought it was the best food he had on the trip. Following the banquet was the presentation of awards for the fish show entries. Allan Semeit received two second place awards - for his albino pupfish and for his *Rivulus cylindraceus* "Al Castro". Craig McGowan also received a second place award for his *Aphyosemion striatum*. Finally, we were treated to a review of *Nothobranchius* by Brian Watters.

SUNDAY: Since we had not collected some of the fish we were seeking, we decided to skip the first event of the day at the convention, the Open BOT Session, and use the

extra time to try collecting in some of the ponds and roadside ditches near the motel. We did not find much in these except *Gambusia* and *Heterandria formosa*. However, we



Checking a drainage ditch near Motel 6



Collecting at the overpass drainage ditches – Fairgrounds building in background

did notice a large alligator in one of the lakes where we collected, but he stayed a distance from us. We joked about sacrificing the oldest (Wright Huntley) if necessary to appease the “gator gods”.

We returned to the Motel 6, cleaned up and headed back to the convention. We were in time to hear Tony Terceira's presentation on "The Bivittatum Group", which was one of the best talks at the convention. It



Sue, Craig, Dan, and John prepping for the auction



The AKA Auction

seemed like as soon as Tony finished, the gigantic auction began. There were bags and bags of fish, yet the auction ran smoothly and was completed by late afternoon. As the convention officially ended, we settled accounts and said our good-byes to Dan Pape and other attendees who would not be participating in the Monday Fish Collecting Trip.

Since it was dinner time, Gary Kukowski led our group that included Ken Normandin of the SKS north to a funky restaurant (a shack with “character”) called "Skipper's". As

you might guess, seafood was the specialty and again the food was delicious. We had a good time before we returned to the motel and prepared for an early start on Monday.

MONDAY: We returned to the Wyndham at 8 AM for the Fish Collecting Trip. Participants were divided into three groups. One went to collect saltwater and brackish killies, while the other two groups went after freshwater killies. The first stop for our group was Lake Thonotosassa, which surprisingly was not very far from our motel. Most of our group started netting the



Bruce and Allan working the aquatic vegetation



Looking up Baker Creek



At the boat ramp at Lake Thontosassa



Looking toward the lake from Baker Creek

inlet by the boat ramp. Several of us crossed the narrow peninsula to another inlet where Baker Creek entered the lake. We found a "gold mine" here. My primary goal was to bring home pygmy sunfishes (*Elassoma evergladei*) and they were abundant here. I worked the thick aquatic vegetation around the mouth of Baker Creek and collected lots of pygmy sunfish and *Heterandria formosa*, a few Pirate Perch, some madtoms, and a few darters. Out in the deeper (3 ft) water, others caught *Fundulus chrystous*.



The parking lot viewed from the boat ramp



Working the water lilies in the main channel at Amberly Drive

Our second stop was on Amberly Drive just south of Bruce B. Down Blvd. Just southeast of the intersection, behind a complex of office buildings, was either a lake or part of the drainage canal. Another gold mine! My second goal was to collect some Blue-spotted Sunfish (*Enneacanthus gloriosus*) and we found them lurking in the aquatic weeds. There was also a large population of *Fundulus chrystous*. We were also seeking these, especially those with melanistic coloration. We also caught numerous *Lucania goodei*. Again, there were a few oddballs to swim into our nets. As we finished at this location, Sue Katz had to return to Orlando and we bid her good-bye.



Netting off the main channel bank



The "supervisors" watch the collectors



A view of the "bay" north of the main channel. This was where we were most successful.



Refreshing the water for the fish



Cleaning up as we leave the Amberly Drive location

Our Fish Collecting Group was continuing to a third location (to collect Florida Flagfish). It was already mid-afternoon and most of our Motel 6 gang were tired from our exertions. We also felt we had all the fish we wanted. Except for Craig McGowan and Wright Huntley (who was taking pictures, not collecting), we decided to skip the last location, return to the motel, and start bagging fish. We spent the rest of the afternoon sorting and bagging. Craig returned from an eventful episode at the third location.

That evening, Wright Huntley led us to a nearby "cowboy" restaurant (Frontier Cattle Company) for dinner. We arrived as one patron

was trying to eat a 6 lb. (not oz.) steak with a baked potato and salad. If he finished within a specified time, his meal was free. Otherwise, it was \$50. He did not make it, but he did finish enough of the meal to get his picture added to their wall of fame. None of us felt any desire to try it. After dinner, it was time return to the motel and pack.

TUESDAY: This was the day of departure. Gary Kukowski drove Bruce Bernard to the airport at 5 AM, then returned and drove Craig McGowan and Allan Semeit to the airport at 8 AM. Wright Huntley was staying in Florida for a few more days. Finally, Gary and John Kukowski drove to the airport to turn in the rental car and fly home.

SUMMARY: This trip to Florida was one of the highlights of my life. I have dreamed of collecting there for many years. Add to that the excitement of the convention and the camaraderie with old and new friends made this a terrific week.