

## Collecting Fish for Taronga Zoo and Aquarium.

By Dave Wilson. From Tank Talk Volume 11. No 1 in 1986

### COLLECTING FISH FOR TARONGA ZOO AND AQUARIUM

David Wilson

The other day I received a phone call from Andy Wattam, he said "that he was talking to staff at Taronga Zoo and Aquarium and they wanted to set up a display of small fishes from Australia".

A quick check of work rosters and perhaps a little bargaining with wives and girlfriends left Tom Bujna, Andy Wattam, John Goodwin, Doug Williams and myself free on Sunday the 2nd of February for a bit of fun and fish collecting. A 7am departure time was decided upon, and also that anybody who was late would be left behind in Canberra. The alarm was set for 5.30am because of a complete lack of preparation. Plastic garbage bin, bin liners, a large scoop and a couple of small eskies were all thrown into the back of the 'yellow peril' (my SUZUKI 4WD). The eskies are used to keep the bait prawns from going black and foul smelling which happens quite quickly on a nice warm day.

About 6.55am everybody had arrived except for John Goodwin. A quick phone call to his house had him out of bed and the five of us were on the road to Jervis Bay about 8.10am. So much for those threatening words about late comers. We stopped for breakfast on the Princess Highway at a small service station near Kiola where we also purchased ammunition for the bait traps in the form of bait prawns and a couple of loaves of bread.

We arrived at the first creek selected for collecting at about 11am. The vehicles were driven down under a bridge and out of sight. Tom's FORD didn't quite make it because of some soft wet sandy soil. When we arrived at the water all of the aquatic plants, which were present twelve months previous, had disappeared, this meant that there was not a great deal of cover for the little fishes we were seeking. The creek runs across rock for about one kilometre from the bridge where we had parked the cars. It then drops over a small waterfall, about two feet high, then into a deep pool which is about one hundred metres long. The other end of the deep pool after a small set of rapids is the beginning of the tidal influence. I have found that the best place to find the most number of different species is at the last area of pure fresh water before the start of the tidal influence.

The first method of collection was to push a bicycle rim covered with fly wire mesh along the edge of the stream amongst the grass and other debris that collects in this area. Doug Williams used a small aquarium net to scoop out a Notesthes robusta (Bullrout) from water only two inches deep (a very lucky scoop), our first specimen for the day. About the third scoop with the bicycle rim, I lifted a two foot long

eel out of the water. I can't remember who jumped higher, me or the eel.

As the day progressed we tried all the methods of collecting that we had equipment for, we set prawns in plastic bait traps which caught a few small Hypseleotris compressa (Empire Gudgeon), Gobiomorphus australis (Striped Gudgeon), Gobiomorphus coxii (Cox's Gudgeon) and Philypnodon sp.1 (Dwarf Flathead Gudgeon). A rod and reel was also used with some success.

The angling method used for the capture of very small fish comprises of a small reel capable of handling a one kilogram monofilament, a rod, about two metres long and very soft, tiny hooks that can be obtained from a tackle store which supplies trout fly tying equipment. The FISHING SHACK, in Lonsdale Street Braddon, is a good place to get these things. When small fish are being caught on a hook for an aquarium, have water in a bucket ready for them, a battery operated air pump on the bucket and a pair of nail cutters to clip the line or hook near their mouth if necessary. Put a small segment of earthworm on the hook and lower the bait near some cover, next to a large rock or log in the water and wait a few minutes. If nothing happens after a short time, move and try another spot. When you catch your small fish dip your free hand in the water and wet it, gently grasp your catch in the wet hand and remove the hook if it is in the lip or the throat, if it is even deeper (their stomach). This is not as much of a problem as you may think, just clip the line as close to the eye of the hook as possible or level with its mouth. Fish with hooks in them will usually get rid of them in a few days without any ill effects. The hook will be found on the bottom of the aquarium, or even in the bottom of the bucket by the time you get your new guests into their new home. Occasionally a fish will have its gills damaged by the hook, these fish will not usually survive.

We left the first collecting site about 2pm with Hypseleotris compressa (Empire Gudgeons), Philypnodon sp.1 (Dwarf Flathead Gudgeons), Gobiomorphus coxii (Cox's Gudgeons), Gobiomorphus australis (Striped Gudgeons), Notesthes robusta (Bullrouts), Common Galaxias and some juvenile eels. Last year at the same creek I caught all of the above mentioned species as well as Myxus petardi (Freshwater Mullet), Redigobius bikolanus (Big-eyed Gobies) and Protoroctes maraena (Australian Grayling). As you can see our catch was much less than my trip last year and I think that two possible reasons for this are the lack of aquatic vegetation and the higher water level. Higher water levels not only allow fish to move upstream more easily and as a result of this it also makes collecting more difficult.

The road home crossed Conjola creek, this being our second collecting site. I hoped to catch some Monodactylus argenteus (Silver Batfish) but there were none to be found. Everybody had a bit of fun with rod and line. We caught some mullet and freshwater herrings which are beautiful fish but stress very easily and die. Many attempts have been made to transport Freshwater Herrings home but mostly they die during the trip home. Once I managed to keep two alive for about a week. Doug Williams set the plastic bait traps with some

prawns and bread, it wasn't long before he had about fifty Pseudomugil signifer (Pacific Blue-eyes), some of which were showing a brilliant body colour and had good long fins. The collecting site at Conjola creek is slightly brackish and is under tidal influence. Most of the fish encountered here were marine, we caught Bream, Blackfish and a large number of Mullet about ten inches long. To catch a ten inch Mullet on a one kilogram line is a tremendous amount of fun.

Late in the afternoon a strong southerly wind started to blow, making things a little unpleasant so we decided to leave for home. On our arrival in Canberra, the fish were left in the garbage bin overnight due to the extreme state of exhaustion following such a days activities. By the next day the fish were acclimatized and were placed into a couple of spare aquariums with only one casualty found. The rest are still swimming around happily awaiting transfer to Taronga Zoo and Aquarium.

**Postscript 2014:** Dave Wilson kept on collecting fish. He now does it for a living as proprietor of "Aquagreen" Australia's largest supplier of native fish and plants, located in Howard Springs NT. Aquagreen is a long-term and valued sponsor of CDAS. If you attend CDAS auctions, many of the special lots of rare and hard to find natives come from Dave.