

THIRTY-SIX HOURS ACROSS FLORIDA

Arthur Kosakowski

Davie, Florida

How far can I go in Florida, and can I catch a new species to my life list in 36 hours? Let's find out.

Growing up in New Jersey, every destination was one hour away. Going down to the shore? One hour. Going to the mountains? One hour. Going to Pennsylvania? One hour. Going to New York? One hour.

Not just New Jersey, but all of the Northeast is rather small compared to the rest of the United States. I would drive through five states in less than four hours on my way from New Jersey to New Hampshire when I was in graduate school. It was a shock when I moved down to Florida and realized that the drive from Miami to Jacksonville was over six-hours. To continue to the far side of the panhandle would add another few hours. Florida is big!

Combine Florida's size with my busy schedule and fishing trips to the far reaches of the state aren't often available to me. The farther it is from the Fort Lauderdale area, the less likely I'll be able to fish it. Roughly once per year, though, I'm able to find a weekend when I can make the trek up to northern Florida in search of fish species I've never caught or, at the very least, fish species I seldom encounter.

THURSDAY, MAY 25, 2023

The night before my 36-hour fishing marathon, I did some research on possible fish species to catch and where I could best do that. I singled out two species I had never caught and thought I had a good chance of catching: the Brown Darter *Etheostoma edwini* and the Metallic Shiner *Pteronotropis metallicus*. After consulting FishMap.org, I had several locations picked out where others have found Brown Darters and/or Metallic Shiners. I was ready.

FRIDAY, MAY 26, 2023

The day had arrived and I was ready to head north to the first spot, the New River in Worthington Springs. Thanks to my habit of prioritizing sleeping-in over almost everything else, I was on the road a little after 10:00 AM. One short pitstop for lunch and over 350 miles later, I made it.

The river was bigger in person than what I saw on Google Maps, but after walking the shore for a few minutes and not seeing any life in the sweet-tea-colored water, I finally spotted fish. A quick drop down with a little redworm produced my first fish of the trip: a Sooty-banded Darter *Percina westfalli* (Figure 1). While not the darter I was after, I rarely get to catch *any* darters given where I live, so this was a welcome sight.

Photos by the author.

Originally from Bayonne, New Jersey, Arthur Kosakowski is a recreational fisherman currently living in Davie, Florida. He has a passion for finding beauty in every fish species no matter the size. Since moving to Florida, he has been mesmerized by the variety of native and exotic fish species. Follow his fishing adventures on YouTube at www.YouTube.com/c/TheFishingNomad

I could see more darters on the bottom and a few smaller fish in the middle of the water column. Which should I target? Since I had already caught a darter, I decided to try for the smaller fish. It took a few missed hits, but I finally hooked an Ironcolor Shiner *Notropis chalybaeus* (Figure 2). Also not what I was looking for, but still a fish I don't get to catch often, so I couldn't be that upset.

I spent about an hour walking the shoreline and dropping my redworm all over, but the only spot I even got a bite was where I had already caught two fish. I managed to pick up a few more of each of these species before deciding to drive to the next spot.

Spot number two, on the Santa Fe River, was about a five-minute drive away. This was a big body of water without many features. I spent half an hour here without seeing a single fish or getting any bites. I fished around a downed tree in the water, but all I got for my efforts was a miniature Dollar Sunfish *Lepomis marginatus* (Figure 3). I usually love sunfish, but I didn't spend over six hours in the car to catch a species I could have caught much closer to home. It was time to call it quits in this spot as well.

I had picked out three more spots in the area and spent an hour driving to all of them without finding any fishable access. Given the setting sun and my lack of success, I quickly opened up Google Maps on my phone in hopes of finding one more spot to try. It took maybe 30 seconds to find it and I made the short drive to Cow Creek in High Springs to discover a few inches of water with a sandy bottom. I knew Brown Darters preferred sandy bottoms so I was at least hopeful I could find a deeper pool somewhere on this creek that held some. Fast-forward an hour. The sun had set and all I had caught was a duo of Eastern Mosquitofish *Gambusia holbrooki*.

The sun was gone and I was out of places to fish for the day. I found a cheap little hotel close to High Springs and decided to retire disappointed.

SATURDAY, MAY 27, 2023

It was a new day and, after learning of a new spot on the Santa Fe River where someone had seen Brown Darters while snorkeling, I was off. I arrived shortly after 8:00 AM. I wanted to get a somewhat early start since it was Memorial Day weekend and this was a popular kayaking and paddleboarding spot and also had a boat ramp. I was ready to catch my fish and be gone before the crowds showed up.

I immediately spotted a large school of shiners but couldn't quite tell what they were. I quickly caught one and it ended up be-



Figure 1. Sooty-banded Darter.



Figure 2. Ironcolor Shiner

ing an Ironcolor Shiner. Several Ironcolor Shiners later I decided to continue walking in search of either darters or different shiners.

Over the next couple hours I found and caught several more Ironcolor Shiners, which I was getting rather tired of. I also saw a couple Bluefin Killifish *Lucania goodei* and Sailfin Mollies *Poecilia latipinna*. Neither of these wanted anything to do with my bait and, after a frustrating three hours without a Brown Darter or Metallic Shiner, I was done.

While taking a quick break in my car, I decided to put the Brown Darter and Metallic Shiner on the back burner and just enjoy catching some fish. I knew of a backwater about a one-mile hike away that held a good number of Spotted Sunfish *Lepomis punctatus* and the occasional Suwannee Bass *Micropterus notius*. I tied on a small jig head with a small soft plastic caddisfly larva and I was off.

Immediately after making it to the spot, I spotted Spotted Sunfish. I caught roughly a dozen (Figure 4) within the next hour, as well as two Suwannee Bass (Figure 5) and a lone Largemouth Bass *Micropterus nigricans*. I had my fun and tried to figure out my next course of action while walking back to the car.

With the day half gone I knew I had to start making my way back south. I had a few places picked out near Ocala, but I got a tip that I might find Metallic Shiners in Gainesville. I decided to put all my eggs in the Gainesville basket. After a pit stop for lunch, I made it to Gainesville close to 4:00 PM but was unimpressed with the creek when I saw it.

The water was very clear and extremely shallow, with few deeper pools that only contained some sort of sunfish I wasn't interested in. I wasn't seeing anything small enough to even be mistaken for a shiner. I decided to keep working my way upstream to see if I could find something up there and I was happy I did.

I found one deeper pool that held no sunfish but only some sort of smaller, longer fish. They spooked easily as they could see me perfectly through the shallow, clear water. I stood behind some branches while I dangled my redworm in the water and after a few minutes I had my first fish out of this creek, a Metallic Shiner (Figure 6). This was certainly one of the better-looking shiner species I had ever caught, and it felt great to finally catch one of my target species after all the failures I had had on this trip.

Not wanting to quit just yet, I kept working my way up the creek and managed to pick up several more Metallic Shiners, a trio of Eastern Mosquitofish (Figure 7), and a lone Largemouth Bass. I'd call that a success.

Knowing I still had a roughly six-hour drive back home, I called it a day. I began making my way down south with the sun setting and made it home shortly before midnight, nearly 36 hours after I left. Going one-for-two on the target species is a win in my book. Not a bad way to spend a weekend.



Figure 3. Dollar Sunfish.



Figure 4. Spotted Sunfish.



Figure 5. Suwannee Bass.



Figure 6. Metallic Shiner.



Figure 7. Eastern Mosquitofish.