# COLLECTING IN LITTLE BENNETT REGIONAL PARK MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S GEM

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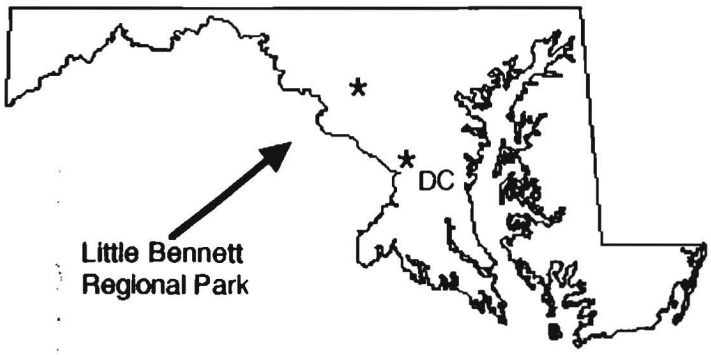
Just outside of Clarksburg, MD, on the northwestern edge of Montgomery County, lies Little Bennett Regional Park which is a 3600 acre wilderness only 20 miles from Washington DC. The park's namesake, Little Bennett Creek, meanders pristinely through the entire length of this largely hardwood nature preserve.




Little Bennett Creek and its tributaries were once the power source for numerous saw, grist, and tanning mills, but all have long since been abandoned. Today, the area is used only by hikers and campers.

I first went to Little Bennett on a late spring day in 1994. The first stop was one of Little Bennett's tributaries called Soper's Branch. After pushing the seine into a cascade just below a bridge, I pulled out a netful of what I later discovered was the area's dominant species - rosyside dace *(Clinostomus funduloides)*. Each fish was about four inches long and had a bright red swath running the entire length of its side. For an instant, I thought I had netted a school of rainbow trout. Other netfuls turned up some area staples: a few blacknose dace *(Rhinichthys atratulus)* and a small crayfish.

On a later trip to Soper's Branch, below that same cascade, I pulled out something I had only seen once or twice before. My boys crowded around to see the spectacularly ugly creature that flopped in the center of the net. It had the same general shape and black-brown blotches of a South American banjo catfish. But its mouth was broad like a bullhead's and its eyes had ridged, copper-colored irises. Large, fan-like, spiny pectoral fins covered about half the length of its body.

After checking my Petersen Guide, I found out it was a mottled sculpin *(Cottus bairdi)*. In a later conversation with park naturalist, John Bain, I learned that although the mottled is the most common sculpin in Little Bennett Creek, the Potomac sculpin *(Cottus girardi)* is also found there and migrates up the Monocacy River which feeds into the Potomac River.

Our 65 gallon aquarium was vacant at the time, so I immediately converted it to a Little Bennett biotope tank. The rosyside and the blacknose dace acclimated almost immediately - soon taking pellets and losing their fear of us. They were in perpetual motion, darting in and out of the filter stream produced by two Aqua Clear 300s I used to keep the tank clean. The dace soon took to presoaked Hikari Cichlid Gold pellets and made impressive size gains in the year I kept them.

I wasn't so successful with the sculpin. I had read that this species could be acclimated to taking pellets. He disappeared in the tank - perhaps under a rock pile or an old stump which I had pulled out of the Big Gun Powder River north of Baltimore. I thought he'd eventually begin feeding, but first had to get hungry before accepting the pellets.

I continued feeding as usual and let the filter wash some pellets under the rocks and driftwood. A week or two later, the sculpin turned up again, but dead on the floor of the tank after obviously starving to death. So much for what you read in books.

On our next trip, we went to Little Bennett Creek itself at the Hyattstown Mill Road Ford. At first glance, this stretch of the creek looked desolate, shallow, fast flowing, and too turbulent for any fish. A pass of my seine through a bank side hole, turned up the usual: blacknose and rosyside dace.

For curiosity sake, I turned over a rock in the fast moving water while rapidly sweeping underneath it with a dip net. Wriggling in the net was another sculpin. I tried again with another rock, this time turning up a fantail darter *(Etheostoma flabellare)*. I worked this spot with my dip net and eventually filled the collecting bucket with darters and sculpins. We also found what at first glance, looked like the biggest, homeliest darter I'd ever seen. It was, in fact, some sort of minnow. Bronze colored, with a pointed snout and downward-facing mouth, my Petersen's Guide listed it as a longnose dace *(Rhinichthys cataractae)*. I was surprised to find it under the rock because my earlier reading had led me to believe that this was an open-water species. Collecting manuals, it seemed, are often wrong or prone to generalities. Eventually, we netted a few more longnose dace as well.

I put the longnose in the 65 gallon with the other dace. They faced the filter flow. With their pectoral fins spread wide, they reminded me of airplanes as they held steady against the current.

I knew the sculpins and darters couldn't compete with the fast-moving dace for food, so I set them up in a 10 gallon tank by themselves. After a day or two, they calmed down a bit and started taking black worms. Soon they were eating frozen brine shrimp as well - all except the largest sculpin. He refused to eat, preferring to instead hide under the rocks. My luck with large sculpins seemed to be all bad.

A few days later, I found him dead at the bottom of the tank having choked to death on the largest of the darters which was a purple and black striped male with gold

spots on each of the rays at the top of his pectoral fin.

Having just discovered how predatory sculpins were, I took them out of the darter tank and put them in the 65 gallon. The dace were too large for the sculpins to even try to swallow.

However, feeding the sculpins soon proved to be a problem. Since the bottom hopping sculpins couldn't compete with the dace for food, I fed them black worms from a turkey baster. This wasn't as easy as I thought it would be because the dace, now quite tame, boldly snatched the black worms before the sculpins could eat them.

A month or two later, I switched them to dead feeder guppies, which I sucked up with the turkey baster and then blasted back in the sculpin's faces. Eventually, I switched them to rosy red minnows. However, this was also problematic. A small pumpkinseed which I housed in the tank managed to steal a rosy red from me at each feeding, just as it came out of the turkey baster.

On a subsequent trip to the Muddy Branch, which is a tributary of Little Bennett Creek, I turned up two other minnow species. That day, I entered the branch just below Hyattstown Mill Road. Upstream, beavers had just built a dam and the creek was beginning to flow over the road.

I put the new acquisitions in the 65 gallon tank as well, but didn't get the chance to identify them. I think one of them might have been a baby fallfish *(Semotilus corporalis)*. I thought they were too big and fast for the sculpins to pick off. Again, I was wrong.

The sculpins and remaining minnows made for interesting observation. The sculpins proved to be quite territorial, and would line up in their assigned spots each night when I brought out the turkey baster to feed them. Their temperament was quite varied. The smallest became extremely tame, resting at the top of the stump, about an inch below the water's surface. The big sculpin, however, was rather shy, poking his head out for only a minute before snatching a rosy red and darting back beneath the rocks. He had also taken to stalking the crayfish, which for the most part, rarely ventured from underneath the tunnels he had dug under the rock pile. Just why the sculpin stalked the crayfish, I don't know. The crayfish was much too large to swallow - almost as big as the sculpin. Then again, mottled sculpins can't seem to resist an opportunity to choke themselves to death.

For a future project, perhaps I'll get some sculpins and attempt to spawn them the following spring. A species only tank will be more appropriate. I've read that they make good parents - guarding the eggs and even the fry, which are free-swimming for a short time.

The naturalist mentioned Little Bennett also hosts the greenside darter *(Etheostoma blennioides)*, but are rare and hard to find. Outside the park, in the lower reaches of the creek, he's caught other fish common in the Potomac system including smallmouth bass *(Micropterus dolomieu)*, redbreast *(Lepomis auritus)*, and green sunfish *(Lepomis cyanellus)*. I advise against entering the creek below this point because high levels of coliform bacteria have been detected from runoff of leaky septic tanks in Hyattstown.

Although water quality in the park is excellent, it may not remain so. Montgomery County's master plan calls for the eventual development of several hundred townhouses in the area - more bedroom communities for the ever-expanding Washington DC suburbs. I can only hope the County's planners have the foresight to keep pollution in this otherwise pristine park environment to a minimum.