

IMPRESSIONS FROM THE 2002 A.N.G.F.A. NATIONAL CONVENTION.

For anyone interested in native fish keeping the annual ANGFA Conventions are the highlight of various activities on the calendar. I have attended every single one of them thus far and have enjoyed them all. It is a golden opportunity to catch up with "fish friends" both old and new, and find out what's happening around the ridges from the experts in the various fields. The venue changes each year and this state-wise rotation encourages attendance from more local identities each time.

This year the venue was "Sails" Resort at beautiful Port Macquarie on the coast of New South Wales and there is probably not a more idyllic spot in Australia. The 7 hour drive down from Brisbane on Friday 25th November was extremely pleasant except for the widespread pall of smoke from extensive bushfires in the region. Fortunately over the weekend wind changes and some welcome rain reduced the problem considerably and the convention was not significantly impacted on except for some plane schedules on the Friday evening.

The traditional AGM on Friday evening was once again chaired by yours truly and comprised the usual reports, elections and discussions that are so necessary to the orderly running of the affairs of the association. Life membership certificates were presented to Andy Wattam and Bruce Hansen, and later Derek Girkin (President) and Jennifer Palmer (Vice-President) were elected to the committee for the ensuing year. If the success of the convention is any guide, the association is in good hands. Our thanks are extended to them and the continuing committee members for their efforts. During general business there was a lively discussion on smuggling, the increasing bureaucratic influences on the hobby and possible future areas of conflict. The traditional continued discussions over a convivial drink completed the evening.

The convention proper clicked into gear from 8.00 am on Saturday morning following a superb breakfast that was included in the venue tariff. After the scramble of final registrations and distribution of Convention packs (which were enclosed in a useful and attractive "Streamwatch" backpack) we were tempted by an array of merchandise from national and local groups, the most spectacular being the convention shirts. These high-quality polo shirts were snapped up quickly and featured an Empire gudgeon, in breeding colours (artist: Martyn Robinson) as the pocket logo against a mid-blue background. The trade room featured an attractively set-up tank of local native species as well as the range of raffle prizes donated through the generosity of our sponsors who were also featured in the Convention booklet with the cover illustration of the same empire gudgeon.

The introductory opening slide-show featured personalities and events from ANGFA excursions over the years and evoked many fond memories and a many laughs, especially the eye-opening "end". After brief national and local group welcoming remarks our first speaker was Dave Wilson. "Darwin" Dave has been our representative in the Territory from way back and knows almost "everything" about how to find and care for almost any "critter" or plant from the Top End. His presentation "Fish bothering in remote areas of the Top End and some of the people you meet" showed us locations that few others get to see as well as local identities and of course left us all starry-eyed with new "wish-lists" of places to survey.

Martyn Robinson from the Australian Museum has an extensive range of interests in "things natural" and an equally extensive experience in researching, publishing and liaising to pass on his findings to others. Martyn's presentation, "Mudskipper basics" introduced us to these fascinating creatures as well as informing us about their special anatomical, functional and behavioural adaptations so characteristic of the group. His talk detailed Australian species especially, and besides identification on morphological features allowed us to confidently predict identity from habitat preference as each species has a zone of "occupation". I suspect many of the hobbyists in the audience will seriously consider keeping mudskippers after this session.

After morning tea and a chat our next presentation was Bob Wong and "Male-male competition and female choice in the Pacific blue-eye". Bob's academic achievements are massive and we are grateful for his willingness to share them with us. Many ANGFA members were happy to assist Bob here and there in his researches and he was grateful for that help. Bob made many friends at the convention with his cheerful and friendly attitude. I will never forget him saying that he was a bit of a "fish nut" but, "I'm not as nutty as many of you guys!" His research was the sort of stuff we fishwatchers love and obviously involved many hours of observation. The conclusion was that females prefer males that

spend more time courting (rather than the winners in the aggression stakes) and that they produce larger hatchlings with the preferred male. He also produced a fascinating phylogenetic tree for the various local forms of Pacific blue-eyes based on DNA analysis and where they fit in with the other species. A lively question time discussion revealed how interested the audience were.

Our next item was a double act from Paul Smith, who is an environmental scientist with CRL and Rob Wager, aquatic consultant and regular ANGFA contributor. They collaborated on a project on North Stradbroke Island in Moreton Bay where the sand mining company (CRL) were concerned that their operations near Little Canalpin Creek might significantly impact on the population of Oxleyan Pygmy Perch therein. As part of their proactive program for the conservation of this species they designed a breeding facility that comprised an innovative outdoors setup and a backup indoors closed system. The outdoors system, using linked large plastic tubs with emergent plant biofilters, all under shade cloth have been extremely successful and are a credit to all concerned. The presentation came across well with lots of enthusiasm and humour and the audience trooped off to lunch with smiles on their faces.

After an excellent buffet lunch, the Oxleyan Pygmy Perch theme continued with Jamie Knight and "Distribution and habitat preferences of the endangered Oxleyan Pygmy Perch (*Nannoperca oxleyana*) in north-eastern New South Wales". Jamie has been entrusted by NSW Fisheries with the job of trying to define the distribution of this species in that state so that an appropriate recovery plan can be developed. His talk contained much useful practical information, especially on habitat preferences and also highlighted the problem of discrepancies between "listings" as well as underlined the fact that field scientists need to develop and practice better field handling techniques for captured specimens. His assertion that over-collecting was a significant endangering factor was disputed during question time.

Gunther Schmida was next and Australia's wildlife photographer of cold-blooded species shared his techniques with us in "How to take a "pretty" picture of aquatic life forms in an aquarium". Gunther has been a tried and true supporter of ANGFA and ANGFA conventions and this presentation was no exception to the usual superb standard. It became clear that not only is Gunther master of the equipment but the major reason that he takes such great shots is that he understands the animals themselves and strives to recreate their natural environment as closely as possible in the photographic tank. He passed on many priceless tips from his lifelong experience of this specialised pursuit and his passion for the animals and their environment continues unabated. It shows in his results! We look forward to many more years of being enthralled by his impressive images.

Following afternoon tea Christmas came early in the form of Andrew Lo who has delighted us before and this time filled in more than capably for the indisposed Heiko Bleher. Andrew is an economist with special interests in nature conservation and a special focus on the conservation of fish habitats in the remnant bushland around Sydney. His presentation was entitled "Fish Lover's Guide to the Galaxias of NSW: an Ecological Perspective". Andrew opens with attention-grabbing aids and holds your attention for the entire time, then leaves you wanting more. He told us about his struggles with developers to try to save part of the few remaining habitats for *Galaxias brevipinnis* near Sydney and introduced us to newly-discovered species of Galaxiids from northern NSW. No wonder his university students loved his classes. Throughout his enthusiasm enhanced the logic of the argument – we loved him too!

That brought the educational component of the day to a conclusion and a short break to spruce up for the Convention Dinner at Sails Resort's "Spinnakers" Restaurant. The food was excellent, the service good, the company all you could wish for and filled in a couple of hours very nicely. Then came one of the highlights of the convention for many – the ANGFA National Annual Convention Auction. There was a vast array of items before the hammer ranging from native fish (especially rare ones), aquatic plants, equipment, books and various bits and pieces of fish-related paraphernalia. The auction went off like clockwork, accelerated along by the "full weight" and humour of our auctioneer Steve Baines. There were some superb bargains knocked down on the evening and many happy new owners and it even finished early enough for some "stayers" to imbibe in a nightcap or two at the bar.

Sunday morning brought a welcome weather change for the firefighters and a continuation of the program. First cab off the rank was James Sakker from NSW Fisheries who informed us about the various "NSW Fisheries Projects" that he is involved with and especially the protected species sightings program. He also outlined how ANGFA members can assist and how in turn they can benefit from being able to access the NSW Fisheries FishFile database.

Effie Howe, our next speaker, is well known as an ANGFA stalwart and researcher on fish-related projects. Previously we have only seen freshwater material from her but this time she shared her experiences with the Marine and Coastal Community Network of Dragon Search NSW. The project involved collating information on sightings of the Weedy Sea-dragon as part of the background information for a conservation plan for this species. Her experiences sharing facilities with other similar community based groups were a revelation and her presentation introduced many of us to a new window into our underwater world.

Our final speaker for the morning was my good friend and neighbour, Adrian Dawson. Adrian has been a tower of strength for ANGFA Queensland for many years and loves nothing better than to hop in his truck and go out collecting. His presentation "The Best Across the Top" was a collation of several of his trips north looking for beautiful rainbowfishes and in particular his beloved "trifasciatus". Adrian's presentation included glimpses of the fishes and habitats of a couple of areas not previously featured at ANGFA conventions – Yirrakala and the Habgood River.

After another excellent morning tea break Walter Ivanstoft assumed the presenter's podium. Walter is now a Senior Research Fellow at Macquarie University as well as scientific editor of "Aqua" for Heiko Bleher. He has regularly been generous with his valuable time for ANGFA and his extensive experience has been much appreciated. Walter has published many articles on native fishes and their relatives elsewhere and unofficially is called "Mister Hardyhead" because of his world renowned pre-eminence with this group. His presentation "Dalhousie Springs Revisited" allowed us a look at one of his field trips when he flew in to this fascinating oasis in the Simpson Desert in northern South Australia to examine the special fauna and flora of the springs. The high level of endemism of the springs fish fauna attests to their long separation and evolution to suit the special conditions found there.

One of the highlights of any ANGFA Convention is the possibility of a contribution from one of our overseas members. Franz-Peter Mullenholz has a special place in our affection for many reasons – he is a top bloke, warm and friendly, loves our fishes and our country (he must since he has made 9 trips here) and has the technical expertise to produce professional quality audiovisual shows. He went to special lengths this time with "Good Australian Mates", a personality show featuring more than 20 people of ANGFA that he and his wife Ulli have delighted on their many trips. The show, narrated by FP and Ulli shows Australia and Australians (especially the species "angfa-ensis") as seen through their affectionate eyes and had the audience eating out of his hands. Unfortunately mechanical problems with the hired projectors caused Franz-Peter a few frustrating moments during the presentation but it was a show to be remembered and treasured and was appreciated with tremendous applause. Thank-you Franz-Peter and Ulli – we will have you back any time.

Our last presenter before lunch was from Greg Howe, one of our junior members, and naturally with Effie and Chris for parents it is not surprising that he takes a keen interest in native fish and our aquatic habitats. His contribution "Feral Fish: Is the Plague Minnow in the Myall River System" informed us about his recently-completed survey of the distribution of *Gambusia* in the Myall River catchment on the NSW mid-north coast. It is great to see the younger generation getting out there and looking around at nature instead of computer games on a screen. We look forward to Greg's next efforts.

After an enjoyable lunch break we moved on to a series of presentations involving trips by ANGFA members. Our first presenter was Scott Hunt, who in real life is an IT consultant in Canberra, but "more importantly" has been keeping, breeding and photographing native fishes for the last 8 of his 20 years in the hobby. "The long way round to ANGFA Convention 2001, Adelaide" featured highlights of a 7-week trip through North Queensland, the Cape, the Gulf Country, the Northern Territory and down through Central and South Australia. Once again the "projector gremlin" sabotaged the show and made things difficult for Scott but certainly brought back many pleasant memories for me.

Scott was followed by his co-pilot on the trip, Andy Wattam who has been the "bulldozer" behind many an ANGFA project including the first 2 conventions and a couple later that were held in the ACT. Andy knows everyone who is worth knowing "in native fish" and loves nothing more than the "inside story" on the many and varied incidents that occur throughout the ANGFA sagas and trips that unfold from time to time. Now Andy has long been apprenticed to the "old Master" when it comes to story telling. You guessed it – the "Silver Budgie", Neil Armstrong. He who proudly declares that "you never let the truth get in the way of a good story!" After Andy's presentation, "Collecting Expeditions

- The truth Uncovered ", I am now of the opinion that Andy has now attained his "Tradesman's Certificate" and with a few more shows like this one to his credit will be approaching Neil's level of expertise.

After afternoon tea came the final presentation of the weekend was by Barry Meiklejohn who transformed the ANGFA.Qld Newsletter and has been a major part of many committees for ANGFA at both the state and national level over the years. Baz and I had recently completed a trip to Central Australia to have a look around and try to see as many fish habitats as possible along the way. His expertise with the Canon Digital camera and associated computer wizardry resulted in a spectacularly comprehensive pictorial extravaganza of the trip accompanied by an equally comprehensive commentary. For a variety of reasons the fish and their habitats were a minor component in this beautiful show.

All too soon another convention was over with a repeat of the opening slide show and closing remarks from local and new-national president, Derek Girkin and we were all fired up to book in early to the next one in Brisbane in 2003. Many were staying on for the post-convention boat cruise, local winery visits and a variety of other local attractions, a few were even planning to sample the local waterways for a rainbow or two, or even some "Rhads". *I had a great time – appreciating the lovely local marine habitat, making new friends, renewing old acquaintances, marvelling at the friendliness of the locals, enjoying the stimulating educational program and wondering how many raffle tickets I'll have to buy next year to win even a third prize in any of the great raffles held between each part session.* This convention had top atmosphere and for my money was one of the best yet !

- Bruce Hansen.