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Illinois Creek

Michael Forsberg

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Spring Seep
Michael Forsberg

ILLINOIS CREEK

Today is my third day photographing underwater in the Land of Oz.

I am trying to capture on camera the small, beautiful native fish that live out their lives in the clear streams rolling off the tallgrass tabletops of the Flint Hills in eastern Kansas. These are the streams and creeks most people seldom notice or think about as they drive over them on a country road bridge. But I'll never not notice them again.

The water of these creeks is arguably clearer than any in the Great Plains, thanks to the creeks' limestone bottoms and to the still intact tallgrass prairie surrounding them. Entering their underwater realm is like entering another world. First, a supreme silence envelops me with a feeling as comforting as a warm blanket on a cold winter night. Then, there's the soft, almost buttery quality of the light, refracted by the water above and reflected by the cream-colored limestone below. Finally, I notice the rich diversity of life itself, which is everywhere.

Submerged just below the surface in a few feet of water, pushing off the bottom with my hands and propelling myself forward ever so slowly and quietly, I move from pool to riffle to pool. I can see crayfish backpedaling into dark corners, mossy-backed turtles lurking on the edge of undercut banks, and schools of fish no bigger than my pinkie darting this way and that, in and out of the current. Their magnificent colors flash every time they hit a spotlight of noonday sun streaking through the canopy of trees.

I have spent an hour or so in the water when I surface to defog my mask and readjust a plate-size slab of limestone I had shoved into the front of my wet suit as ballast. I look up and see a man wearing a cowboy hat and boots standing on the high bank, staring down at

me. Through my fog-stained mask, I can see he's tall, lean and weathered by the sun. He has a fence-fixing tool in one hand and a roll of baling wire in the other.

"Hi," I say.

"Hello," he says back with a nod and a puzzled look on his face.

"I bet you don't see someone in a wet suit and mask snorkeling in this creek every day," I offer, not knowing what else to say.

"Nope."

"Then I suppose you're wondering what the heck I'm doing?" I say as I pull myself up on a gravel bar near the bank and take off my mask so he can see my face.

"You could say that."

"Well, I'm photographing fish." He looks at me funny then and takes a step back.

"You mean suckers?" he asks, using the angler's generic term for any fish not worth catching.

"Well, yeah, there are probably a couple suckers in here, but I'm trying to photograph other fish: like daces and darters, sunfish and shiners, even Topeka shiners, the endangered ones — the natives that are supposed to be in these prairie streams."

"Hmm," he says with a nod. Then there's an awkward silence. I don't think he believes me.

"Would you like to see a few pictures?"

"Um, okay," he says, somewhat surprised. He takes a step forward.

I shake off some water and meet him halfway up the bank. Taking the digital

camera out of the underwater housing, I show him some images on the back of the screen. The fish, which today are schooled up in the current at the head of a couple of deep pools, are in prime spawning colors and every bit as colorful as a rainbow or a coral reef. He takes a long look.

"Those are in this creek?" he asks as his face creases with a slight grin.

"Yep, there, and over there." I point to the places in the stream I had just taken the photographs.

"Pretty cool, huh?" I say.

"Yeah. What are those fish again?"

So I tell him I've just learned what these fish are myself and that I honestly don't know much about fish other than what I can catch with a worm and bobber. I also admit that I've rarely photographed underwater before, but I explain that here in the prairies, we tend to think mostly about birds and grass and the land above but not much about fish and the waters below. That these native fish species are here and thriving is a sign of water quality, I explain, and that translates in large measure to the good stewardship of the ranchers in these hills. People like him.

"So you live around here?" I ask.

"We lease the pasture over there. My family has been around here for many generations."

"So, was your family one of the first to settle in this area?"

"Not the first, but pretty close. Probably been here about as long as that old tree." He points to a huge old cedar guarding the edge



Illinois Creek Fishes
Michael Forsberg

of a rock face on the opposite bank, where a thin waterfall cascades into the creek.

Our conversation quickly fades as we stand there, looking at the old tree and watching the water slide down the rock wall and trying to imagine the fish in the deep dark pools of the creek.

"Well, I should fix that fence," he says. "High water pushed it over last week."

"Need any help?" I offer.

"Nope. But thanks."

With that, he walks back to his pickup to grab another tool, and I put on my

mask and slide down the bank into the creek. For the next several minutes, I can hear the muffled tamping sounds of fence posts being reset into the creek as I search underwater for the brilliant-colored, long-eared sunfish lurking around their spawning beds near the crown of a fallen tree.

A moment later, the tamping sounds stop.

I emerge again to defog my mask and look downstream. The fence is fixed, the rancher gone.

Michael Forsberg is co-founder of Platte Basin Timelapse and serves as Conservation Photographer in Residence at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He focuses on stories of the Great Plains, watersheds and North America's cranes.