

ANGFA NSW Far North Queensland Fieldtrip By Richard Blake

Following the success of the ANGFA National Convention on the Gold Coast in late October, ANGFA NSW undertook a week-long collecting and surveying field trip to the Cairns region. It was by far one of the most enjoyable experiences I've had, seeing some absolutely incredible country, finding some stunning fish, and spending time with an all-round great group of people.

Day 1

Monday the 30th of October saw our group of nine meeting at Cairns airport to then pick up the 4x4's for the coming drive. The day was mostly preparation work; getting some food, sorting vehicles, finding some foam boxes for the fish, and then the drive from Cairns up to our accommodation for the night at the Mount Molloy Pub.



The Mount Molloy Pub, with our 4x4's out the front.

After reaching the pub and dropping off our gear, we backtracked to a nearby creek to conduct the first survey of the trip. On the way to Hunter Creek, a tributary of the Mitchell River, we ran into Jesse and his family, and they joined us at the creek. Quickly, we spread out to look for fish, using a dip net and some bread, and throwing a few traps in for good measure. Some stunning blue *M. splendida* ssp. *inornata* with bright yellow fins formed our main target, as well as some too difficult to catch coal grunters we observed darting around the deeper parts. Along with these, we also caught some macrobrachium, flyspecked hardyheads, and a single, sickly-looking gambusia. Having bagged the fish we wanted to keep (and killing the gambusia), we returned to the pub for an enjoyable meal and a few drinks.



Everyone excited by the newly caught fish (Photo by Michael Jones).

Day 2

The next morning, after a brekky in the pub, we set off north towards Cooktown, stopping at some of the nicer creeks along the way, catching similar species as the day before, including more blue and yellow *M. s. inornata*. In Mary Creek, whilst the others were spread out around the creek, I took the chance to throw on my snorkel, have a look further upstream, and for the first time, swim amongst schools of rainbows. A thoroughly enjoyable experience! Along with the rainbows were some larger hardyheads and a number of coal grunters. No luck catching any of them though. Here also was the first place we caught a purple-spotted gudgeon. As we drove further on, we stopped at a servo, watched Ian tuck into a monster burger, and tried some of the saltiest fruits we'd ever tasted. Continuing, we passed Black Mountain, a massive, exposed granitic pluton that is slowly cracking apart, looking more like a mound of black boulders than a single rock. Nearby, we stopped at a hidden waterfall called Trevathan Falls. After a short but moderately difficult walk to the base of it, we found a little oasis. Sheltered by high rock walls and large trees was a clear



pool, filled with jungle perch, and a dream to swim in. It was a fantastic place to relax in the water and stand under the falls. Ross even managed to catch a perch with a rod and reel. Our last stop of the day was our accommodation at the Lion's Den, which, if it weren't for a camel, we would have found easily. The Lion's Den is a nice little bar with some raised tents on platforms to stay in,

surrounded by the largest mango trees I'd ever seen, some 40m high or more, right on the banks of the Annan River.



Sunset on Mount Cook, Cooktown (Photo Ross Salvato)

Day 3

This was the day that saw us travelling to the northern-most extent of the trip. We drove up through Cooktown, towards Hope Vale and Cape Bedford. In amongst the sand dunes of the Cape we found a series of tannin stained pools and some flowing water. This was our goal, and within them, *M. macculochi* and *P. gertrudae*. These proved very easy to catch using both a dip net as well as box traps. Along with these two species, we caught a lot of *mogurnda*, *macrobrachium*, glass shrimp, a riffle shrimp and some unknown tiny crayfish. The scenery here was stunning, and we even caught a glimpse of the coloured sands the area is known for. Moving inland, we drove past Isabella Falls and on to McIvor Road, following along the McIvor River and the tributaries flowing into it. The first suitable tributary we found had some magnificent bright yellow *M. splendida* ssp. *splendida* which were cause for great excitement as they were so unexpected. The next tributary we crossed just ramped up those excitement levels. Amongst the usual catch of *ambassis* sp., *mogurnda* and assorted shrimp, we caught what appeared to be some absolutely monster *M. trifasciata*. In appearance, very similar to what Gap Creek *M. trifasciata* were said to look



like, streaks of green, purple, and blue, and orange and red finnage. With great enthusiasm, we caught a good amount of them to bring back with us. On the way back to the Lion's Den, we stopped at Isabella Falls to enjoy the scenery and see what was in the creek. Before heading back, we stopped in Cooktown to have a few drinks and nibbles at the top of Mount Cook as the sun was setting.

Jungle Perch caught by Ross at Trevathan Falls (Photo by David Matheson)

Once back at the Lion's Den, having been watered and fed, and changed the water of all the fish collected so far, we wandered down to the Annan River to do some night fishing. Catching some macrobrachium, *M. splendida* ssp. *splendida*, and a mouth almighty, along with a number of bright green frogs (later being identified as *Litoria jungguy*). Sitting around the table at the camp later and chatting about the days fishing, Dave noticed a few dead fish in one of the bags. Not that unusual. But the worst was yet to come. Lifting that bag up, the one underneath had more dead fish, as did the next, and the next after that. Almost every bag had dead or dying fish. Frantically, we took out as many saveable fish as we could, transferred them to new bags of water, or into buckets with Mino-Mizers (as any fish we had with a Mino-Mizer seemed to be doing fine). In all, we lost almost 80% of the fish we had caught that far, including all of the *M. trifasciata* from the McIvor River tributary. I strongly suspect the water we had used was severely deoxygenated, maybe from a tank that had been still for a while, which is why Mino-Mizers would have been so effective at saving the fish (rapidly increasing the available oxygen in the water). It was the first time we had used tap water at the Lion's Den for water changes, as the previous night creek water had been used with no such problems. An unfortunately sad and stressful night to cap off a truly exciting day.

Day 4

After the debacle the previous night, spirits weren't nearly as high, though the prospects of the upcoming day were quite stirring. Setting out, we stopped first at the well-known Wallaby Creek, a short drive away from the Lion's Den. The only real target here were the red-finned *M. splendida* ssp. *splendida*, which turned out to have quite a bit more purple to them than expected. Driving further towards the coast, we aimed to stop at the similarly well-known Gap Creek, though another alleged camel caused us to pass it by on the first go. Despite being a fairly small and inconspicuous creek, Gap Creek boasted quite the assortment of life. Along with a sizeable amount of red and green *Blyxa* sp. growing in the water, there were large *P. signifer*, huge and beautiful *M. trifasciata*, shrimp, ambassis, herring, and even a large snakehead gudgeon Ross caught on a line. After the fun of Gap Creek, we did some serious four-wheel driving on the drive south through the Daintree Rainforest at Cape Tribulation, caught the ferry across the Daintree River, and headed down towards Mossman. Having seen a picture on the Rainbowfish Australia Facebook page of a stunning rainbowfish caught somewhere near Mossman a few months earlier, I asked to have a quick look around. Over lunch we talked to some locals about where to access nearby rivers, eventually moving to check out the Mossman River itself. This proved to not be the location we were after, containing only some fairly plain *splendida*.



The blue and yellow *M. s. inornata* caught in the Mary River (Photo in aquarium).

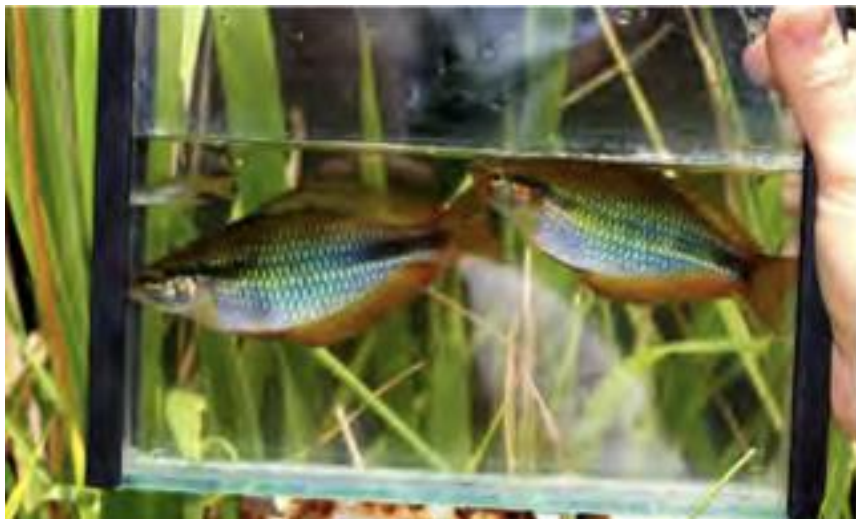
It was here however, that we did catch a very small Roman-nose goby, a notable deviation from the usual catch. At the last minute, MJ contacted the person who'd caught the fish we were after, finding out the location, a stream in Whyanbeel, flowing into the next river system north of the Mossman River. As the day was growing late, and we still had a fair drive ahead of us to reach Fisheries Falls before night, we raced over to the new location. Here there weren't many obvious fish, though there were signs of catfish nests. After spending some time netting, we eventually caught a number of quite large *P. signifer*, and only three of the sought-after rainbows, one male and two females.

Ian filming rainbows swimming around the box trap (Photo by Michael Jones).





The only male splendida caught near Mossman (Photo by Michael Jones)



Gap creek tri (Photo by Michael Jones)



A magnificent bright yellow *M. splendida* splendida (Photo Ross Salvato)

All that remained for the day was to keep heading south, through Cairns, and on to Fisheries Falls. Though when we arrived, we found that almost everywhere was closed for dinner, and a mad rush began to find somewhere to get something to eat.

Day 5

This day marked the start of the second half of the trip, moving from north of Cairns to south of Cairns. The first stop of this leg of the journey was to Harvey Creek, and the enormous Pacific Blue Eyes that reside there. Of all the places to swim, I think this was the



best. Schools of splendida darted around, followed by huge P. signifer and flyspecked hardyheads. Also present were large numbers of perch and grunTERS. As I swam further upstream into the shallow rapids, cairnsichthys began to appear around me. And when I swam back to the creek crossing and sat in the shallows, schools of signifer crowded around me nipping at any pieces of

dead skin. Things you'd normally have to pay good money for, nature was doing for free. Our next stop was right next to a barely used railway. Here we parked the cars and walked for 10 minutes down the rails to a small bridge over a swamp. Eubenangee swamp. Here we set traps and dip netted to catch more M. macculochi and P. gertrudae.

Next on the agenda was lunch at Etty Bay, where besides having a fantastic view of the ocean, we were lucky enough to see a wild cassowary. After lunch, we stopped at a creek crossing on the road into Etty Bay to try our luck catching cairnsichthys. Some were caught, as well as some splendida and macrobrachium. To our surprise, our box traps we had set were unfortunately full to the brim with an assortment of brightly coloured introduced guppies. These were dumped onto land and left. A pair of tourists spotted us fishing and



asked what we were doing. We were happy to explain we were surveying the fish species present in the creek, and show them the sheer number of introduced pests present as well.



From Etty Bay, we drove further inland, towards Utchee Creek. Here we caught a number of small *M. utcheensis*, and I was startled to see a ~50cm long-armed shrimp sitting in the rapids. After Utchee Creek, we drove a short way to collect some rainbows from Miskin Creek. These are quite dark fish, with a prominent red spot on the

operculum, reminiscent of a *M. duboulayi*. Despite this, they are still quite similar to the Utchee Creek rainbows we had sampled earlier in the day.

A day well spent, we returned to Fisheries Falls for a well earned drink.

Day 6

The morning of the 4th November, we made our way into town for breakfast, checking out the Gordonvale markets as we did. By happenstance, we came across Bruce Hansen, and had a quick chat about our trip so far and plans for the next few days, as well as seeing how he was doing.



Moving from the lowlands, we travelled up the escarpment to the Atherton tablelands. A fantastic winding drive led us up from the coast inland.

The first stop of the day was to Lake Eacham, a beautiful spot, it's only misfortune the local extinction of the Eacham Rainbowfish. Snorkelling

along the edge of the lake, schools of splendida abounded. Along mouth almighty, barred grunters, and some enormous archer fish. Beautiful fish, though a shame they contributed to the demise of local species. Lunch saw us meet at the Malanda Falls, and backtrack south towards Millaa Millaa. Stopping along the way to sample the lower reaches of Williams Creek. Here head- high grass impeded access to the creek itself, leaving only Dave and me to



throw some traps in. All that was caught were some guppies, besides the itchy silica spikes of the grass. Heading further upstream of Williams Creek, we found a small pool under a crossing, full of the as yet un-named Malanda rainbow- fish and large, yellow-finned mogurnda. Unsuccessfully, we only caught a handful of the rainbowfish before we had to move on.

The next stop was to Dirran Creek, an overpass over the river with a handy newly constructed path down to the edge. Throwing some traps in, we split up to survey the creek, taking some time to collect a handful of native lace plants (*Aponogeton elongatus*). Leaving the traps, I decided to try snorkelling in an effort to find more fish. And fish I did find. In a sub-merged overhang, I came face to face with a ~50cm tandanus catfish, along with a group of large grunters. Shying away from the fish, I spent the rest of my time there enjoying myself swimming in the river current. In the traps we had set were some small rainbowfish, likely an *M. eachamensis* variant. We then headed for our accommodation for the night, and last stop of the trip at the Millaa Millaa caravan park.

Day 7

In the morning, we found that of the few Malanda fish we had caught, most had died. This prompted us to go back to Williams Creek to catch a few more. Having caught some more Malanda Rainbowfish, we moved on to some nearby creeks to see what was about. Stopping at a small drainage culvert, we threw some traps in before continuing a short way to an overpass. Here we could see schools of red splendida swimming around, but no amount of bread could coax them into our traps. Failing to catch anything, we returned to the previous creek to see if our traps had caught some- thing. Amazingly, they had. Some small rainbowfish, similar to what we had seen at Dirran Creek. With only a few in the traps, we set about trying to dip net a few more to bulk up the numbers, only netting a couple

more fish sadly. This was to be our last lot of fishing, as in the afternoon we decided to go swim and relax at the Millaa Millaa falls.



Despite the water being clouded with mud, the rainbowfish here were more numerous than anywhere we had stopped previously. They ferociously schooled around any bread thrown in, joined by numerous tandanus cat- fish and turtles. That evening, we settled in at the pub for some well-earned drinks and a meal, sad that the trip was ending the next day, but having thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

Day 8

Monday morning marked the end of the trip, with some members heading off early to catch flights from Cairns. The rest of us took time to water change the fish, and pack them into foam boxes for the trip back to Sydney. Once done, we headed into town for a last breakfast, then began the drive back to Cairns. The trip down from the plateau was just as enjoyable as the drive up, a winding road through lush forest with views out to the coast. Once back in Cairns, we headed for the freight centre to send the fish back. After some re-jigging of the boxes, they were accepted and sent off to the airport. We dropped the cars off, said our goodbyes and waited for the flights home.

Reaching Sydney, our work was just beginning. After receiving the fish from the freight company, I still had to get home and re-house all the fish I'd brought back. At the same time

learning that the storm I had just flown over had caused mass delays for the rest of the group, with some being re-routed back to Brisbane.

Fish settled, I could relax. Not a single fish had died in transport and they seemed happy enough in their new surrounds.

The ANGFA NSW Cairns fieldtrip was one of the most rewarding experiences I've had. Not only did I get to spend my time with a great group of individuals, but I saw some truly beautiful countryside, and caught some stunning fish. I'm so ready to go on the next big adventure with ANGFA NSW.

Richard Blake.