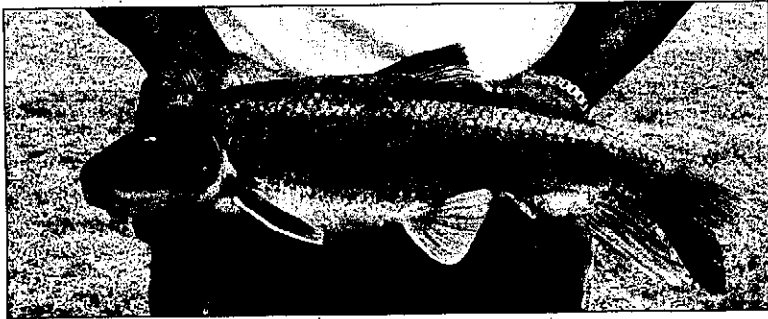# Outdoors

Surviving with the robust redhorse

BY MARGARET CARMICHAEL
The Oconee Leader

As the Oconee River's hefty mystery fish, the robust redhorse, powerfully handles his element at the huge aquariums in Atlanta and Charleston, any thought of extinction seems like "borrowed trouble." It's not: scientists and wildlife personnel have scrambled ever since the fish was discovered 15 years ago below Lake Sinclair's dam on the Oconee River.

Recently, UGA fisheries scientist Cecil Jennings generously made time to update The Oconee Leader. Dr. Jennings, who has been involved in the rescue project for about 12 years, reviewed background information and explained challenges facing the fish. More surprisingly, though, he spoke of the "very collaborative association that has fostered the success" of recovery efforts.

The robust redhorse would be a shoo-in for an endangered listing. Yet, instead of chafing within the strictures of the Endangered Species Act, the river warriors fight freely, even creatively, to save our big clam-eater. They can do this because of a forum called the Robust Redhorse Conservation Committee. We'll take a closer look at this phenomenon later in our update.

BACKGROUND

Ah, the zircon-like brilliance of hindsight! We now know that the 70-mile stretch of the Oconee River between Milledgeville and Dublin has the largest wild (not stocked) population of robust redhorse known. In 1991, when DNR biologist Jimmy Evans and technician Wayne Clark were sampling aquatic life at the mout of Commissioner Creek, we did not know the fish even existed.

The redhorse sucker fish family is a numerous one, but – as its name indicates – the robust redhorse is its largest member. An average adult weighs nine pounds and is 26 inches long. They are long-lived and can reach at least 30 inches and 17 pounds.

Evans and Clark were understandably amazed, then, when their electro-fishing wand brought eight strange, large fish to the surface. (Clark later commented that it was as if he'd seen a dinosaur in his back yard.)

Sample fish were sent to selecte ichthyologists, including UGA Bud Freeman and Roanoke Cc lege's Bob Jenkins, the nation leading authority on sucker fishe The specialists concluded that th was a new species and cor menced the paperwork to have properly recorded. Then – just lil that! – the mystery was solved.

The National Academy of S ences in Philadelphia found a sent a copy of naturalist Edwa Drinker Cope's careful descripti in 1869-1870 of a six-pound fi from North Carolina's Yadk

Sweat now, it pays later

The thermometer outside is hovering around 100 degrees and you can't walk from the car to your back door without breaking a sweat. This upcoming bow

wasn't confident in my abilities vowed to do better. About the middle of March, I headed out my backyard for 30 minutes of

'Robust redhorse'

River. A photograph could have done no better: the men had their fish.

Cope left no preserved specimen of his robust redhorse. (He and his fellow boardinghouse guests are thought to have eaten it.) Further, his solitary description had been lost to view, if not literally lost, for 122 years. Nevertheless, the robust redhorse has several distinctive characteristics besides its large size.

It has the downward-positioned mouth, stocky body and prominent lips typical of redhorse sucker fishes; but, in addition, it has an unusually large and somewhat puffy lower lip. Its clinching iden-

tification, though, is its molar-like teeth, which extend into the throat behind the gills. The fish's preferred food is freshwater clams, which it enjoys thanks to those unique, clamshell-cracking teeth.

Cope's description included the comment that the robust redhorse was "fine table fare." Native Americans already knew this, as archeologists have found remnants of the fish's unique teeth in the Inidans' refuse mounds. (And the forebears of some Oconee Countians reading this undoubtedly enjoyed the big fish, too, before our section of the river became too muddy for it to thrive.)

Fisheries and wildlife personnel

working to reestablish the robust redhorse urge anyone who thinks he may have seen the fish to contact them. Cecil Jennings' number at UGA is 706-542-4837, and Jimmy Evans' number in Fort Valley is 478-825-6151.

Recently, a reference librarian in UGA's Science Library remarked that she thought she had seen some robust redhorse while canoeing near Lake Oconee's dam. When I urged her to report the sighting, she brushed off the suggestion, saying, "I think they already know."

Maybe. Or maybe not. Let's make the phone call to be sure.

How will the robust redhorse make it? Be sure to read next week in The Oconee Leader to see how the fish is doing.

'Dixie Divas'

grown in our gardens and canned in our kitchens.

We are a sisterhood with relatives who live in the Appalachians, in rural communities, on ancestral plantations, on the steamy seacoasts, on working farms and in big cities. There are threads of commonality woven throughout the many sub-cultures of the South and, as I wrote in that book, "there are those who would call these women the heart of all things Southern. But they are much more than that. They are the magnolia-scented breath

the faint of heart. It takes hard work, effort and attention to detail.

I can't wait for you to meet some of them. My mama, who earned money sewing dresses for others to put me through college, and my cousin, who never misses a funeral or the food that comes with it, are two of my favorite divas.

Kudzu and Dixie Divas have a lot in common. They are practically indestructible, thrive in Southern soil and both refuse to be controlled by man.