

IV: ghosts

Gliding and flitting in the bucolic, tranquil, deserted North Delta, a region in the watershed I adore. Despite the frequent pummeling down by winter's wrath, spring was just too mature to be contained anymore, and when the water temperature began to climb in the early afternoon, all mama's resident finny creatures blossomed in insatiable pre-spawn life. Crappies mingling around vertical structure thumped both jigs and small jerkbaits. Ol' biggie shoved up into thick, shallow tule clumps and against sun-baked rock, pouncing with abandon on well-placed plastic worms. And bluegill, iridescent hens fat with eggs and big bulls with copper-cobalt foreheads, traipsed around bank-side brush in the back end of a slough, eating marabou jigs just as they do during spring in water-supply reservoirs. Given a long, intimate relationship with all these fishes and their brothers and sisters, from bluegill and redear in Poway ponds in my early teen years, to the glorious crappie fishery that was Lake Gregory in high school, to the biggies and smallies that've been constant companions stuck to my hooks for nearly 30 years, I caught 'em all with elegance, and that while enmeshed in the North Delta's wild hardwood-tree-adorned mid-channel bars, snaky sloughs, and remnant tidal marshes.

In short, a fabulous predator-prey day in a wild place.

But after getting home and gazing at the few pictures we took, and under the influence of Laura Cunningham's *State of Change*, I questioned just how *Wild* the experience was - I mean, all the fish I caught were non-natives, albeit wild-spawned and self-sustaining. I wondered - what would I have caught in the North Delta had the season been the same but the dams and dikes and diversions hadn't existed? The habitat sure would've been different: tule marshes (of which only a smidgen currently exists) would've been ruling the landscape, backed by vast grasslands that now exist mainly as frayed fringes along the sloughs, there now for cows, goats, sheep. Without the dams and invasive aquatic plants, the sloughs would've been more turbid throughout, although certain sections we were in - upper Barker, upper Cache - had fairly stained water. Substrate would've been finer since the levees wouldn't have existed and thus neither the requisite riprap. And the resident fishes? Instead of largemouth hunting the tule pockets and corners, thicketail chub would've been the lazy stalking predator, chewing sculpins. In place of shy crappie, shy Sacramento perch would've glided slowly up to suspended tube jigs and then slurped 'em in with a quick snap. Tule perch, rather than bluegill, would've been the water-column bug-pickers, similarly susceptible to the damselfly imitations that fooled the 'gills. Key to all the natives, however, is that they would've been spawning or already spent, while all the non-native centrarchids that bent my rods were in a pre-spawn chow-down. Migratory species back then, as now, would've been notable by their absence: adult squaws and hitch would've been in the rivers to spawn (similar to striped bass today), and splittail would've been doin' their thang in floodplain lakes.

The corollary is that how I connected with the fishes resembled how I would've before Americans reorganized the landscape, although my little performance was by no means unique since bluegills and crappies and bass have been introduced all over the fucking world. Photos of well-caught thicketail chub and Sac perch certainly would've presented more diversity and spice in the theater of global fish porn than another shot of another pre-spawn biggie. But with the dams and the waterweed both clearing the water, neither of which is going anywhere, with reduced flows and the hotter climate giving rise to ever-warmer waters, the non-native fishes are entrenched and are now a permanent part of this watershed. Too, the native crappie and biggie

analogs, the Sac perch and chub, are never coming back, leaving *Pomoxis* and ol' largemouth as the closest I'll ever be able to touch thicketail and Sac perch in their native range.

Summer on the North Delta, a true summer day, hot and breezy, where we flowed through vestiges of a place dying and through a place blossoming. Suffocating channels coughed sediment-starved water into desperate tidal marsh, and only sliver hauntings of ancient grasslands that once buttressed the aquatic world trickled down the slough banks, yet persistent mini-islands hoisted big ol' venerable valley oaks and cottonwoods, and Bullock's Orioles and myriad heron species and grackles and swallows gawked and chattered as we sped by on our stout boat. And in the newly hewn sapphire water, amid vibrating stalks of vibrant jungle, many a post-spawn big - echoes of the extinct thicketail chub - kissed my plugs and plastic worms, reaffirming that, yeah, I understand largemouth bass exquisitely, and that, yeah, my skills for catching the big-mouthed black bass remain honed.

Delve into the heart of the North Delta I did - I felt it, I listened to it, and I ate it. The power of the hungry adult biggies ached my arms as I battled the fish to the boat. The searing, shimmering sun's heat teased out a lizard sensation on my skin, as if it were triggering an ancient, latent desire deep in my bones to appease Nature's requests. The pheasant's scratchy crackle and the heron's old-man screech pricked my ears with especial vibrancy in the paucity of humanity, as did the vaulting and splashing of the hooked largemouths. And the culmination: a largemouth bass fillet, crispy and golden, fed and freed me as I continued to roll through time and become ever more wed to the wailing watershed.

Blustery winter valley-floor day, blasting rain, avalanche clouds, ripping winds tossing leaves and birds and buckets. The North Delta the previous day, however, was different. Placid water, no people, an intimate ground fog, clouded ceilings softening the sun yet not pummeling with rain, and warm air, which, when combined, gave rise to a productive autumn largemouth bass bite in the evolving Delta, a Delta evolving ever closer to a tidal, freshwater Texas lake. We would've preferred stripers, being better equipped for the dynamic Atlantic immigrant than the languid Mississippi native, but the striped fish only showed herself at the last spot of the day, and then in spotty numbers. Aside from the slow tides thus weak water structure, so much of the habitat that a mere few years ago would've attracted stripers (and pikeminnow) - strong current seams, sparsely vegetated corridors in side channels - was now choked with weeds, ragged, clogged, morphed into hunting grounds now lorded over by largemouth bass. Largemouth, the lowly largemouth, ubiquitous, cosmopolitan, lacking in novelty, but, still, they remain a worthy fish - they taste good, they're higher-tier predators that eat and transform many smaller organisms (shad, gobies) into more effectively captured packets of life, and they're *wild*. The friendly biggies, they turned the sour notes of the North Delta's dissipating striped bass and associated vaporizing Native Wild to bittersweetness.

At least we still have that.