

Seining Downstream and Other Tips

Peter J. Unmack

P. O. Box 1454, Tempe, AZ 85280-1454
peter.unmack@asu.edu

Upstream or down? The direction you pull a seine in a stream seems to be a rather counterintuitive problem. Many fish collectors say it only makes sense to seine for fish in an upstream direction.

This approach works fine if you seine in streams in which the direction of flow is barely obvious. But upstream seining is next to impossible in streams in which the water is quite obviously flowing.

Some counter with the claim that it's harder for fish to evade the seine by swimming upstream against the current than it is swimming downstream. But have you ever tried seining upstream against a reasonable current? It's difficult to move a seine upstream, let alone keep the leadline on the bottom. More importantly, though, it should quickly become obvious that fish can move faster upstream than you can pull a seine. That is why seining downstream in a current (Fig. 1) is the best way to go.

There's no doubt about it, pulling a seine downstream through a rapid, riffle or run is no easy task. After all, you need to move faster than the water or else your net gets turned inside out. If the seine catches on a rock you may fall over, or, worse yet, injure yourself on something during your mad dash downstream. Granted, downstream seining requires a lot of energy and increases the risk of falling. But it is by far the best way to get fishes that live in faster environments.

An alternative to seining downstream in a riffle is to set the net across a given area, making sure that the leadline is on the bottom, and then kicking with your feet on the substrate downstream towards the net (Fig. 2). The downside for solo collectors is that more people are required, usually two to hold the net while one to four others kick downstream. By kicking I don't mean just plodding downstream while stomping your feet. You have to really drag your feet through the substrate,



Fig. 1.

Seining downstream works well in riffles, runs, and pools as long as you're able to move slightly quicker than the water.
Photograph by Michael Baltzly.

dislodging and moving as much of it as possible. (Use your hands on larger rocks.) Shake your hips and think of it as a "downstream kick dance." Yes, it looks silly, but you'll catch more fish. Do the kick dance until you reach the edge of the net. At that point everyone reaches down and grabs the lead line and lifts it. (But don't forget to keep the top of the seine up, too, or you'll flip the fish out.) The two downsides to this method is that some fish will get hurt by rolling rocks, and you'll need to be careful when lifting the seine as some rocks usually end up in the net. This technique works great if you're chasing bottom-hugging species such as darters and sculpins.

However you seine, always be open to new approaches. There are times when I'll seine upstream on the edge of faster water (especially if there is a small back eddy). Sometimes I lift the net in the middle of the river. Other times I sweep it onto the bank. Whatever technique you use, just keep your seine brails banging along the substrate and make sure your leadline is on the bottom. You'll be a better seiner for it. 🐟



Fig. 2.

Each habitat type typically requires a different seining technique. In faster riffles it's usually more effective to kick seine. This is done with two people holding the seine in place across the creek, being sure the lead line is on the bottom, as 2-5 people shuffle their feet and work their way downstream to the edge of the net (above) at which point everyone lifts the net (below).
Photographs by Michael Baltzly.

