

TIGERFISH!

by DAN RADEBAUGH

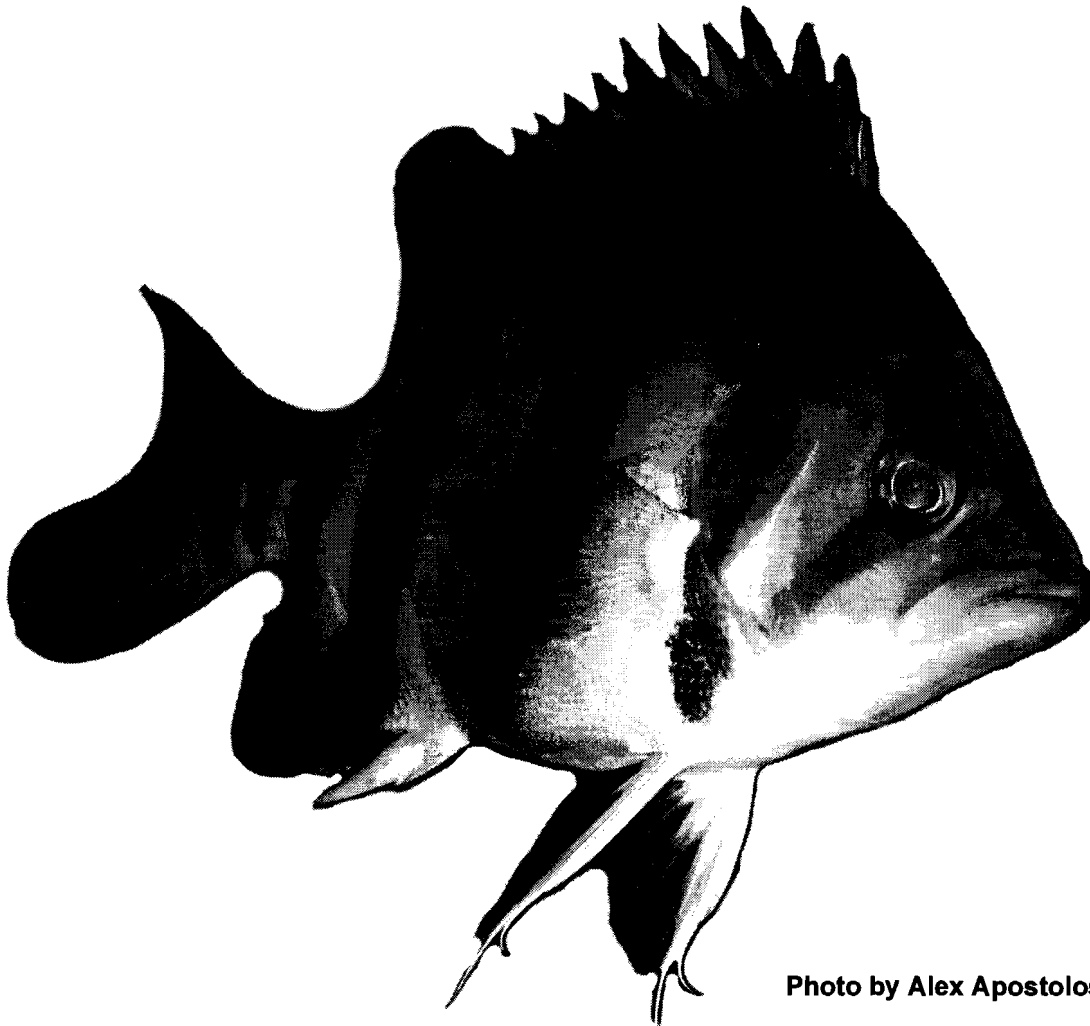


Photo by Alex Apostolos

During a visit to New York City by two of my sisters a couple of summers ago, we (the sisters, my wife Marsha, and stepson Alex) were walking up Mulberry Street in Little Italy, when I spotted a small fish shop that I hadn't seen before. In addition to the shop's good selection of goldfish and Flowerhorns, a tank with baby Oscars also contained some striped fish that I hadn't seen before, which were about the same size as the young Oscars. The owner told me they were Siamese Tigerfish. My Chinese being non-existent, I couldn't find out much more about them, but I was intrigued enough that, while we were having desserts at Ferrara's, I slipped out, returned to the shop, and bought one, then returned with my prize to finish my treat. This little striped fish with the big personality quickly became one of my favorites, and remains so, though he's not so little these days.

In keeping with the current taxonomic chaos in our hobby, there are three or five species of Tigerfish currently recognized — all from Southeast Asia and the Indonesian archipelago. The body is compressed and deep, and the lateral line is arched and complete. The jaws are protractile. Most are freshwater dwellers, though *Datnioides quadrifasciatus* inhabits brackish waters. Datnoids are now in their own family, Datnioididae, within the order Perciformes (perch-like fish). They were formerly placed within the family Lobotidae along with marine tripletails, and then in the family Coidae, which was subsequently renamed Datnioididae. The first three species listed below were all formerly included under *Datnioides microlepis*. Short of counting rays or scales, and even with photos and stripe diagrams, it can be tough for the casual hobbyist such as myself to distinguish species with any degree of certainty. I believe my fish to be *Datnioides pulcher*.

***Datnioides microlepis*:** Commonly called the Indonesian Tigerfish, Indo Dat, or IT is native to Cambodia, Thailand, Sumatra, and Borneo. This is probably the most frequently encountered species in the hobby. Like the others, it has a tall, deep body, with black vertical stripes on a creamy yellow or gold background. A relatively slow grower, it can eventually attain a size of around 20 inches. In Thailand *D. microlepis* is sought after as a food fish.

***Datnioides pulcher*:** Wide-bar Datnoid, or Siamese Datnoid, It was formerly included under *D. microlepis*. The number and arrangement of its stripes is the main (though not always obvious) point of differentiation. This is currently the “hot” species among Datnoid fanciers.

***Datnioides undecimradiatus*:** Thin-bar Datnoid. Northern Thailand Tigerfish. It was also formerly included under *D. microlepis*. The most rarely seen of these first three species. The thin stripes are the giveaway.

***Datnioides quadrifasciatus*:** Silver Datnoid, American Tigerfish. This species has a similar range to that of *D. microlepis*, but prefers brackish waters. Its body is silver-gray with the characteristic black stripes. It has a slightly more elongated body.

***Datnioides campbelli*:** New Guinea Tigerfish. This species is found in New Guinea and Australia. They are tall and bulky, but with a smaller mouth than the other Datnoid species. This is the most seldom seen, and reportedly the most territorial and aggressive, of the five species.

In the aquarium, I have found the Datnoid to be mostly a good citizen, though it is highly piscivorous, and its mouth will open very wide. I’ve come across conflicting opinions regarding compatibility. The most convincing description I’ve seen is that with one another they get along best in groups, where a hierarchy can be established. Where only two are kept, the weaker will be constantly tormented. I have only one, so I can’t speak to the conspecific issue, but mine will bully some tankmates.

Datnoids are ambush predators, and like hiding places such as leafy plants or caves, where they can lurk. They usually move rather deliberately, but are capable of bursts. “Eat and Run” types, they will grab a mouthful, and rush to a hiding place to eat. Highly piscivorous, they can be quite difficult to convert to non-swimming food. Mine will take frozen foods, such as bloodworms, prawns, krill, silversides, etc. He’ll also take treats like whole shrimp from the hand, but so far will not touch pellets or freeze-dried foods, though on-line acquaintances tell me some of theirs will. By all accounts, they seem to prefer neutral pH with some hardness. Mine does very well in New York City tap water, with the temperature in the high 70s. They grow rather slowly, but with a potential size of over twenty inches, a large tank will eventually be needed. There is no record of aquarium spawning, but they are farm-bred in Singapore.

These are fun fish to keep! They’re very aware of their owner, and will come to the front of the glass for a greeting, as well as to remind you about feeding time, or to complain that the first portion wasn’t enough for a growing fish! Not exactly common in the hobby, but not rare either, these personable perciformes can be pricey, but if you have the space, they’ll win you over!

