

Natives, Anyone?

by DAN RADEBAUGH

My first experience keeping fish was with *Gambusia*. I was nine or ten, and we lived on a lake north of Tampa, so collecting them was simple. Keeping them alive in glass jars proved less so, but the seed was sown. I tried *Gambusia* again a few years later - then keeping fish in an actual fish tank (and an outdoor pond)—this time my goldfish & tropicals got their fins shredded by these small but aggressive natives, so the *Gambusia* got returned to the swamp from whence they came.

These days I'm more interested in larger fish than *Gambusia*, but the idea of natives still appeals to me, so I've put together a small collection of natives, both wild-caught and hatchery-bought. My current native residents are three yellow perch, four pumpkinseeds, two warmouths, and a spotted sunfish (*Lepomis punctatus*), as well as a longnose gar.

There are a lot of reasons people don't keep native fish. They are generally perceived as being rather drab, many require living food, most prefer cooler water than we are used to providing, or than indeed was possible in the old days of incandescent lamps. Then there is the matter of acquiring them. There is little or no uniformity among the states as to the laws for collecting, buying and selling, or even possessing native fishes. While many of these laws make some sense when placed in local historical context, just as many are illogical, arbitrary, or just plain silly. Add to this the issues of acquiring the needed licenses, possibly further endangering threatened species, private property ("What are you doing with that net in my creek?"), and it becomes apparent that you need to do some homework before you sally forth to collect your natives. In fact, to those of us living in cities like New York, the whole idea of sallying forth into the wilderness when there are perfectly good pet shops within walking distance can seem more than a little masochistic. Besides, what about that drab thing? Well, let's talk!

First, about the drab thing. There are hundreds of North American fish potentially suitable for aquariums. Many are strikingly colorful! Who knew? Very few aquarist books even mention them. Ironically, many of our North American fishes have become rather popular among European aquarists. Between all the minnows, darters, shiners, catfish, and sunfish, there are plenty of natives to suit nearly any color

preference or tank size. Fortunately, there are now some field guides and other books that show decent color plates of a wide range of North American native fishes.

Often the choice of substrate and lighting make a surprising difference in how your fish display. For my fish, a switch to a lighter gravel and stronger lighting was a revelation!

Water Conditions:

Many natives occur over a wide geographical and climatic range, and with some exceptions are not too picky about pH, hardness, etc. Salmonids, such as trout, are very difficult (and in many states illegal) to keep in aquaria. They require pristine water, usually too cool for average aquarists to maintain. The Southeastern brook trout, for example, will not survive sustained temperatures of over 68 degrees Fahrenheit. I have not heard of largemouth or smallmouth bass being successfully kept in home aquaria over a long term. In general, for the fish I will mention below, the trade-off seems to be that they will grow more quickly in warmer water, but not live as long as they would in cooler water. All of these fish seem to need cool water, followed by a rise in temperature, as a spawning trigger. With the advent of more reasonably priced large tanks, and now, thanks largely to saltwater enthusiasts, affordable chillers, there is probably reason to believe that aquarium spawning of many of these species is possible.

Temperament

For tropicals common to the hobby, there is usually pretty good available information regarding diet, temperament, and spawning. This kind of information is less readily available for natives, especially as regards keeping them in aquaria. There are a few books and web sites that summarize how some of the more well-studied species behave and spawn in the wild, but not much data is available on how most of our natives behave in glass cages. I'll confine my remarks to the few that I have some experience with.

Yellow Perch (*Perca flavescens*):

In his excellent book, American Aquarium Fishes, Robert J. Goldstein dismisses yellow perch as being unsuitable for aquaria. I would really like

to ask him why. I've had my three for a year now, and they've been model citizens. They're easy to feed, not aggressive, and entertaining to watch. They like to hang out together, and show schooling tendencies, so having three allows them to do so. For a while I kept them with some cichlids, and they adopted the *Jurupari* as their leader. Their diet in the wild is opportunistic — insects, crustaceans, and small fish. Mine are hatchery-born, so flakes and now pellets are readily taken. I supplement with minnows, mealworms, crickets, earthworms, freeze-dried krill, etc. Despite being rather shy, they can be boisterous feeders. In the wild they spawn in the spring, and are egg-scatterers, providing no care to the eggs or fry. I have not heard of any home aquarium spawning, nor have I seen any spawning behavior in mine. Probably there is a rising water temperature cue, and my unheated indoor tank stays in the upper 70s through the winter. Size is usually from 8-12", and mine are in that range. They are altogether delightful fish, though sometimes a bit skittish.

Sunfish:

There are many sunfish species, and they generally fill the ecological niche occupied by cichlids in the Southern Hemisphere. In North America they include Crappie, Bluegill, Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass, as well as many lesser known and/or smaller species.

Pumpkinseeds (*Lepomis gibbosus*):

One of the most common and best known species — truly beautiful fish when given adequate lighting. They are active, a bit scrappy with one another, and brave, but not aggressive in the way we think of with cichlids. They're colony-nest builders, clearing a hollow in the substrate using a sweeping movement of their caudal fin, which the male will then defend. Mine have not spawned, but one of the males did build and defend a nest, though he couldn't seem to interest a partner. As with the perch, there is probably a water temperature cue in the spring. Not fussy eaters.

Warmouth (*Chaenobryttus gulosus*):

They have an interesting, coppery color, are more laid-back than the pumpkinseeds, and more piscivorous, though they appreciate veggies — peas, cauliflower, chopped spinach, etc. — from time to time. Both pellets and flakes are readily taken. Ambush predators — they like to hang out around driftwood or other decorations. They're very aware of the space outside the tank. They will come to the glass to meet and greet, but remain somewhat shy. Warmouths' behavior will seem more familiar to cichlid veterans, as compared with

that of pumpkinseeds — rather more solitary — conspecific dominance is an issue. They will mix it up with cichlids of a similar body shape.

Spotted Sunfish (*Lepomis punctatus*):

A surprise on all counts. I acquired mine by accident. Initially totally silver, it has developed the signature spots and dark ventral fins as it has grown. It has shown some aggression with certain other fish — the warmouths for example — mostly over who gets a preferred spot. Like the others, it appreciates veggies from time to time.

Shortnose Gar (*Lepisosteidae platostomus*):

This is an "I think." I bought it as *L. platostomus*, but store ID's are not always to be trusted. A gar expert of online acquaintance finds the photos to be more suggestive of *L. osseus*. Peaceful, but when hungry it will try to eat what it thinks will fit in its mouth. It took a long time to convert this fish to eating pellets. These guys require a large tank, as they can eventually grow to over three feet. Mine is about half of that length right now. Use some care with tankmates. Gars look quite fierce, but are defenseless against fish like large, aggressive cichlids.

All of these fish, separately and collectively, have been a pleasure to keep and observe. While these particular fish require large tanks for long-term care, there are smaller and more colorful species that would be just as rewarding to keep as any tropical. And just as with tropicals, plenty of our native species are suffering from habitat destruction, and are in need of help.

Suggested References:

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