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Paradise Revisited

Macropodus erythropterus - the Red Back Paradisefish

by ALEXANDER A PRIEST



Macropodus erythropterus

Photo by Al Priest

It is generally accepted that the *Macropodus opercularis*, or paradisefish, was the first tropical fish to be kept as a pet in Europe and in the Western Hemisphere, having first been imported from Asia into Europe around 1869 and into the United States in 1878.¹ For many years, the genus *Macropodus* was believed to consist of three species: *Macropodus opercularis* (the common paradisefish seen in many pet stores and often sold as either the blue or red, and sometimes turquoise paradisefish, depending on the shade and intensity of color of their vertical body stripes), *Macropodus ocellatus*, or roundtailed paradisefish (once known as *Macropodus chinensis*), and *Macropodus concolor*, the black paradisefish (now called *Macropodus spechti*).

In a paper published in 2002, Dr. Jörg Freyhof, of Berlin Germany's Leibniz-Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries, and Dr. Fabian Herder, Curator of Ichthyology at Zoologisches Forschungsmuseum Alexander

Koenig in Bonn, Germany, identified two new species in the genus *Macropodus*: *Macropodus hongkongensis* from Hong Kong, and *Macropodus erythropterus* from the coastal catchments of the Vietnamese Rivers Quang Tri, Cam Lo and Giang. The rest of this article is about *Macropodus erythropterus*, also known by the common name of red back paradisefish.

As indicated previously, *Macropodus erythropterus* is one of the two newest members of the genus *Macropodus*, having been imported into Europe in 2000 by Drs. Freyhof and Herder. I obtained my group at a Greater City Aquarium Society auction (just one additional benefit of attending aquarium society meetings).

The body shape of *Macropodus erythropterus* closely resembles that of the common pet store variety paradisefish, *Macropodus opercularis*. *M. erythropterus* has a slightly more pointy head, no (or very faint) opercular spot, and no prominent vertical stripes. Its body is reddish in color, with a

more intense red color along the back (thus, the common name of red back paradisefish).

This species shares many characteristics with *M. opercularis*, including adaptability to almost any water conditions, and aggression. Like *M. opercularis*, the red back paradisefish is **not** a candidate for a peaceful community aquarium. Males are aggressive and territorial, and will attack almost any other fish of similar or smaller size. While they are native to soft, slightly acidic water, they readily adapt to most water parameters (although wild caught specimens are best kept in soft, acidic water if you want them to breed). They can tolerate a very wide temperature range, but *Macropodus erythropterus* is best kept at 75° F or less.

These are very easy fish to keep and breed in the home aquarium, requiring very little beyond food and clean water. Caves, driftwood, and plants are recommended, especially if you keep more than one adult male in a tank. As noted previously, males are territorial and will fight unless they can each stake out a distinct territory. If you expect them to breed, floating plants (or other floating objects) should be placed in the tank to serve as anchors for bubble-nests.

Be careful, especially at feeding time, as they are such enthusiastic eaters that they are likely to jump to try to get to the food faster. A very snug lid, with all openings sealed, should always be in place.

Males are larger than females, have longer fins, and are more colorful. Adult females are wider, have shorter fins, and are less colorful (they can appear to be almost white when ready to breed). Just like the other members of the *Macropodus* genus, *Macropodus erythropterus* is a surface bubble-nester. That means a male will build a nest of bubbles at the surface of the water (usually under a leaf, but in an aquarium a floating piece of plastic will serve as a suitable substitute). He will then try to entice a female to his nest and if she is receptive, they will embrace. Hundreds of eggs can be produced at one spawning.

While they will eat almost anything, *Macropodus erythropterus* is primarily a carnivore, and live or frozen food is recommended, especially if you want the fish to spawn. They readily breed in captivity, and their spawning process is typical of other bubble-nesting anabantoids (such as *Betta splendens*).

The male wraps his body around the female, causing the expulsion of eggs from the female. The male then takes the eggs and places them into his floating bubble-nest.

He will guard the eggs until they hatch and the fry are free-swimming (usually within three days), after which he should be removed.

Just as with *Betta splendens*, the female should be removed as soon as the spawning embrace produces no more eggs, as she (and any other fish who might be in the vicinity) will be attacked by the male once he starts guarding his nest. Once the fry are free swimming, the male provides no additional parental care.

Some sources claim that *Macropodus erythropterus* appreciates some water current³ but I question that, and have found that they do quite well with minimal water movement. In my opinion, any significant current would disrupt their nests, since they are surface bubble-nesters.



Scientific Name: *Macropodus erythropterus*
Common Name: red back paradisefish
Standard Length: 2.5"
pH: 6.5 to 7.0 (slightly acidic to neutral)
Water hardness: soft to neutral
Temperature: 70° to 75° F
Distribution: coastal Viet Nam and vicinity of "Dong Hoi," Thailand
Reproduction: bubble-nester
Temperament: aggressive, jumper
Environment: low-light, caves and/or driftwood, heavily planted including floating plants, tight-fitting cover with no gaps
Nutrition: primarily carnivore (live or frozen worms, brine shrimp, etc.)
Filtration: avoid currents and surface agitation

References

¹
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freshwater_aquarium

² Freyhof, Jorg and Fabian Herder 2002 Review of the paradise fishes of the genus *Macropodus* in Vietnam, with description of two new species from Vietnam and southern China (Perciformes: Osphronemidae). *Ichthyological Exploration of Freshwaters* volume 13, no. 2, pp 147-167.

³
http://aquaworld.netfirms.com/Labyrinthfish/Macropodus/Macropodus_erythropterus.htm