

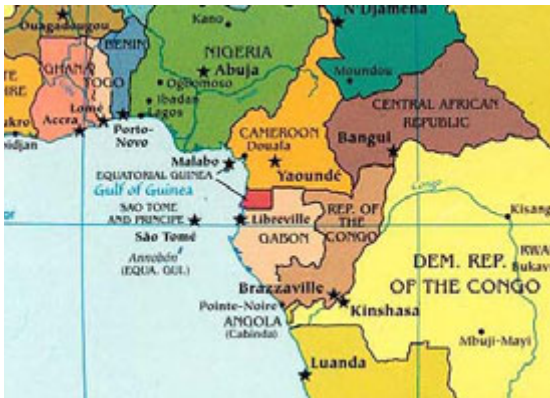
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## Steatocranus (Boulenger, 1899): A Genus Review

Even before I began to get excited about the Cichlids of West Africa, I was always intrigued by the genus *Steatocranus*. I have always had a soft spot for rheophilic fish. Rheophilic is a term that refers to fish that live in fast moving water. Most cichlids of this type are slender and elongated to enable them to thrive in the quick moving bodies of water. All members of *Steatocranus* are rheophilic species. In addition, all species have reduced swim bladders to varying degrees. They will sink like a rock when the stop swimming. The vast majority of their time is spent on the substrate.



As of this moment there are 9 described species and 2 undescribed species. All of them except for one can be found in the Congo River system. The type species happens to be among my favorites and that is *Steatocranus gibbiceps*. The described species contained in the genus currently are *Steatocranus bleheri*, *S. casuarius*, *S. gibbiceps*, *S. glaber*, *S. irvinei*, *S. mpozoensis*, *S. rouxi*, *S. tinanti*, *S. ubanguiensis*. The undescribed species are *S. sp. "red eye"* and *S. sp. "square head"*.

Let's discuss their appearance now. I would classify the genus as a small to mid size animal. The most unique characteristic they share is the large mouth and thickened lips. In addition, some male specimens can grow some very impressive humps on their head. Males also get larger than the females and tend to have more elongated dorsal and anal fins. This is one of my favorite traits. I have some males with dorsal fins that flow well past the end of their tail. Pelvic fins have a rounded appearance due to the longer middle rays. *Steatocranus* can be seen propped up on these pelvic fins constantly. Members of the species have very stout and strong caudal peduncle that powers a large caudal fin. The dorsal fin maintains a low profile along the length of the body and flares a bit near the end of the fin. Normally the coloration is the first physical trait that is mentioned when describing a species appearance. *Steatocranus* will never be called a colorful group of fish. As they mature most of them are a dark gray or muddy brown color. Juvenile coloration can be a bit more varied. The color is not what makes this an exciting group of fish to keep. It is their unique shape and wonderful personality.



I have bred a few of the species, but not all of them by a long shot. They are a cave spawning and pair bonding cichlid. I have always started with 5-6 juveniles of a species and let them sort it all out to obtain a pair. Pair bonding compared to many species is relatively peaceful. I never witnessed the raw brutality of some cichlids. It is very easy to see with even minor observation who is going to pair. There will be some chasing that is exhibited. Once a pair is identified it is a simple matter of pulling the rest of them before any carnage takes place. In a couple of instances I have had a male tolerate two females in the tank, but he would only breed with one. In one case, the dominant female died and it looked like he bonded with the second female. Eggs were laid several times, but I never achieved any fry from the attempt. A clay breeding cave has been the most popular choice so far for a breeding site. I have also had pair choose a group of rocks as well that formed a cave. There can only be one entrance though into their sections of the rocks. If there is any way for a backdoor entry, they will move onto another site. Once they have spawned and the fry are free swimming the female will guard them. The male doesn't actually guard the fry, but patrols his territory and defends anything in his space, which happens to contain the female and fry. The young fish will stay very close to the spawning site for an extended period of time. Often I have no idea how big a spawn took place till weeks after the spawn and the fry begin to explore their surroundings. In addition, the parents and juveniles will tolerate multiple generations of broods. I have discovered the hard way that the parents do not defend very well against catfish picking off fry. I have a habit of keeping catfish, mostly synodontis, in all

my tanks. I do this for two reasons. I like the job they do of keeping the tank clean of any food, and I love catfish. I no longer keep any in a tank with *Steatocranus* though.



I would like to share some thoughts on the tank environment when keeping these cichlids. First let me mention that I would never mix species in a single tank. I keep them in 30-gallon long tanks. I imagine a bonded pair could be kept in a 20 long, though I have not tried this myself yet. The substrate is always dark brown pool filter sand. I keep lots of rocks for hiding and perching spots. I have found that they will live at multiple levels. I also keep lots of plants in the tank. Most of them are tall plants that will reach the surface and help subdue the lighting a bit. An overly bright tank will not let them be too comfortable. Water parameters are not real important and they tolerate higher pH and hardness very well. Though they are a riverine fish, it is not necessary to recreate their natural environment with excessive water movement. They have developed their body shape to stay out of the rapids. They do need well-oxygenated water. The method that works best for me is to have a slightly oversized filter for the tank. I will place a tall rock below the output of the filter. The flow of water will hit the rock and disperse the energy of the water throughout the

tank without overpowering the fish or blasting substrate everywhere.

Feeding these fish is very easy. I mix a combination of spirulina and kelp, brine, and garlic flake into a container and feed this to them. I also feed NLS flake to them as well. I would not recommend feeding them pellets myself. I lost several specimens when I was in a phase of feeding only pellet. They appeared to struggle with processing pellet.





Occasionally I will feed live mosquito larvae as well. They attack these with much enthusiasm.

Despite their appearance I have found them to be excellent community inhabitants. I will usually keep them with another West African cichlid. They have been kept successfully with *Anomalochromis thomasi*, *Benitochromis nigrodorsalis*, *Orthochromis stormsi*, and *Pungu maclereni*. I almost always try to keep a West African barb or tetra in the tanks as well as dithers. In addition, I think they are beautiful fish as well.

If you are interested in West African cichlids then the members of *Steatocranus* are an excellent choice to add to your tanks. It always one of the more fun tanks that my family and I enjoy observing. They are charming whether they are propped up on their fins staring at you or darting and scooting around the tank. They are not a shy cichlid and seem to be as interested in us as we are them.

Reference:

**Lamboj, A.** 2004. "The Cichlid Fishes of Western Africa." Bergit Schmettkamp Verlag, Bornheim.

-Dave Hansen

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