

A Constellation of Community Cichlids

Dr Paul V. Loiselle

"You can't keep cichlids in a community tank. They grow too big and will kill any fish that they don't eat." This is the conventional cautionary utterance that neophyte fish keepers usually hear when selecting the inhabitants of their first aquarium. As the Family Cichlidae comprises about 1100 described and half again as many undescribed species, it is certainly possible to find quite a few cichlids that can legitimately be characterized as large, aggressive and predatory. However, there are also many cichlids whose size and temperament definitely qualify them as excellent community tank residents. My aim here is to introduce readers who are either contemplating the purchase of an aquarium or are in the process of stocking their first community tank to a selection of cichlids that combine the family's fascinating behavior with attractive coloration and a live-and-let-live attitude towards tankmates.

The selection of species included herein can all be maintained successfully as single pairs in a standard 20 gallon aquarium. While none of these fish qualifies as a serious predator, it is a simple fact of life that big fish eat little fish. All of these cichlids are likely to regard fish less than 3/4" long as convenient snacks rather than neighbors sharing a common habitat. Tankmates too large to make a comfortable mouthful, such as the majority of tetras, danios and barbs, livebearers like platies, swordtails or mollies and Australasian rainbowfishes are as a rule ignored. Exceptions to this pattern arise when a pair of cichlids decides the time has come to raise a family.

Efficient protection of their eggs and young is a defining characteristic of the family. Indeed, watching a pair raise a brood of fry to independence is one of the chief attractions of cichlid keeping. All of the species covered herein practice biparental care of their eggs and young and will stake-out a territory within which they deposit their eggs and from which other fish are excluded. Pair formation is thus an essential prerequisite to successful spawning. Where males and

females differ markedly with respect to size, fin development or coloration, selection of potential partners is a straightforward matter. If their needs with respect to water quality and temperature are met, any two well-fed individuals of the same species but opposite sex can be expected to eventually pair-up and spawn when housed in a community setting. When such sexual dimorphism is not evident, the usual case when dealing with immature individuals, the best way to obtain a compatible pair of cichlids is to purchase six individuals and grow them to adult size. Once they reach sexual maturity, pairing will occur as a matter of course.

A 20 gallon tank is generally large enough to afford its non-cichlid residents sufficient space to escape the attentions of a breeding pair of any of these cichlids. Whether a pair succeeds in rearing their fry to independence depends upon the size of their aquarium, the nature of the tank's other residents and their prior experience. As a rule, the larger the tank, the easier it is for parental fish to keep potential fry predators at a distance. Parental behavior is a function of both instinct and learning. A pair of cichlids may thus experience several failures before pulling off a successful spawning.

All of the cichlids presented in this brochure are commercially available and can either be found in most retail establishments or purchased from on-line vendors. The mix includes some species that require soft, acid water, others that need hard alkaline water to thrive and a few that will live happily over a wide range of pH and hardness values. These cichlids do not tolerate elevated concentrations of dissolved wastes, so efficient filtration and a program of regular partial water changes are essential adjuncts of their successful maintenance. All will accept a wide range of live, frozen and prepared foods, but do best on a diet of the first two.

Fish sizes are given as standard length (SL), the length of a fish's body exclusive of its tail fin. Hardness values are expressed as °DH; 1°DH = 17.1 ppm.



***Etoplus maculatus* – Orange Chromide**

Range: Southern third of peninsular India and Sri Lanka.

Size: To 2½" (6.0 cm) SL. Temperature: 70-82°F (21-28°C).

Water Chemistry: pH: 6.8-7.8, hardness to 15°DH. This species can tolerate salinity up to 10% that of sea water.

Comments: Orange Chromides will eat soft-leaved plants. An easily bred cave-spawning cichlid. Sexual differences are slight. Females have an iridescent white patch on the upper and lower tips of their caudal fins. The fry depend upon mucus nibbled from their parents' flanks for a significant portion of their diet. Parental care is protracted, adults continuing to defend their young until they reach 1" (2.5 cm) total length. The wild color form has been largely displaced from retail outlets by a golden color form marketed as the Red Chromide.

***Pelvicachromis pulcher* – Common Krib**

Range: Coastal rivers of Nigeria and western Cameroun.

Size: Males to 3½" (9 cm) SL, females to 2" (5.0 cm) SL. Temp: 72-84°F (22-29°C).

Water: pH: 6.0-7.2, hardness to 10°DH.

Comments: The name "Krib" stems from its initial misidentification as *P. kribensis*, a species native to southern Cameroun. Looks its best and behaves most naturally when housed in a well-planted tank. Care of the eggs and wrigglers is an exclusively female responsibility in this cave-spawning cichlid. Both parents defend the free-swimming fry. This is the most commercially available representative of the genus. Other *Pelvicachromis* are equally good community tank residents and have essentially the same maintenance requirements as the Common Krib.



***Anomalochromis thomasi* – African Butterfly Cichlid, Dwarf Jewel Fish**

Range: Coastal rivers of Sierra Leone.

Size: Males to 3½" (8.0 cm) SL, females to 2½" (6.0 cm) SL.

Temperature: 72-85°F (22-30°C).

Water chemistry: pH: 6.0-7.5, hardness to 12°DH.

Comments: Unless housed in a well-planted tank, the Dwarf Jewel Fish can be rather shy. This species deposits a round plaque of eggs on a flat surface. Young pairs may eat their first few spawns but eventually settle down to become model parents. A slow-growing but long-lived dwarf cichlid. An undescribed *Anomalochromis* from the neighboring country of Guinée that sports a series of dusky bars on the flanks is sometimes erroneously marketed as *A. thomasi*. Neither species is as readily available as *Pv. pulcher*, but both are well worth the added effort to find.



Julidochromis transcriptus

Range: Lake Tanganyika.

Size: Males to 2½" (6.0 cm) SL, females to 3" (7.6 cm) SL.

Temperature: 72-84°F (22-29°C). Water Chemistry: pH: 7.5-8.0, hardness to 20°DH.

Comments: This attractive little species requires plenty of rockwork in its aquarium to feel at home. A secretive cave spawning species, the appearance of free-swimming fry within a pair's territory is often the first indication that a spawning has occurred. The numerous geographically isolated populations of this species differ in details of their color pattern. The fish depicted is a representative of the Zambian populations. The two other dwarf representatives of the genus, *J. ornatus* and *J. dickfeldi*, are equally desirable community tank residents and have the same maintenance requirements.

Neolamprologus multifasciatus

Range: Lake Tanganyika.

Size: Males to 1½" (4.0 cm) SL, females to 1" (2.5 cm) SL.

Temperature: 72-84°F (22-29°C).

Water Chemistry: pH: 7.5-8.0, hardness to 20°DH.

Comments: This is one of the smallest known cichlid species. It is a representative of a group of dwarf species that shelter in empty Neothauma snail shells in the wild. Its tank must be furnished with comparable shells, which serve as both shelter and spawning sites. These easily bred little cichlids are excellent parents. Older fry remain within their parents' territory and assist in the rearing of subsequent spawns.



Mikrogeophagus ramirezi – Ram

Range: Orinoco basin of Colombia and Venezuela.

Size: To 2½" (6.0 cm) SL. Temperature: 75-85°F (24-29°C).

Water Chemistry: pH: 6.5-7.2, hardness from 3°DH to 10°DH.

Comments: Rams are easily sexed. Males have a taller dorsal fin while females sport a rosy violet blotch on their flanks. This surprisingly prolific little cichlid deposits a substantial circular plaque of eggs on a flat surface. Both parents tend the spawn and defend their free-swimming fry. While they spawn readily in captivity, Rams have a well-deserved reputation as spawn eaters. Bred on an industrial scale, *M. ramirezi* is the most readily available dwarf cichlid. In addition to the wild fish depicted here, a number of mutant color forms are also often offered for sale.

Mikrogeophagus altispinosa – Bolivian Ram

Range: Bolivian tributaries of the Amazon River.

Size: Males to 3" (7.6 cm) SL, females to 2¾" (7.0 cm) SL.

Temperature: 70-82°F (21-28°C).

Water Chemistry: pH: 6.5-7.2, hardness from 3°DH to 15°DH.

Comments: Somewhat more robust than its Orinoco basin congener, the Bolivian Ram is also more tolerant of lower temperatures and harder water. The pronounced lyre-shaped tail fins of males are broadly edged in red. Those of females lack both the long trailers and extensive red edging. It breeds in the same manner as *M. ramirezi*, but is a much more reliable parent.



Laetacara curviceps – Sheepshead Acara

Range: Eastern half of the Amazon basin in Brazil.

Size: Males to 2¾" (7.0 cm) SL, females to 2¼" (5.5 cm) SL.

Temperature: 70-85°F (21-30°C). Water Chemistry: pH 6.0-7.5, hardness to 12°DH.

Comments: This dwarf acara is easily sexed. Females have a larger and more clearly defined black spot in their spiny dorsal fin. Pairs of *L. curviceps*, like those of the two *Mikrogeophagus* species, deposit a circular plaque of eggs on a flat surface. They are, however, more reliable parents and can usually be expected to raise their young to independence even in a community tank. Two other *Laetacara* species are sometimes offered for sale. *Laetacara dorsigera* and *L. araguaiæ* differ in coloration but have the same maintenance requirements and reproductive behavior as the Sheepshead Acara.

Cleithracara maroni – Keyhole Cichlid

Range: Orinoco basin in Venezuela, coastal rivers of the Guianas and the island of Trinidad.

Size: Males to 5" (12.5 cm) SL, females to 3½" (9.0 cm) SL.

Temperature: 72-85°F (22-30°C). Water Chemistry: pH 6.0-7.5, hardness to 12°DH.

Comments: Despite its size, this is a very timid cichlid that will only prosper in a well-planted community tank. Small schooling fish such as tetras or rasboras make ideal companions.

Adult males are significantly larger and have longer dorsal and anal fins than females, young fish are extremely difficult to sex. Keyhole Cichlids are very prolific, depositing a circular plaque of eggs on a flat surface. Young pairs may eat their first few spawns, but eventually master the complexities of parenthood and do a competent job of rearing their fry.



Herotilapia multispinosa – Rainbow Cichlid

Range: Eastward flowing rivers of Central America from southern Honduras to Costa Rica.

Size: Although they can grow to 5" (12.5 cm) SL, Rainbow Cichlids begin breeding at half that length.

Temperature: 70-85°F (21-30°C).

Water Chemistry: pH 6.8-8.0, hardness to 20°DH.

Comments: Rainbow Cichlids feed on filamentous algae in nature and will eat soft-leaved aquarium plants. This species is extremely difficult to sex. In a group of juveniles of the same age, males tend to be slightly larger. Pairs of this very prolific species deposit their eggs on either a flat or a vertical surface. They are such reliable parents that *H. multispinosa* is often recommended as the ideal species for neophyte cichlid keepers. Rainbow Cichlids rarely have any difficulty rearing fry to independence in a community tank.