

Geophagus sp. “Tapajos red head”

The fish that changed my mind

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(re-printed from the April 2010 issue of “Buntbarsche Bulletin”, Journal of the American Cichlid Association)



The focus of my cichlid keeping has been mainly Lake Tanganyika for the last 30 odd years with some exceptions. The different shapes, sizes and behaviors of these cichlids has always fascinated me like figuring out the social structure in a group of *Tropheus*, the amazing parental care of some of the *Neolamprologus* species, the beautiful display of an *Enantiopus melanogenys* male trying to lure a female into his nest or laughing at the little shell dwellers when they re-arrange their tank. This has



made me the subject of many jokes in my home club where South and Central American cichlid keepers are in the majority.

Then about 4 years ago a good friend told me that it was time for me to get involved with some “real” cichlids and offered me some juvenile *Geophagus*. He told me that they are an undescribed species called sp. “Tapajos red head” and that they were quite difficult to find here in Ontario at the time. I had never maintained *Geophagus* species but have been interested in them due to their unique breeding habits and of course their beauty.

Christoph Seidel and Rainer Harnoss discovered this species in 1991 in the Tapajós River which is a tributary of the Amazon and which joins this great river close to the city of Santarém. The water in this river is very murky which explains the nonexistence of permanently submerged plants. The pH ranges from 6.2 to 6.8 and there is no measurable hardness. The temperature is about 28° Celsius but it fluctuates up to 12° during the year. However, in the aquarium these fish will accept a pH of up to 8.0 and a hardness of 20° dGH without any difficulty and will not stop them from breeding. This gorgeous cichlid is quite



lively and can be a bit aggressive towards conspecifics during breeding. It is therefore advisable to have them in a tank of at least 4 feet in length which will provide them with enough swim room and some wood, rocks and plants for some hiding places.

But back to my story: The timing was perfect because I was getting bored with my frontosa set-up and was thinking about a change. This opportunity made the decision very easy. Until I sold the frontosa and made my 160g into an Amazon set-up, I placed the 5 fish in a 4 foot 65g. They were about 1.5-2 inches in length and still had some growing up to do. By the time they reached about 3 inches, I



noticed that they were not swimming in one group any longer. Two pair had separated from the group. They both were busy to clean a flat rock each, one in the left corner and the other in the right corner. Both pair laid eggs which hatched after three days. Both parents took the wigglers in their mouth for a while but then made a good meal out of them. I did not mind since these fish were still very young and obviously needed some practice. This happened several times over the next few months and every time the parents carried the wigglers a bit longer. However, I never noticed any fry.



Around the same time I was given the “Tapajós”, I went on my annual pilgrimage to the OCA “Extravaganza”. This is always a good opportunity to find South- and Central American cichlids. Southern Ontario is mostly African cichlids. I found some *Geophagus altifrons* which would go very nicely with the “Tapajós”. The plan was to move both species in the new tank at the same time to avoid any trouble. I also added some small albino *Ancistrus* to help me keep tank and decoration clean. Big pieces of drift wood, some large *Anubias barteri* and a few rocks were used to aquascape the tank. As

substrate I chose very fine silica sand with a grain size of less than 1mm. Under no circumstances should the grain size exceed 2mm. These fish are also called “earth eaters”. They sift through the upper layers of the substrate by passing the sand through their gills looking for anything edible. A grain size larger than 2mm can cause injury to the gills and prevent them from eating. The water temperature is maintained at 78 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, the pH around 8 and the hardness between 12 to 15 dGH.



So in the tank they went and that was it for the next couple of days. They disappeared under the wood and the plants until they got used to the new environment. Then you could see them sifting through the sand tirelessly all day long looking for food. This is no boring tank, there is always movement. However, I have never seen them fight or noticed any injuries. Since everything went fine, I decided to just leave the tank alone, do the necessary maintenance and enjoy the fish. They were breeding regularly but I have never seen any fry, only males and females holding. So one day I decided to remove one pair and give them some privacy in a 4

foot 65g tank. It took only 3 days and they started to clean a flat rock right at front glass of the tank. The next day I was able to observe the spawning. There were no surprises. It was the same like all other substrate brooders. The female positioned the eggs and the male circled over them to release his sperm. The whole process lasted a few hours with some little breaks in between. The female always stayed with the eggs while the male checked for eventual enemies. When I came into the fish room two days later, all the eggs were gone. My first thought was:” Oh well, the eggs are gone. More luck next time”. Then I noticed that both parents made a chewing motion, like they were eating something but their mouth stayed firmly closed. That’s when I realized that they were holding. They did not eat during that time. The fry was released after another few days but just very briefly at first. At that time I started to sparingly add some food. The female spit out the fry immediately and started to go after every morsel of food she could get while the male kept the fry in his mouth. After a few minutes the male too let go of the fry and started to feed. Both parents were very nervous during that time swimming constantly in all directions, picking some of the fry up and spitting them out again. During that time something funny happened. I have air stones in all my tanks to create some water movement. The fry seemed to find the bubbles



very interesting and the whole swarm started to swim over and started to “play” in the stream of air coming from the stone. They were lifted up to the surface, came back down to bottom only to be lifted up again. The parents almost went ballistic trying to gather the fry up again but with very little success. I had to shut down the air flow to calm them down again. After about two days, the female seemed to have lost interest in the mouth brooding and it was the male that took them all into his mouth when I got too close to the tank. However, the female always stayed close to the fry. These fish are excellent

parents and looked after their babies for about 2-3 weeks. That’s when I noticed that the fry numbers started to dwindle and I siphoned some of the fry out of the tank to grow them out. The fry takes

freshly hatched brine shrimp from the beginning without any problems and grow relatively quick in the beginning.

By now you must understand the title of this article. These beauties got me hooked on South American cichlids. I have even started to keep some of the smaller Central Americans. More than halve of my 24 tanks are now occupied by New World cichlids or as my fellow club members would say “real cichlids”. Don’t get me wrong, I will never be without my beloved Tropheus but I have to admit that the “earth eaters” are not far behind. Especially the “Tapajós” have made me realize what I have been missing. The beautiful colors, the pleasant and very interesting behavior plus the manageable size should make this fish a definite on every cichlid lover’s wish list.



Personally I have set my eyes on yet another earth eater: *Retroculus xingensis*. Well, one of these days I will find them.....

References:

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