

Enantiopus melanogenys (Boulenger, 1898)

A Tanganjikan Beauty

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If you happen to walk by an aquarium containing an adult group of *Enantiopus melanogenys* I guaranty you will stop and take a second look. I call it the “WOW” factor. A displaying male will certainly get your attention in a hurry. These fish are without a doubt one of the most beautiful and interesting cichlids coming from Lake Tanganyika and I was lucky enough to get my hands on 10 fry to grow them out and to enjoy their beauty and their behavior.

These fish were discovered by J.E.S. Moore during one of his expeditions to Lake Tanganyika 1895-1896 and described by Boulenger in 1898. Their introduction to the hobby was to my best knowledge in 1985 to a German importer.



Wild male

They are endemic to the sandy habitat at Lake Tanganyika and are found pretty much throughout the Lake to a depth of up to 50m (~164 feet). *E. melanogenys* have a very slender and elongate body shape. Males can grow up to 16cm (~6”) while the females will about stay about 4cm (~1.5”) smaller. The females look a drab beige-gray while the males impress with amazing colors. These sand dwelling cichlids are polygamous maternal mouthbrooders. In the lake, the males built large breeding colonies where they create shallow round territories of ~50cm (~20”) in the sand. In the center of this territory they dig another smaller pit of ~15cm (~6”) where the actual spawning will take place. The males stay in their territory while the females swim over the colony

and descend down to one or more males to spawn. Then they swim back to join the school of the other mouthbrooding females. These schools stay together and after about 3 weeks the move into shallow areas and release their fry simultaneously.



Young male trying to impress the females

In the aquarium however things are quite different. The fry I finally received trough a friend of a friend of friend... was about 2.5cm (1”) in length and ended up in a 35g tank to grow. Now if you decide to take the same route I did and buy fry, you better be a very patient person because these fish grow very slow no matter the food you give them. But let me promise you, it is worth the wait. At

approximately 2" I moved them to their permanent home, a 4 foot 65g tank. The back of the tank was built up with some rocks but the biggest part of the bottom surface was covered with a 2" layer of fine silica sand. They shared their home with a group of *Paracyprichromis nigripinnis*. This arrangement worked perfectly since the *Paracyprichromis* spent most of their time among the rocks. The pH value of the water was just over 8 and I kept the temperature at about 78 Fahrenheit (~25.6 Celsius).



Male Paracyprichromis nigripinnis yawning

When it comes to the food for my fish I become very particular. I never feed the same two days in a row but vary their diet from day to day. Frozen foods like blood worms, mysis, daphnia and brine shrimp are always available for my omnivorous cichlids but I also feed some good flake food to give them some vegetable matter. On top of this I feed live food whenever I can get my hands on it.

Under the described conditions my *melanogenys* still did not grow faster but they very slowly became a functioning and healthy group. At the size of about 3"-3.5" I was easily able to tell them apart by their behavior. I was happy to see that I had 4 males and 6 females. Knowing that these fish are very peaceful, I did not remove any males because I wanted to see how they would manage to build their territories in an aquarium. I did not have to wait long. It was more and more clear to me that 3 of the males were competing for the "best" spot. The third male was hiding among the females. Soon I had three shallow pits in my tank, one to the left, one to the right and one in middle. The males were constantly working on their homes and trying to fend off other males that came too close by spreading their fins and shaking. However, I have never seen them hurt each other or any of the females. Even the sub-dominant male was never in danger of being injured.



Young male trying to spawn with one of the females while defending his territory

These "training sessions" went on until they reached a length of about 4"-4.5". At this point they were approx. 18 months old and the males started to color up very nicely, especially when they were trying to impress the females or when they defended their pit against other males. I tremendously enjoyed watching the males tirelessly working on their pit, trying to lure a female into their territory while making sure that no other male would cross the line. The females were mostly found in the water column or sitting on one of the rocks and it appeared to me that they too were enjoying the happenings below them.

Then one day I noticed one of the females with a chewing motion like she was eating something. She opened her mouth a little and that's when I could see the eggs. I would not have noticed it because her face looked quite normal. It takes about 20 days for the fry to hatch so after 15 days I moved the female in a 10g nursery tank. A few days later she released 10 tiny fry. I left the mom and her babies in the 10g for another couple of days and then moved her back with the group. The fry eagerly took the freshly hatched brine shrimp and crushed flake and the integration of the female into the group presented no problem at all. There is however one problem I discovered at some later spawns. The



Young male showing off

Female will look after the fry only for a short time and will then start enjoying them in a more culinary manner. It is very advisable to keep a close eye on her after she released the fry. The problem is to catch the female before she gathered her young back into her mouth for protection. Stripping the female is absolutely no option for me since I am a strict opponent of this practice but with a little patience this problem can easily be solved.



I have been a fan of Tanganyikan cichlids for many years now, especially *Tropheus* but this fish has become a very close second on my list. This is not only because of their beautiful colors but their very interesting behavior and their peaceful temperament. I kept this group for about 5 years and they have given me many hours of enjoyment and a good number of fry. The colors of these second generation fish were not as intense as the wild variety as you can see on the provided photos but they were still one of the highlights in my fish room.

References:

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Tanganyika Secrets, 1st Edition 1992; Page 92-93
