

An excellent Tropheus companion, Simochromis babaulti (Pellegrin 1927).

By Klaus Steinhaus (reprinted from the February 2009 issue of "Buntbarsche Bulletin", Journal of the American Cichlid Association)



Being a Tropheus fanatic for over 30 years, I am always on the lookout for compatible species to keep them company. I do not like to mix different Tropheus species but like the looks of a nice big tank with one Tropheus variant and some different species that have the same dietary needs and are able to stand up to the fast and sometimes rough Tropheus. Petrochromis is such a species and so is Simochromis. I kept Petrochromis and Tropheus together for a number of years with great success but had given up hope to ever get my hands on some Simochromis. That is until I heard from a friend that his friend had brought in a wild group directly from Lake Tanganyika. I immediately told

him to reserve the first 20 fry for me and he did.

To my knowledge there are 5 species within the genus Simochromis: *S. diagramma* (Günther 1893), *S. babaulti* (Pellegrin 1927), *S. margaretae* (Axelrod & Harrison 1978), *S. marginatus* (Poll 1956) and *S. pleurospilus* (Nelissen 1978). All are endemic to Lake Tanganyika. For this article I would like to concentrate on *S. babaulti* since this is the only Simochromis species I worked with.

S. babaulti is a herbivorous mouth brooding cichlid and lives along the shallow shore line of the lake feeding on the biocover (Aufwuchs) at a depth of up to 5 meters (~ 15 feet). At 11cm (~ 4.5") it is one of the smallest species within the genus but don't let this fool you. These little guys surely know how to defend their territory and they do it with a gusto that is fun to watch. They are very territorial and do not tolerate other rock grazers coming close, especially conspecifics. It is therefore very advisable to use a tank of no less than 90g if you would like to keep these fish.

When I finally received my fish at a size of approx. 2.50cm (1") I placed them into a 4 foot / 65g tank to grow out and to eventually house them in a 6foot / 125g tank with about 20 juvenile Tropheus sp. "Cape Nundo" and some Eretmodus cyanostictus. It was amazing to see the amount of food these little fish were able to consume and how fast they grew. I placed two large rocks into the 65g to have some kind of decoration (I hate bare tanks) and very soon these rocks became the center of attention for some of the little guys until two of them emerged as the "owners". It appeared to me that they did not defend these rocks as their breeding spot but more as their feeding grounds. I observed this behavior many times after their move into the larger tank.





When they grew to about 2.5", it was time to move them into the larger tank. I took 8 of them and added them to my group of *Tropheus* sp. "Ujiji". They are also in a 4 foot, 65g but with fewer rocks. That would make it much easier to collect the holding females since I had no desire to take the big tank apart every time these guys were spawning. The rest of them went into the big tank with the *Tropheus* sp. "Cape Nundo".

For the big tank I choose small gravel as substrate and decorated the left and right back corners with large pieces of lime stone. To finish it up, I added some pieces of *Anubias barteri* to each rock pile. The water temperature was at 78-80 Fahrenheit and the ph value at ~8.5.

All fish were added at the same time and over the next few months I enjoyed watching them grow and finding their place within their new surroundings. It didn't take long for some males to show their superiority and set up their territory. One on the extreme left, one on the extreme right and one in the middle of the tank. The first spawning I noticed at a size of about 7.5cm (~3"). The dominant males dig a shallow pit into the gravel which marks the center of their territory. The pit and the surrounding area are rigorously defended especially against other *Simochromis* males but also against the *Tropheus*. However, I have never noticed any injuries due to aggression. Any female coming close to the territory is relentlessly pursued and the male is trying everything in his power to convince her to follow him into the pit. If the female has no interest in spawning, she will be chased away and his attention will move to the next female. If he is successful, the female will follow him into the pit and they will spawn in normal mouth brooder fashion. The incubation time is about 25 days and the fry is very fast growing.

Simochromis babaulti are a very lively group of cichlids and if you do not have the proper accommodation for them then they will drive you insane and sooner then later kill each other. But if you like life in your tank and constant movement, these fish are surely for you. When given enough space, *Simochromis* is a delightful fish to watch and if kept together with the right company, you will not be disappointed. So don't be scared of them and give them a try.