

Butterflyfish Fever

You can't always get the fish you want – it wouldn't be reef safe.

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Raccoon butterflyfish.
Threadfin butterflyfish.

I wonder why I am always drawn to the fish I can't house in my aquarium. (I can't be the only one, right?) It must be "wanting what you can't have" syndrome. Currently, with our 50-gallon tank, I'm limited by two factors: size and reef compatibility.

I love (and can't have) the various beautiful species of butterflyfish. I know that some butterflyfish can work out in a reef system, but ever since the butterflyfish disaster we went through early on (read about it here), I am reluctant to take a risk on a fish that is only likely reef safe.

According to the Maui Ocean Center, 24 species of butterflyfish are found in Hawaiian waters. While snorkeling around the islands, I saw lots of threadfin butterflyfish and raccoon butterflyfish, sometimes alone, but more often in large schools.

I found the large groups of raccoon butterflyfish particularly interesting because their behavior was quite different from the fish around them. Most of the other fish I saw on the reef seemed to be in constant motion, searching for food or hiding from danger, but the raccoons were often relatively still, just hovering in the water. If I swam over to the group, they would slowly swim away from me, then (after I left them alone) they'd relax and just hang out again, calm and practically motionless. I don't know if it was the location, the time of day or just the fish I happened to see, but it was unlike anything I had seen snorkeling before!

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