

World's Most Indestructible Aquarium Fish?

Could it be your garden-variety goldfish?

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The other day on my usual long-distance call with my parents, my dad shared a story with me about a goldfish that our family had won at a carnival. My father was in the United States Air Force and stationed in England at the time. This would have been way back in the 1960s, so I was too young (I was born in 1962) to remember this particular fish or its bowl. Of course, more than 40 years ago, fishkeeping was much different than it is today. Although some maverick aquarists undoubtedly dabbled in keeping marine organisms — keeping live rock in aquaria was initiated in 1846 — the concept of modern reef aquariums, which we've all been bowled over by from time to time, wouldn't be introduced to U.S. hobbyists until the mid-1980s in the pages of *Freshwater And Marine Aquarium* magazine. Amano-style planted tanks would be years away, too. In fact, most setups in the 1960s were glass tanks with simple aeration, fake rock or a castle and a few fishes, namely goldfish, but guppies and bettas, too. Many would argue that the crown of "World's Most Indestructible Aquarium Fish" should go to either bettas or guppies before goldfish. Since my story involves the lowly goldfish, I'll try and make a case for them.

My dad was doing a straight faucet-to-bowl water change on our goldfish's bowl. The goldfish was named Carn, short for carnival. On one particular Saturday morning, my dad saw that the water in Carn's bowl was becoming a bit fouled, so he decided to dump as much of it as he could and to refill it under the tap with Carn still in the bowl. Here's what my dad had to say: "I turned the tap on and unconsciously turned it to hot. I soon noticed this orange goldfish turn bright red. It survived for several more months." My dad said he never forgot to check the water temperature before swapping out Carn's water ever again.

Granted many of the following accounts are anecdotal, and the teller's word has to be taken at face value, but there are so many of these that I'm sure most are true. Combing for online accounts of goldfish survival, I googled "goldfish survival stories" and here is some of what I found: a goldfish leapt out of its tank and survived 13 hours on a carpeted floor before being returned to its bowl, where it revived and resumed swimming; another survived a "diseased bowl," which killed every other fish except for the goldfish; in another story (this one is a case of "you couldn't make this stuff up"), a goldfish gets a piece of gravel lodged in its mouth, which the owner works out by applying pressure to the fish's mouth, but once the gravel is dislodged the fish is "bent" at its midpoint at a 90-degree angle, which the owner straightens out — the fish survives the entire ordeal; one report says "they can survive close to freezing [water] temperatures for an unlimited time" and, finally, a noisy air pump is turned off and remains off for seven hours, with one goldfish surviving and another not.

When not being scalded, frozen stiff or poisoned by derelict hobbyists to whom "water change" are fighting words, goldfish can live up to a decade in aquaria. Goldfish were developed from wild carp by the Chinese more than a millennium ago and first received mention in the U.S. in an article in the *New York Aquarium Journal* in 1876 (the year Custer met his demise at Little Bighorn). The hardy (some of the many varieties that have been bred through the years are quite delicate, such as bubble-eyed goldfish) goldfish paved the way for so many other freshwater fishes to be kept. The successes and failures with other freshwater fishes ultimately lead aquarists to develop better equipment and refine captive maintenance techniques, thus providing the bridge by which hobbyists could begin to successfully keep more difficult species.

Before most modern aquarium equipment came to be, there was the goldfish. The hardy goldfish deserves our adoration, if for no other reason than it is a survivor. Maybe the guppy and betta folks should rethink which fish they coronate "World's Most Indestructible Aquarium Fish." I've made my case, now let the chips fall where they may.

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