

Graceful Gourami Fish

The reason for gourami fish popularity is easy to see.

By Max Gibbs

Selected Species Descriptions

The dwarf gourami (*Colisa lalia*) is a long-time favorite in the hobby. A sparkling gem would be hard pressed to compete with the male dwarf gourami. The males are some of the most intensely colored wild fish in the freshwater hobby, possibly outshone only by the African killies. This beautiful little fish from India is unlikely to exceed 2 1/3 inches. The female is invariably smaller.

In general, this is a peaceful — even timid — fish, but rogue males can be aggressive and a constant nuisance to some individuals they may take a dislike to. The bubble-nest is usually a fairly compact affair, using plant bits in the construction, helping the bubbles to retain a traditional domed shape. Both the eggs and fry are tiny. Initial feeding is difficult, needing the finest rotifers and infusoria to boost growth to a more manageable size.

The croaking gourami (*Trichopsis vittata*) is found across a wide region — eastern India, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra, Java and Borneo. Full size is no more than 2 1/3 inches.

In its natural environment this shy species is found in shallow waters, with ample vegetation for cover. The tropical sun can easily push the water temperature up to high levels, which these fish prefer. Dry foods alone are rarely sufficient for this species, and both live and frozen foods are to be regarded as part of the regular diet for success.

Males can be identified by the red edging of the anal fin, which is also longer and more pointed than that of the lower female fish. Broad-leaved floating plants are preferred for breeding purposes. Both sexes can "croak" — primarily during courtship.

The chocolate gourami (*Sphaerichthys osphromenoides osphromenoides*) hails from Malaysia and Sumatra. A top size of about 2 inches is typical.

This species is collected exclusively from the wild as it does not lend itself readily to captive breeding. It is notorious among fish dealers as a difficult fish to handle when newly arrived. Once acclimated it becomes more accommodating, but must always be regarded as a tricky fish to keep.

It is said that the eggs are laid in some kind of nest, but this is more likely to be a simple depression in the substrate, from which the eggs are taken up by the female for mouthbrooding. The young fish are brooded in this way for about two weeks. Newly caught females sometimes are found to be carrying young in their mouths, which rarely survive the acclimation process to captive conditions.

The tiny upturned mouth indicates a surface feeding fish, taking small insects in the wild. Cool or regular tropical aquarium temperatures are unsuitable for the chocolate gourami. Something at or about 82 degrees Fahrenheit should be provided. Soft acid water is also appreciated, if not essential.

The giant gourami (*Osphronemus gorami*) is a big fish, although reports of top sizes vary quite considerably. It is generally considered to be fully grown at 23½ inches, but specimens approaching 39 1/3 inches are reported.

The species originated from the Great Sunda Islands, but has been widely introduced elsewhere as a food fish. The juveniles offered to fishkeepers from time to time are attractively and vertically striped, but lose these marking as they mature.

Fully grown "pet" giant gouramis can become very fussy feeders, often showing a single-minded preference for one kind of food. They require a good amount of vegetable matter in their diets.

The huge rubbery lips of the mature fish are a particular feature. The males have pointed anal and dorsal fins. Youngsters will fight among themselves quite spiritedly, but mature fish are usually peaceful — almost sedate! A nest is built from plant bits, and the resulting construction is spherical in shape. The brood is initially well protected by the parent fish.

The honey gourami (*Colisa sota*), like the dwarf gourami, is a tiny, beautiful fish originating from India. It is now largely farm bred for the hobby. It may achieve 2 1/3 inches, but usually matures at smaller size.

The male transforms from a plain little fish to a blaze of honey gold. Both dorsal and anal fins are edged with yellow, and the ventral feelers assume a similar strong yellow coloring. A dark steel-blue area extends from below the mouth, back under the eye, merging into a black area as it drops down into the anal fin. The honey-gold scales are edged delicately with a pure yellow.

Being a tiny fish, suitably fine foods should be offered. Although generally a very peaceful fish, a nest-guarding male can be surprisingly aggressive, displaying a courageous bravery toward even large intruders posing a threat.

The three-spot, or blue, gourami (*Trichogaster trichopterus*) originated from Malaysia, Thailand, Mayanyar (Burma), Vietnam and islands of the Indo-Australian archipelago. As a wild fish it has a dusky mauve coloring.

The sky-blue fish so familiar to fishkeepers is a refinement of color achieved during captive breeding. The market occasionally sees the wild form, but it lacks the popularity of the beautifully colored aquarium-bred stock.

The blue gourami breeds very freely, making a large bubble nest, free of vegetation in the actual construction but often arranged within the shelter of surface plants. The female has a rounded dorsal fin.

Blue gouramis are often content to cavort with each other, leaving their tankmates in peace. However, a lone male will often turn rogue and menace other fish in the community. Similarly, two males may fight or harass one another until dominance is established. The vanquished fish is usually killed.

The thick-lipped gourami (*Colisa labiosa*) is a handsome fish from Mayanyar (Burma) and India. It may grow to about 4 inches and is easily sexed when mature. The male has a pointed, elongate dorsal fin, and is more colorful than the female.

It is a quiet and peaceful species, tending to be shy and needing some cover for security. Soft, slightly acid water is preferred, but is hardly a necessity. The bubble-nest is an untidy, large, sprawling affair, without any vegetation incorporated into the construction. About 500 eggs comprise an average spawning.

The dwarf croaking gourami (*Trichopsis pumilus*) is from Vietnam, Thailand and Sumatra. At a top size of a little over 1 inch, this pretty little gourami is the smallest labyrinth species.

The light reflects off the sequin-like scales to amply justify one of its common names, "sparkling" gourami. Some front lighting is needed to see this lovely little gourami at its best.

By nature these are shy and retiring fish, but when spawning the situation changes radically. They become protective and aggressive.

Soft, acidic warm water conditions are to the liking of this gourami. When nesting they seek out a broad-leaf floating plant whenever possible. Although this species can also croak, like its vittata cousin, the noise is quite muted by comparison.

The neon dwarf gourami (*Colisa lalia* var.) is a man-made variety that some fishkeepers regard as an improvement on the wild form (this writer disagrees!). The electric sky-blue color that is so prominent in the dorsal fin of the natural form dominates the entire body of the male neon variety.

The red stripes of the wild fish have been significantly reduced to reveal the generous expanse of bright blue. The female carries a mere shadow of this color scheme, but nonetheless results in a somewhat more colorful fish than the wild form. This is just one of several color varieties of the dwarf gourami now regularly produced commercially for the aquarium market.

The opaline gourami (*Trichogaster trichopterus* var.) is a very popular variety of the blue gourami. It is a mutation produced initially by an American breeder named Cosby. This variety is still occasionally known as the Cosby gourami.

In all respects, other than the coloring, this species is identical to its blue gourami ancestor. Opaline gouramis are capable of reaching about 6 inches in length, and are regarded as one of the larger aquarium fish species. The total number of eggs laid will average about 1000, but up to 4000 is a possibility. After spawning is completed, the male guards the nest and will often show aggression toward the female at this time.

The pearl gourami (*Trichogaster leerii*) comes from Malaysia, Borneo and Sumatra. It grows quite large and may achieve 4 inches. In spite of its size this is a very peaceful fish.

The male has an elongate and pointed dorsal fin, unlike the shorter rounded fin of the female. Both sexes are dappled with numerous pearly white spots, but the male also has a pleasant orange throat and thorax. This orange area transforms into a wonderful red glow when the fish is in breeding condition.

The pearl gourami prefers to build its nest within the shelter of surrounding floating leaves, although these are not incorporated into the actual nest structure. The male will guard the nest once spawning is complete, and does not necessarily drive off the female, as commonly happens with other *Trichogaster* species. Once a pair is "matched," breeding is usually an easy process. Although reasonably tough and long lived, the pearl gourami may be easily frightened and needs peaceful surroundings with adequate cover.

The golden gourami is a more recent pseudo-albino morph derived from the blue gourami. This desirable form appeared around 1970, but the origin does not seem to have been documented.

Like its original form, the golden gourami prefers a higher temperature than the norm — somewhere in the 78- to 80-degree Fahrenheit range is ideal. *Trichogaster* species will "shimmy" at low temperatures or when generally debilitated. A water depth of no more than 6 1/3 inches is all that is required for the breeding tank.

The banded gourami (*Colisa fasciata*) is also confusingly known as the giant gourami — a title also (and more deservedly) given to the true giant among gouramis, *Osphronemus gorami*. This is the largest *Colisa* species, growing to about 4¾ inches.

It originated from Mayanyar (Burma) and India, but is largely domestically bred now. At a glance this species might be mistaken for the thick-lipped gourami, but closer inspection reveals a quite different fish.

The body of the male is vertically patterned with steel-blue bar markings. This same color is more vividly carried with a fiery red edging in the anal fin. Spots of blue decorate the dorsal fin, and are joined by red spots in the tail.

Adequate feeding is a priority necessary for success. Underfed fish waste down rapidly and are not easily restored to good, well-bodied form again.

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