

A Banjo Catfish Story

Because banjo cats, members of the South American family Aspredinidae, are nocturnal by nature, you may never see them eat.

By Ginny Eckstein

Q. I thought you'd be interested in a recent experience with my favorite (and only) banjo catfish. After not seeing him for three or four days in my 55-gallon tank, I figured that he had somehow become trapped in a deep narrow hole in a piece of driftwood. Sure enough, there he was, stuck in the hole and devoid of life. I tried shaking the cat out, but his fins were wedged against the sides of the hole. I couldn't reach him with anything so I tried flushing him out. No go. I finally removed the slate from the bottom of the driftwood and, after much shaking and flushing and poking, he fell out of the hole and into the sink strainer. I reassembled the slate to the driftwood and was about to hold services for my banjo catfish when he moved his tail. I put him back into the tank and he just sort of fell to the bottom and didn't move. The next day he was back in the hole in the driftwood again. Since then, he makes himself known every couple of days or so.

I don't know if there are any lessons to be learned here, but I believe that the banjo catfish has nine lives. I'll finish this with a question. What does this catfish eat? I am missing no fish, I keep plastic plants in the tank (so he can't be a vegetarian) and other than an occasional food tablet, I have never seen him eat. He sure does conserve energy though, as he seldom moves.

A. Before I trade banjo catfish stories with you, I'll try to answer your question. What does this fish eat? Almost anything in the aquarium (worms, flakes, freeze-dried foods, tablet foods) that it can find during its "normal" feeding time. What does that mean? Because banjo cats, members of the South American family Aspredinidae, are nocturnal by nature, I'm not surprised that you've never seen him eat. He does his foraging in the dark, and no, he's not a predator, which is why you're not missing any fish. Hopefully, you're remembering him, and any other catfish in the tank, by feeding after you turn the tank lights off.

I agree about the amazing resiliency — what you call having "nine lives" — of the banjo cats. Now, because I listened to your experience, you have to hear about mine! Every winter I go to Tampa, Florida, to judge in the Florida Tropical Fish Farmer's Association show. Naturally, while vacationing I have to check out what's available to the hobby in Florida. (I think all hardcore hobbyists visit pet shops when away from home — you can never tell, you might find something "different!")

Elwyn Segrest, owner of Segrest Farms, invited me over to see his establishment. How could I resist? While I was there (a very impressive high-tech operation) I saw a tank of newly imported "banjo cats." Contained therein were some "strange" banjos — different than the others. An Agmus, the craggy headed banjo, a Platyistacus/Aspredo, the whip-tailed banjo cat, and something else that I couldn't identify at the time (it turned out to be an Amaralia, a very rare and obscure species). Of course I wanted them, and I was even more thrilled when the three fish were given to me as a gift! I could hardly wait to get back to New York.

Okay, I know you're wondering what's the point, what does this have to do with the nine lives theory? Simply this. My flight back to New York was not direct — I had to change planes in Washington, DC. The Long Island airport, where my car was parked, was fogged in. This is where my nightmare began.

Landing at the wrong airport isn't thrilling. Finding out that you have no luggage can be disconcerting, but realizing that my fish box (containing the strange banjos) was missing made me crazy! Keep my clothes please, just return my fish! The thought of my rare catfish being left behind at nearly midnight on a cold winter's night in March nearly made me ill.

The airline was very supportive. My luggage wasn't lost, it was merely left in DC. They'd return it the next day directly to my home. Some 20 hours later, I received my luggage. I felt my heart sink as I opened my fish box. The thin sheets of ice floating in each bag did nothing to help my anxiety. In turn, I peered into each ice-cold bag. No signs of respiration were evident in any of the fishes. I turned each bag upside down and watched the stiff corpses float belly up in their glacial tombs.

I'm not sure there's an adequate word to describe my feelings at that moment. Totally distraught, I carried the styrofoam fish box down into my basement fish room. I placed the box on the floor. I would return later, when I was better able to cope with my feelings, to make some notes before I preserved their bodies in formaldehyde.

Some 4½ hours later, with pen in hand, I went to examine my specimens. Picking up the first bag, I was sure my mind was playing tricks on me. Were there now slight signs of respiration in the thawed body? I looked at both of the other bags...signs of life in each...impossible...those fish were at least partially frozen, and totally dead...I've lost my mind. My rate of respiration was increasing. Could they possibly live? With fingers crossed, I moved each body into a separate 5-gallon tank. The Platystacus actually moved in a feeble attempt to swim.

All I could think of was if these fishes were merely "suspended" somehow, and certainly not dead, they would die of the super case of ich I was sure they would develop. I added no medication to their tanks because I don't believe in treating prophylactically. (Medications always add to the stress of an already weakened fish — that's why you should always increase the aeration in a tank while medicating.)

A happy ending. One week later all three fish were eating, and not one showed any ill effects from it's chilling experience! You don't have to convince me that banjo cats are extremely hardy!