

Synodontis Catfishes

A look at some of the species that are available to hobbyists and tips on their care.

By Lee Finley

In another article, I presented a brief overview of some of the basic principles for maintaining Synodontis catfishes in the aquarium. Now I would like to introduce a few of the various species that are available to hobbyists.

All Synodontis catfishes originate from Africa. There are three areas of that continent where the majority of Synodontis seen in the hobby come from: West Africa (mainly Nigeria), Zaire (the "Congo") and the rift lakes. I will discuss briefly, by geographical origin, some of the more than 100 species in this genus. Although there is only space to deal with a small number of these fish, I hope you will have at least a better understanding about some of these fascinating catfishes. (Note: All sizes given are in total length [TL], which is the full length of the fish including the tail fin.)

West Africa

We begin with those species that are usually sold under the trade name of "lace cats." A great many of the Synodontis imported for the hobby are included in this group, which is basically a potpourri of Synodontis species. Most of them display varying patterns of spots on the body, and at the smaller sizes usually imported it is difficult (often impossible) to correctly assign a species name.

Many of these fish are rather unknown both to science and the hobby, making it very difficult to identify them, even as adults, by their appearance. Suffice it to say that most of these fish will get considerably larger than the 2- to 3-inch (5- to 8-centimeter) sizes they are commonly imported at. Most tend to be of fairly mellow disposition and generally make interesting inhabitants of a community or Synodontis aquarium.

Synodontis gambiensis is one of the more recognizable species that is seen regularly mixed in with shipments of catfish from the group above. It is easily spotted among such imports because it is a solid gray-colored fish. The ventral region is whitish. Other identifying characteristics include whitish barbels and a somewhat indistinct dark band on each lobe of the caudal (tail) fin.

In the wild, this species reaches more than a foot (30 centimeters) in length, but it usually stays somewhat smaller in the aquarium. *S. gambiensis* can be somewhat aggressive, especially when it gets to larger sizes. However, as long as suitable hiding places are provided and only tankmates of similar temperament are included, no major problems are likely to occur.

Synodontis ocellifer was, at one time, a fairly rare fish in the hobby. What was once a fish shipped accidentally with other Synodontis is now imported separately in fairly decent numbers.

The base color of this species is a light gray (sometimes with yellowish overtones) and the body is decorated with a varying number of large, round black spots. In many larger individuals, the center of each spot exhibits a lighter area that forms an ocelli ("eye-like") pattern, which gives this species its scientific name. The fins, especially in smaller individuals, show a pattern of darker spot/band-like markings. As the fish grows these tend to soften in appearance, although the caudal and anal fins will usually retain this pattern.

In the wild, *S. ocellifer* can reach the rather substantial size of almost 20 inches (51 centimeters), but like many larger species, it tends to remain smaller in captivity. Its overall disposition is relatively mild mannered, but, as is often the case, there may be exceptions to this. If kept with fish of similar size and temperament, *S. ocellifer* makes an attractive and peaceful addition to your aquarium.

Synodontis eupterus is, to my mind, one of the most outstanding of the Synodontis catfishes. Although it is not especially notable for its coloration (a base gray-yellow to gray violet with darker markings in the form of winding lines in the young and small spots in the adult), the finnage, especially the dorsal, is what catches the eye. This fish well deserves its common name: feather fin Synodontis. The dorsal fin, even in many juveniles, shows a distinct feathering. As the fish grows, this is additionally accentuated by increased prolongations of the soft rays, along with the accompanying membrane. The dorsal spine also shows similar extension with the growth of the fish.

S. eupterus, which can grow to approximately 10 inches (25 centimeters), is not a particularly aggressive species and

generally does well in a mixed group of fishes. I have also maintained a species tank with just this fish without experiencing any major problems. The one caution is that because of the prominent dorsal fin, it is probably best to avoid placing this species with fish that might tend to be fin nippers.

Zaire

Some Suggested Reading for Information on Synodontis Catfishes

Burgess, W. E. 1989. An Atlas of Freshwater and Marine Catfishes: A Preliminary Survey of the Siluriformes. T.F.H. Publications.

Ferraris, C. 1991. Catfish in the Aquarium. Tetra Press.

Loiselle, P. V. (ed.) Catfishes and Loaches. Aquarium Digest International: 47/48. (This magazine was later issued by Tetra as a hardcover book under the title Catfishes and Loaches — The Bottom Dwellers.)

Sands, D. 1986. A Fishkeeper's Guide to African and Asian Catfishes. Tetra Press. This area of Africa provides by far the largest number of species of Synodontis to the hobby. Among these are some of the most attractive and desirable members of the genus. If you become interested in Synodontis, you will definitely want to know more about the species from this geographical location. In the limited space here, I can cover only a few of them.

One in particular — a small, "common" Synodontis — can be considered the standard bearer for the genus. *Synodontis nigriventris* is without doubt the most popular and widespread (in aquariums) of the Synodontis catfishes. This popularity is certainly not as a result of its color. The base color is generally brown, with small darker spots scattered on the body and head. Two broad bands of lighter color may be seen on the body to the front and rear of the adipose fin.

Although this description does seem rather somber, the whole presentation of color and pattern is actually quite attractive. However, what has made this fish so popular is its swimming habits. Most of its time is spent in the inverted position. This habit of swimming upside down has helped make *S. nigriventris* a standard of the hobby since its introduction into the United States in the early 1950s.

If you have never kept any of the Synodontis, this is the species that I would suggest you start with. It is commonly available and reasonably priced. One point, however, needs to be stressed. In the wild, *S. nigriventris* is found in large schools that often consist of thousands of individuals. Consequently, it will not be a very happy fish if maintained alone. Survive? Sure. Thrive? No.

I would recommend purchasing this fish in groups of at least three to five individuals. In this way, they can live more naturally and their schooling behavior combined with their inverted aquatic acrobatics will offer you many hours of pleasure.

This species is also one of the few in the genus to have been bred in the aquarium. Its small size (under 4 inches [10 centimeters]) makes it a more likely candidate for aquarists whose interests run toward spawning their fishes.

Another species, *Synodontis angelicus*, was, for many years, "the" fish of the hobby. There were pictures of it in numerous books and magazines, but the fish itself was very rare — and very expensive. What few specimens did arrive in the hobby were generally priced in the \$200 to \$300 range. Well, I'm very happy to report that this is no longer the case. While dealers are certainly not giving them away these days, *S. angelicus* is now available in sufficient quantities to make its price range (which is somewhat size dependent) much more appealing.

The "classic" *S. angelicus* is a jet black fish with numerous whitish spots scattered over the head and body. Quite a few variations of this fish are known. Some display spots of a yellow or bluish coloration. In some individuals, thin winding bands of a similar color may be noted. Individuals with a brown base color may also be seen from time to time. One specimen I maintained for a number of years displayed pale orange spots.

S. angelicus can reach a length of almost 10 inches (25 centimeters), but this would have to be considered a very large individual. In terms of behavior and temperament, this species should be considered to have the potential to be very territorial. As a result, it can create significant problems in a tank, especially at larger sizes. You should keep this in mind when considering this beautiful species.

Synodontis contractus is a small species (4 inches [10 centimeters]) and one of my personal favorites. It is somewhat similar in appearance to *S. nigriventris* but has a generally more thickset body and "chunky" build. Like *S. nigriventris*, it will spend a good amount of its time in the inverted position and is also a schooling species.

In the wild, this species is known to feed heavily on algae, so the addition of this or other vegetable foods to its diet is strongly recommended. With its small adult size and other similarities to *S. nigriventris*, this species offers good potential for someone wishing to try their hand at spawning a *Synodontis* species.

Synodontis decorus is one of the most magnificent of the *Synodontis* species! It is hard to find a more stunning sight than that of an adult *S. decorus* swimming in an aquarium with its long, black dorsal fin trailer flowing behind. When seeing this species at the smaller sizes they are usually imported at, they are quite attractive, but this is merely a hint of the beauty to come.

Believe me, it is well worth the investment and time needed to raise one or more of these beauties. I have raised a number of *S. decorus* from 2- or 3-inch imports to adults of 12 to 13 inches (30 to 33 centimeters) — in suitably large tanks, of course — and the results were certainly worth the effort.

This is one species that you definitely want to keep away from potential fin nippers. The long dorsal trailer can be a prime target for some cichlids, as well as other species. If damaged, the trailer will regrow; in some instances, if damaged too far down, it may fail to reappear.

Synodontis notatus is not one of the most attractive of the *Synodontis*, but because of its general availability it deserves note here. This species has a gray-brown body color, with the ventral region being white. On the sides there are varying numbers of round, black spots along the midline. There may be as few as one spot per side — usually there are less than five — but on occasion there are more. The numbers of spots on each side of the body do not necessarily match. Very rarely, an individual without spots on one side or the other may be seen.

S. notatus will easily grow to 10 inches (25 centimeters) in the aquarium if provided with enough room. It can, on occasion, be fairly aggressive, especially toward others of its own species. There was recently a successful spawning of this species by Georgia aquarist Forrest Jordan.

Rift Lakes

Although most aquarists think of cichlids in connection with the rift lakes of East Africa, there are numerous *Synodontis* as well, such as *S. njassae*. This species, which is native to Lake Malawi, is an ideal *Synodontis* choice for those hobbyists interested in the cichlids of the same lake.

The fish(es) known in the hobby as *S. njassae* really appears to be two species, one of which is apparently undescribed. Both are similar in that they show a silvery-gray background color and have blackish spots on the body. One of the species (which appears to be the real *S. njassae*) is a slimmer fish with many small spots and is usually more commonly seen. The other fish has a higher body and the spots are usually larger in size and less in number.

As noted above, these catfish are suitable inhabitants of Malawi cichlid tanks. The water conditions maintained for the cichlids are also excellent for the catfish. *S. njassae* is generally active enough to stay out of the way of the often aggressive cichlids. This *Synodontis* appears to prefer the company of its own kind, so it would be a good idea to try to keep at least two together in a tank.

Synodontis multipunctatus is native to Lake Tanganyika and therefore also a suitable inhabitant for rift lake cichlid tanks. *S. multipunctatus* is one of the most popular of the *Synodontis* catfishes. This popularity started with those aquarists who kept cichlids from Lakes Tanganyika and Malawi and has spread widely from that base.

This species is quite attractive. The base body color is a pleasant copper color. Newly imported fish (and those less happy with their aquarium environment) tend to show a base color of white with only a hint of copper. The body and head are spotted. The fins are especially attractive. Notably, the dorsal, pectorals and caudal fin show a pattern of dark edged by white. This pattern (body and fins) is not unique to this species. Other closely related species from the lake (*S. polli*, *S. petricola*, *S. dhonti* and so on) are somewhat similar in appearance.

S. multipunctatus is a schooling species and should not be kept individually in a tank. The other species mentioned above tend to be less social in their habits. By obtaining a few *S. multipunctatus* and keeping them with mouthbrooding lake cichlids, you will be pleasantly surprised.

The surprise is baby *S. multipunctatus*! This species is by far the most commonly spawned (in captivity) *Synodontis*. What makes them unique is that they will spawn in conjunction with the cichlids and that the female cichlids will then incubate the catfish eggs along with their own. There is not enough room here to go into detail, but do be aware that it can and does happen.

In the wild, *S. multipunctatus* feed heavily on snails. This food is not a necessity in the aquarium as they will adapt to a wide variety of foods. But should you happen to have access to snails, it wouldn't hurt to put some into a tank containing this species.

Space considerations dictate that this article must come to a close. I have barely scratched the surface in regards to this interesting group of catfishes. I do hope that I've provided at least some useful information on *Synodontis* and strongly suggest that if you haven't kept them before, consider doing so now. I think you will receive as much enjoyment from them as I have.