

African Cichlids: *Cyprichromis microlepidotus*

African cichlid, *Cyprichromis microlepidotus*, from Great Rift Valley Lake Tanganyika.

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Cyprichromis microlepidotus will fill more of a middle-of-the-water-column niche than will the other, smaller cichlid species also being kept in this setup.

Cichlids from Lake Tanganyika come in all shapes and sizes. In this vast lake, the open waters obviously provide the largest habitat. Not surprisingly, dozens of cichlid species have evolved to take advantage of this habitat where the primary food source apart from fishes is plankton. *Cyprichromis microlepidotus* (Poll, 1956) has evolved to feed in the open water near rocky outcrops. This species of cichlid occurs at depths of 35 to 130 feet in the northern part of the lake.

In the lake females and subdominant males are found in large shoals feeding in the open water. Here these fish feed mainly on copepods and other zooplankton that abounds in the lake.

Natural History

Cyprichromis microlepidotus has a torpedo-shaped body, with a long-based dorsal fin that extends over a large part of the back, a shorter-based anal fin and a large, indented caudal fin. The conical snout holds a protrusible mouth that is large when fully extended while this fish is feeding.

Given its wide distribution, several color variants have been recorded and been named after the location of their capture. Some of these variants that are available from time to time include those from Mabilibili, Magara, Bulu Point, Kiriza, Karilani and Kasai. While *C. microlepidotus* from Bulu Point have a yellow-colored body and caudal fin with blue dorsal and anal fins; those from Magara have a lot of blue color in the body. The Kasai variant have a reddish brown body and anal fin tinged in blue with blue dorsal and anal fins. Female fish are generally lighter brown in color and have less of the blue highlights. Male fish can get to more than 312 inches in total length, while female fish remain a little smaller.

Sexing Them

In the home aquarium, it is obviously not possible to maintain large shoals of *C. microlepidotus*. In the Tanganyikan biotope aquarium that has been developing via this column, the most that one could hope for, even though these cichlids are not aggressive, is one male and three or four females.

When looking at subadults at your local fish store, you should be able to differentiate between male and female fish since this species is sexually dimorphic. The male fish are the more colorful and flamboyant fish in the aquarium, which is noticeable if one watches the fish quietly from a distance for a few minutes. This can be picked up even in the crowded tank of the local fish store where these type of fish could be washed out, showing little color.

Rift Lake Setup Recap

The pair of *N. brevis* cichlids has taken up residence in the shells placed in one corner at the front of the aquarium, making for good observation of their antics.

At the other end of the aquarium, female *Altolamprologus compressiceps* have shown some interest in the larger shells placed at the front of the aquarium, but they also seem attracted to the pile of rock arranged to provide lots of narrow crevices.

Cyprichromis microlepidotus are open-water cichlids that like to swim in the water column. However, they are usually found near rocky outcrops, where the male sometimes, but not always, likes to establish a spawning territory. In order to offer the male this option, a tall piece of slate that is at least 6 inches wide and 24 inches tall is placed to form a near-vertical pillar leaning at a slight angle against the back of the aquarium. Burying the slate bottom in the 3-inch coral gravel sandbed ensures it stays in place.

The group of *C. microlepidotus* are fairly peaceful fish, and they should not trouble the other cichlid species that occupy different regions of this aquarium. They should settle in quite quickly in this Tanganyikan cichlid biotope aquarium. Like other fishes from Lake Tanganyika, *C. microlepidotus* is sensitive to nitrogenous waste in the water. While the more dangerous ammonia and nitrites are usually efficiently removed from the water by the external canister filter, nitrates can only be removed by regular 10 percent water changes.

Diet

In the wild, *C. microlepidotus* feed primarily on copepods, but in the aquarium they will take most fish foods that are offered, including flake foods. But their diet should include weekly feedings of some live or frozen foods, such as brine shrimp, mosquito larvae, *Daphnia* and bloodworms. Cichlid granules rich in chlorophyll and carotenoids will help them to maintain their colors. On such a diet *C. microlepidotus* are likely to stay healthy and active and should come into spawning condition.

Territories

In the wild, male *C. microlepidotus* usually establish their 3-D mating territories in the open water column with females entering the male's territory after being attracted by the male's displays to spawn in the water column. The female *C. microlepidotus* usually deposits its entire clutch of around nine eggs on average in one male's territory, which are then immediately picked up by the female in its mouth. The female then repeatedly approaches the male and nuzzles it near its anal fin. The male releases sperm that is picked up by the female to fertilize the eggs in its mouth. Females incubating eggs are known to congregate together in the water column.

In the aquarium, without the benefit of huge water columns, the male *C. microlepidotus* will usually elect to use the vertical slate surface as its spawning territory. The male spends a lot of its time, when not feeding, trying to entice female fish by flaring its fins and dancing in front of them to come over to the spawning site.

The eggs are comparatively large and clutch sizes are therefore small. Incubation of the eggs in the female's buccal cavity, where the eggs and fry are constantly rotated and have fresh water continuously passing over them, lasts about 21 days. The released free-swimming fry are each about one half of an inch long.

Fry released in this aquarium could well fall victim to *Altolamprologus compressiceps* and should be removed if possible to another aquarium for rearing. The fry will take brine shrimp nauplii, Cyclops, small *Daphnia* or powdered dry food, which should be fed to them at least twice a day.

Final Thoughts

Cyprichromis microlepidotus is a nice addition to this Tanganyikan biotope cichlid community, as they mostly occupy the open waters of the aquarium. They are a different shape and color and also swim differently from the other cichlids in the aquarium.

Additionally, they bring a new, interesting concept of fry care to the aquarium — maternal mouthbrooding — where developing fry are carried by their mother in the buccal cavity within its mouth. Only when the fry are fully formed and comparatively large are they released to the outside world. *Cyprichromis microlepidotus* are becoming available more often either at local fish stores or via fish societies and make an interesting cichlid to have in this aquarium. Next Page>>