

African Cichlids: *Neolamprologus gracilis*

African cichlid, *Neolamprologus gracilis*, from Great Rift Valley Lake Tanganyika.

Text and Photos by Iggy Tavares, Ph.D.

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With a maximum size of 3 inches and a mild temperament, the white-tailed brichardi is an ideal aquarium cichlid. White-tailed brichardi are not difficult to feed. They accept quality flake food, cichlid granules and other "treats."

Neolamprologus gracilis, commonly called the white-tailed brichardi and sometimes the graceful lamprologus, belongs to the *Neolamprologus* group that includes *N. brichardi*, *N. pulcher*, *N. falcicula*, *N. christyi* and *N. marunguensis* (often referred to as fairy cichlids).

The white-tailed brichardi is found around Kampamba, Zaire, on the west coast of Lake Tanganyika and near Kibwesa, Tanzania, on the east coast. Here, its preferred habitat is the rocky coastline at depths ranging from 30 to 60 feet. *Neolamprologus gracilis* are primarily zooplankton-feeders, but they will also pick at aufwuchs with its rich content of crustaceans.

Compared to the stockier *N. brichardi*, the white-tailed brichardi is a slender fish. Adults develop long, flowing dorsal, anal and caudal fins that are edged in white. In the wild, some individuals have been seen with caudal fins almost as long as the body length of the fish.

These cichlids are generally tan, with each scale on the torso having a darker highlight, which forms a nice spotted pattern. This spotted pattern is also found in the dorsal, anal and caudal fins. Their blue-rimmed eyes stand out on the pale body and are further highlighted by a thin blue line under each eye. The white-tailed brichardi lacks the distinctive black markings found on the gill plates and the dark bar that runs from the mouth to the gill cover that is on *N. brichardi*, making it easier to distinguish these species.

The white-tailed brichardi only grows to some 3 inches total length and is an ideal cichlid for the aquarium, because it is relatively mild-mannered, as cichlids go. Both males and females grow long, flowing fins, making them difficult to tell apart.

A pair of white-tailed brichardi should fit rather well in an already established Tanganyikan cichlid community aquarium. The problem is trying to pick up a male-female pair. An experienced aquarist might be able to tell a male and female apart by capturing the fish and examining their genitalia. I generally depend on behavior within the holding tank, such as male and female fish hanging out together (subadult females in a holding tank usually do not show too much interest in each other) or two males acting aggressively toward each other.

The age-old option is to buy four to six subadult fish, from which a pair should sort itself out. This could happen within a few days if the fish are sexually mature, or it might take a few months for the fish to become mature. Quite often, once a pair has formed, even these mild-mannered white-tailed brichardi will drive the rest of their kind away from their territory while largely ignoring the other species in the aquarium. It is best to remove the unpaired fish as soon as this happens to avoid them getting injured. Your local fish store should take these fish back if you agreed to this at the time of purchase.

The Aquarium

Over the months before purchasing the white-tailed brichardi, set up the Tanganyikan cichlid biotope aquarium. Put a layer of gravel and coral sand on the base, and overlay it with two groups of *Neothauma* snail shells at opposite corners of the aquarium near the front. This makes for easy observation of the pair of *Neolamprologus brevis* and their family in one group of shells and *Altolamprologus compressiceps* that are occasional inhabitants of the other shell group. These fish also frequent the adjacent group of rocks behind the shells. Place a long, narrow piece of slate so that it rises to the water surface in the center of the aquarium. This will benefit the group of *Cyprichromis microlepidotus* that are also housed in this community.

White-tailed brichardi, coming from a rocky biotope, need caves where they can set up homes and raise their young. Unlike *A. compressiceps* that favor cramped cracks, *N. gracilis* look for relatively roomy "apartments" that both parents can swim in and out of. Another pile of rocks should be arranged to form large caves. A good place to put this pile of rocks is probably near the slate and away from the quarters of the *A. compressiceps*. Then it is time to add the group of *N. gracilis* and let nature take its course. It could be several weeks before a pair emerges from the group. Sometimes, a trio

consisting of one male and two females might decide to set up a home together. One does need to keep an eye out for the ejected *N. gracilis*, which may need to be netted out.

Another possible problem could arise between the newly introduced *N. gracilis* and the shell-dwelling *N. brevis*, particularly if the two groups are too close together. If necessary, both the slate and the abode of the *N. gracilis* can be moved a few inches away from the shells that the *N. brevis* reside in. Hopefully, there should not be too many problems, given the 24-inch width of this aquarium, which places the two abodes 2 feet apart. In any case, a few minor skirmishes do make for a more interesting aquarium.

Keep these fish in hard, alkaline water (dH 12 to 18, pH 7.5 to 8.5) set at a temperature of around 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The aquarium should be at least 120 gallons and maintained in pristine condition with a large external filter and weekly 10-percent water changes.

Neolamprologus gracilis will happily settle down to the diet that the other fish have been taking. This includes a good-quality flake food and cichlid granules with weekly treats of some live or frozen foods, such as brine shrimp, mosquito larvae, *Daphnia* or bloodworms.

Breeding

Once a male and female *N. gracilis* pair has bonded, they will soon set about spawning and produce fry in this large and spacious aquarium. Their spawning site will usually be a cave among the rocks where both the male and female can enter. On occasion, they might elect to use a large empty shell as their abode. The observant hobbyist might see some pre-spawning behavior prior to the first spawning that consists of fin-flaring displays and perhaps even some jaw-locking.

The female usually lays eggs on the roof of the cave, where the male then fertilizes them. While the female fish does most of the egg care, the male patrols outside, deterring other fish from coming close to the spawning site. The eggs hatch within two to three days but take several more days before they are free-swimming and make an appearance at the cave entrance under strict attendance by both parents. The fry are big enough to take freshly hatched brine shrimp nauplii and also other fine foods fed in moderation.

The fry will hang around their parent's cave and help defend subsequent broods that their parents produce by taking on intruders 10 times their size.

A pair of *N. gracilis* adds a new facet to this Tanganyikan cichlid aquarium, not only in terms of good looks but also in their behavior from the way they swim to the way they breed. These pretty cichlids utilize a different niche among the rocks and should fit in with the other cichlids already in the tank, though there may be some squabbling at the beginning. Next Page>>