

African Cichlids: *Ophthalmotilapia ventralis*

African cichlid, *Ophthalmotilapia ventralis*, from Great Rift Valley Lake Tanganyika.

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Female *Ophthalmotilapia ventralis* grow to about 5.5 inches.

Ophthalmotilapia ventralis has a large distribution in Lake Tanganyika, which has resulted in many color variations at different locations that are isolated from each other. The general male body coloration can be a metallic sky blue, black, yellow or even green, depending on their location. Also, these males may show white, black or orange markings on their bodies, giving rise to interesting names, such as "Bright Blue" (blue body with irregular black spots on the sides), "Orange Cap" (blue body with orange on top of the head), "White Cap" (charcoal black body with white markings) and the "Yellow" (yellowish or greenish body).

Mature male fish have elongated ventral fins that can extend as far as the caudal fin. These fins have yellow lappets at their tips, which give rise to their popular name of feather fin cichlids. Dorsal, anal and caudal fins are also slightly elongated in the male and are often the same color as the body. The female fish are generally a silver-gray color, perhaps with a hint of the male coloration. Ventral fins in female fish are not as elongated as those of male fish. The relatively deep-bodied male *O. ventralis* can grow to 6 inches in size, while females will stay smaller at around 5.5 inches.

Ophthalmotilapia ventralis are generally found in the transitional zone between the rocky shores and the sandy bottom around the coastline of Lake Tanganyika. While female fish spend a lot of time in shoals up in the water column feeding on plankton, dominant male fish defend territories high up among the rocks but also lower down on flat rocks. These cichlids do not build elaborate nests in the wild but appear to like having some sand strewn across the spawning site.

In the aquarium, a male *O. ventralis* is always trying to energetically persuade female fish to spawn. This would be too much for just one female fish to cope with, so purchase one male and at least three females. It is easy to tell male and female fish apart, even with subadults.

Tanganyikan Setup

The 48-by-24-by-24-inch, 120-gallon aquarium has a mixed fine gravel coral sand base with two groups of shells at opposite corners of the aquarium, which house *Neolamprologus brevis* and *Altolamprologus compressiceps*, the latter also having the option to use adjacent rocks that provide narrow cracks. The group of *Cyprichromis microlepidotus* uses the upright piece of slate rising to the water surface to spawn on, while a pair of *Neolamprologus gracilis* lives in the rock pile arranged centrally near the piece of slate.

A 6-inch square piece of slate on the substrate in the middle of the aquarium near the front, sprinkled with sand, is the territory of the male *O. ventralis*. Include three or four taller rocks to break up the fish-eye view of the male *O. ventralis*, so that female fish are not always visible when the male is at his nest. More rockwork around the back and sides of the aquarium provide additional spawning sites for the *C. microlepidotus* and extra cover for mouthbrooding female cichlids that want to take cover behind them.

Add some Java ferns attached to some of the rocks to deter the male *O. ventralis* from using the top of the rock piles as a spawning site. This also offers extra cover for female fish and fish fry. The male *O. ventralis* cichlid is unaggressive toward other species in the tank. All the male *O. ventralis* is interested in is his nest (which hopefully is the horizontal slab of slate on the substrate) and attracting females to it. There might be trouble if the male *O. ventralis* does decide to use the vertical piece of slate belonging to the male *C. microlepidotus*, but it will soon sort itself out, as this slimmer fish will usually not stay around to fight. Hopefully, each species stays with its planned habitat.

Ophthalmotilapia ventralis cichlids will do well in alkaline and hard water (pH 7.5 to 8.5; dH 12 to 18) at 75 degrees Fahrenheit, which is close enough to the natural conditions in Lake Tanganyika. Water conditions in the aquarium need to be kept pristine with good filtration and water changes. Feather fins accept most fish foods and do well if offered a varied diet that contains some live or frozen insect larvae and crustaceans.

Breeding

Having established a territory, the mature male *O. ventralis* will try to attract a female *O. ventralis* to his domain. He rushes out to greet a prospective female with his fins erect and then returns to the nest, hoping the female will follow. A gravid

female will follow the male; they slowly circle each other as the male flutters his fins.

Finally, egg-laying begins, with the female depositing a few eggs in the nest, which she then picks up. The eggs are fertilized on the next circle when the female mouths the yellow lappets on the end of the male's ventral fins. This stimulates the male to release sperm. Spawning can continue for up to an hour with occasional interruptions when the male rushes out to chase any intruder that gets too close. Ten to 60 eggs may be laid, depending on the size and maturity of the female.

The mouthbrooding female then tries to take cover away from the male, while the young develop in the safety of the female's buccal cavity. The female might continue to feed on small particles during the incubation phase in order to maintain her strength. The female holds developing fry for up to three weeks, after which they are usually released at the water surface, where they initially form a tight group that moves together as one. The fry disperse at the threat of danger. The fry are big enough to take brine shrimp but also accept other small foods and grow fast. To raise a good number of fry, the brooding female can be moved to a separate aquarium some two weeks after spawning takes place.

Tanganyikan Biotope Completed

The elegant and colorful male *O. ventralis* with female companions completes this Tanganyikan cichlid aquarium. This aquarium offers a small window to observe the behavior of each species individually and also to see their interaction with other species within their community. With the last additions complete, things do not stop as the mixed cichlid community continues to evolve as the various cichlid species spawn. As in Lake Tanganyika, many of the fry will fall victim to predation, but hopefully enough will survive to add more interest to this Tanganyikan cichlid aquarium community. [Back to Page 1](#)>>