

The Cichlids of Lake Malawi: Otopharynx

Some of these, some of those.

By Mark Smith

The genus *Otopharynx* contains a somewhat mixed bag of cichlids. Many pick invertebrates from the rocks or sand, while others are predatory, feeding primarily on small fish.

These Malawi haplochromines are distinguished from other non-mbuna in having two to three black spots on the flanks. One is directly over or just below the upper lateral line in about the midsection of the body. A second is in the middle or upper part of the body just below the end of the dorsal fin. The third spot, if there is one, is located at the base of the tail fin. While members of the *Hemilapia* and *Trematocranus* genera also have this spotted arrangement, in *Otopharynx* the spots do not reach onto the back as they do in the other two genera.

Otopharynx species differ from *Ctenopharynx*, which also share a similar melanin (black) pattern, in having fewer gill rakers or small teeth-like extensions on the back edge of the gills that enable them to sift tiny organisms from out of the sand. And their teeth and jaws are less developed for preying on fish than *Stigmatochromis* and *Exochochromis*. These are a lot of subtle differences that will not matter a whole lot to most people, but are helpful in setting the genus *Otopharynx* apart from the rest of the haplochromines of Lake Malawi.

Under closer scrutiny, the current classification of the genus *Otopharynx* may, in the future, require the removal of some species and perhaps even the erection of a new genus or two. A case in point is the species *O. selenurus*, a solid blue-colored species with several black vertical bands running the length of the body, and a crescent-shaped tail fin. Its appearance makes it clearly the least *Otopharynx*-like member of the group.

Perhaps the most well-known species of *Otopharynx* is one that has been around for well over 20 years. It was undescribed when it first arrived in the hobby, and was given various trade names like "electric blue II" or *Haplochromis pleurospilus* or the better known "red top" *Aristochromis*.

References

- Eccles, D. H. and E. Trewavas. 1989. Malawian Cichlid Fishes. The Classification of Some Haplochromis Genera. Lake Fish Movies, Herten, Germany. Pp. 334.
- Konings, A. 1991. The blue sanddwellers. In *The Cichlids Yearbook*, Vol. 1., Ad Konings, ed. Cichlid Press. St. Leon-Rot, Germany. Pp. XX.
- Konings, A. 1993. *Enjoying Cichlids*. Cichlid Press. St. Leon-Rot, Germany. Pp. 140.
- Konings, A. 1995. *Malawi Cichlids in Their Natural Habitat*. 2nd Edition. Cichlid Press, St. Leon-Rot, Germany. Pp. 352.
- Smith, M. 1994. *Otopharynx lithobates* from Lake Malawi. *Cichlid News* X(X):24-25.
- Spreinat, A. 1995. *Lake Malawi Cichlids From Tanzania*. Unitext Verlag, Gottingen, Germany. Pp. 316.
- Turner, G. F. 1996. *Offshore Cichlids of Lake Malawi*. Cichlid Press, Lauenau, Germany. Pp. 240.

In 1984, Oliver described it in an unpublished thesis at Yale University, officially giving it the designation of *Cyrtocara lithobates*. Possibly as a result of the rules of zoological nomenclature at the time, the name was not officially recognized. In 1989, when Eccles and Trewavas published their revision of the non-mbuna haplochromines of Lake Malawi, the fish was placed in the genus *Otopharynx*. However, to this day the species is more well-known as "red top *Aristochromis*."

Otopharynx lithobates has a restricted distribution, being found only at the Nankhumba peninsula and all the islands that radiate from it. The first variant to come into the hobby — with a red/orange edge to the dorsal fin — is found from Domwe Island southward along the eastern side of the peninsula to Monkey Bay. At most other locations in and around the peninsula, the dorsal fin has a white edge.

At Zimbabwe (not Zimbabwe) Rock, however, which is located a few hundred yards north of Domwe Island, a yellow dorsal variant can be found. This variant has only been found at this location, and is in the running for having one of the most restricted distributions of any cichlid in the lake. It is also the most sought after color variant. It made its pictorial debut under an erroneous name in the May 1990 issue of National Geographic, page 49, picture C — the caption incorrectly identifies it as a species of the genus *Copadichromis*.

The Nankhumba peninsula was declared a national park in 1980, and since then the collecting of cichlids from this area has effectively ceased. Fortunately, *O. lithobates* was already established in the hobby and is today easy to obtain.

It is a rather docile species that does quite well in captivity. While it doesn't seem to be as sensitive to water quality as other Malawian haplochromines, you should nevertheless strive to maintain clean water conditions at all times. This is also a slow-growing species, and until the male develops his breeding colors, it is a rather unattractive cichlid.

Because it is a rock-dwelling species in nature, a tank with lots of rockwork is essential. In the wild they feed on zooplankton and whatever small food items they can find on the surface of the large boulders that make up their home.

Another species, *Otopharynx* sp. "*auromarginatus* Magrette," was a very popular Malawi cichlid back in the 1970s and '80s, but seems to have faded from the hobby in recent years. It is commonly known as "*Haplochromis margaretae*" and is found only at Likoma Island. A few years ago it was thought that this species was *O. auromarginatus*, a situation complicated by the fact that this undescribed species was mixed in with scientific samples of the true *O. auromarginatus*.

Females and immature males exhibit the three spots on the flanks characteristic of the melanin pattern of the genus *Otopharynx*. Males in breeding dress are one of the most richly adorned cichlids from the lake. The upper half of the body is a rich purplish blue that gradually transforms to a bold orange on the belly. Many of the blue scales are edged in orange, while the dorsal and tail fins are liberally streaked with orange and blue. The lower half of the head is a metallic green, while the upper half is solid blue. Truly a spectacular fish!

A less well-known species is *Otopharynx* sp. "*blue otter*," which hails from just south of Otter Point on the western side of the Nankhumba peninsula. It inhabits the relatively deep rocky areas and frequents locations with large boulders. This species has been around in the trade intermittently for the past few years, but has yet to become firmly established in the hobby.

Its most distinguishing feature is its somewhat enlarged black ventral fins. Also, the tail fin and the entire lower third of the body are black. The brilliant turquoise green head is set off nicely against a dark blue body.

The "*blue otter*" is best maintained in a tall aquarium with large, smooth stones. Because it is not a particularly aggressive species, it should be maintained with its own kind or with other species that are similar in temperament. Breeding has been reported in captivity and, as long as basic husbandry requirements are met, should not be too difficult.

An undescribed, secretive, predatory species is *Otopharynx* sp. "*cave*," or "*king cave*," as it is sometimes referred to. The name refers to the fact that it frequents cave-like structures in its rocky habitats.

This fish has a large distribution and seems to be found in the northern half of the lake. Like *Stigmatochromis modestus*, it lurks in the shadows of rocks near the nests of the catfish *Bagrus meridionalis*, waiting for an opportune time to lunge and snatch a juvenile catfish.

It is interesting to note the amount of "*traffic*" around a nesting pair of *Bagrus meridionalis*. Several predatory cichlids can generally be seen hanging nearby or moving around the pair, while other cichlids release their young into the midst of the catfish's young for protection. Some cichlids are attracted to the presence of the other cichlids and the resulting activity. It is almost like a portable micro-ecosystem that follows, or appears, whenever a pair of *Bagrus meridionalis* establishes a spawning site.

Otopharynx sp. "*cave*" is rather sensitive to poor water quality and will quickly succumb under such conditions. It should be maintained in a dimly lit aquarium with plenty of rocks piled up to form caves. The diet should include small fish, such as feeder guppies, or any of the high-protein foods on the market. In order for it to thrive in captivity and exhibit its characteristic behaviors, it should be the dominant fish in the aquarium and should never be allowed to be bullied by other tank inhabitants. Because it reaches a length of 8 inches, a large aquarium (minimum of 100 gallons) is recommended for long-term care.

There are two species that have been tentatively placed into the genus *Otopharynx* — *O. sp. "torpedo blue"* (or "*productus*") and *O. sp. "sliver torpedo."* While the melanin pattern of these fishes strongly suggests they should be placed in this genus, only careful analysis will ultimately determine their classification.

Both species are extremely elongated sand dwellers that roam over vast areas. They seem to be very rare — at least they are seldom seen by divers or collectors, and very few are collected for the aquarium trade. A few specimens of *O. sp. "sliver torpedo"* were recently caught, imported to Germany and then reproduced readily. The spawning in Germany has thus far formed the basis of the captive-bred stock currently in the U.S.

This species is quite placid in captivity and is easily bullied by tankmates with even a hint of aggressive tendencies. Therefore, it is best to maintain them in an aquarium by themselves.

Dominant males develop small greenish/yellow specks over a sandy/blue body, while the forehead and upper snout are overlaid with an attractive blue. Females remain silvery, with yellow dorsal, anal and tail fins. It has been reported that this species spawns readily in captivity, provided it is the dominant, or preferably only, species in the aquarium.

Otopharynx sp. "torpedo blue" is essentially a smaller (5 inches maximum), more colorful version of *O. sp. "silver torpedo."* It is definitely a distinct species. However, another species that looks like the "*torpedo blue*," but grows to a much larger size of 8 to 9 inches, has recently been collected in Tanzanian waters. It remains to be seen whether or not this giant is a distinct species or a variant of *O. sp. "silver torpedo."*

In another genus is *Naevochromis chrysogaster*, also known as "*Haplochromis Jack Dempsey.*" It is the only species in its genus, and lacks a clearly defined melanin pattern. However, there are usually three black spots in a diagonal line from the base of the tail fin to the forehead. One or more of these spots may be absent or they may run together to form a crude, rough diagonal band. This, along with a steeply angled mouth and enlarged lower lip, help to easily distinguish this genus from all other Malawi cichlids. Even though Eccles and Trewavas do not speculate as to its diet in nature, Konings suggests it may include fish eggs and larvae in its diet due to its unique mouth structure.

This species does not appear to have made its way into the American hobby, but a few have trickled into Europe over the years. No reports on its temperament are known or whether it has yet to reproduce in captivity. This modest-size species, reaching a length of 7 inches, should make a distinctive new addition to Malawi cichlid tanks if and when it becomes available in any significant numbers.

One of the top five most well-known Lake Malawi cichlids of all time is the blue dolphin (*Cyrtocara moorii*). This species is immediately recognizable by its solid-blue body and its large, bulbous forehead. Wild-caught individuals sport a larger forehead than captive-raised stock. A satisfactory explanation has yet to be discovered for this.

C. moorii was first imported into the hobby back in the 1970s and commanded one of the highest prices of any Malawian cichlid. I've heard that the first specimens to arrive on our shores sold for \$200 each! Today, it is bred by the tens of thousands in Florida and the Far East, and, as a result, it is one of the most inexpensive, common and popular of all the Malawi cichlids.

There could not be a more ideal beginner's cichlid to choose from. It is a very hardy species and readily adapts to all sorts of aquarium foods. If you are looking for a first fish to breed, this species comes highly recommended. It is capable of reproducing at one year of age, and spawns can number up to 200 with large females.

Provided the aquarium is large — approximately 75 to 100 gallons capacity — and has several smooth stones and/or other hiding places, the dominant male will not be overly aggressive toward the females, whether brooding or not. Due to its prolific nature in captivity, I recommend that you acquire wild-caught or first generation stock, or at least that you purchase your specimens from several different sources so as to minimize inbreeding.