

Bad Butterflyfish

There are lots of problems when keeping many species of butterflyfish.

By Scott W. Michael

Q. I own a 55-gallon aquarium and I was looking into butterflyfish (*Chaetodon* spp.) as possible tank residents. Which butterflyfish would be the easiest to maintain? Any suggestions would be very helpful.

A. I appreciate the fact that you're investigating butterflyfish hardiness before going out to purchase one of these beautiful fish. There are about 120 species in 10 genera in the butterflyfish family (*Chaetodontidae*), but I would only consider a handful of these to be suitable for the beginner.

Unfortunately, there are some unscrupulous collectors, wholesalers and retailers who still sell butterflyfishes that will not survive in the home aquarium. This is unfair to the new aquarist, who may not know any better, and to the animal, which is destined to live an abbreviated life. Therefore, hobbyists need to be aware of those species that do not thrive in captivity and refuse to purchase these fish from retailers.

Let's take a brief overview of this group and examine those species that are well suited for captivity and those that must be avoided. The main characteristic that will ultimately determine which species will readily adapt to captive life is diet. Butterflyfishes can be placed in one of several categories based on their food habits. These categories are: obligatory coral feeders, facultative coral feeders, non-coral invertebrate feeders and zooplankton feeders.

The last two groups are best suited for captivity because these species have a greater dietary range and will consume the foods that aquarists normally feed their fish. The members of the facultative coral feeder group fall into various places on the continuum of hardiness (i.e., some are difficult to keep, some are not), whereas members of the first group feed almost exclusively on stony corals and can rarely be switched to aquarium diets.

These are the species that slowly starve to death or succumb to disease as a result of malnutrition. In the accompanying sidebar, I have listed the butterflyfishes that belong to this group.

Butterflyfishes to Avoid

The following butterflyfishes should not be purchased because of their specific dietary needs. All of them are obligatory coral feeders.

Golden-striped butterflyfish (*Chaetodon aureofasciatus*)

Exquisite butterflyfish (*C. austriacus*)

Triangular butterflyfish (*C. baronessa*)

Bennett's butterflyfish (*C. bennetti*)

Orange-face butterflyfish (*C. larvatus*)

Arabian butterflyfish (*C. melapterus*)

Meyer's butterflyfish (*C. meyeri*)

Eight-banded butterflyfish (*C. octofasciatus*)

Ornate butterflyfish (*C. ornatissimus*)

Blue-spot butterflyfish (*C. plebeius*)

Reticulated butterflyfish (*C. reticulatus*)

Oval-spot butterflyfish (*C. speculum*)

Indian Ocean triangular butterflyfish (*C. triangulum*)

Chevroned butterflyfish (*C. trifascialis*)

Redfin butterflyfish (*C. trifasciatus*)

Although feeding behavior is the main factor to consider when choosing a butterflyfish for your tank, some species are also more susceptible to poor water quality, aggressive tankmates and disease. In some species, we also find significant differences in hardiness between individuals. For example, I have had saddlebacked butterflyfish (*Chaetodon ephippium*) that thrived in captivity, while others have refused to eat and slowly died.

These individual differences may be related to how and where the specimen was captured and how it was treated before it was placed in the tank. Also, the age of the specimen may influence its ability to adapt. For the most part, larger specimens do not acclimate as easily as smaller individuals.

Other species, besides *C. ephippium*, that I consider moderately difficult to maintain include the copper-banded butterflyfish (*Chelmon rostratus*), the big long-nosed butterflyfish (*Forcipiger longirostris*), the Philippine butterflyfish (*Chaetodon adiergastos*), the Red Sea raccoon butterflyfish (*C. fasciatus*), the dusky butterflyfish (*C. flavirostris*), the bluestripe butterflyfish (*C. fremblii*), the dot-and-dash butterflyfish (*C. pelewensis*), Merten's pearl-scaled butterflyfish (*C. mertensii*), the latticed butterflyfish (*C. rafflesi*), the dotted butterflyfish (*C. semeion*), the golden butterflyfish (*C. semilarvatus*) and the crowned pearl-scaled butterflyfish (*C. xanthurus*). I would only recommend these species to those aquarists who are more experienced.

As a potential chaetodontid owner, there are a few other things you should be aware of. First, these fish are munching on invertebrates all through the day. Thus, it is best to feed them at least twice or three times (smaller amounts) a day.

Give them a varied diet, which should include seafood (e.g., clam, scallop, squid) that has been thoroughly rinsed and chopped into bite-size morsels, and/or one of the prepared foods on the market that contains an assortment of marine fare. The best choice is one that is supplemented with amino acids and pigments, which aid in health maintenance and color retention.

Of course, proper equipment and good aquarium maintenance are also prerequisites for successful butterflyfish husbandry. Although not absolutely essential for keeping these fish, I would recommend that you employ a trickle filter and a protein skimmer to maintain optimal water quality.

When selecting fish for your tank, remember that most butterflyfishes attain lengths of more than 5 inches. You must leave plenty of room in your aquarium to accommodate an adult specimen.

An aquarist must also be prepared for those parasites that invade butterflyfishes. Unfortunately, there are a number of them, including ich (*Cryptocaryon irritans*), velvet (*Amyloodinium ocellatum*), lymphocystis and the dreaded uronema. Because space does not allow detailed discussion of these diseases, I recommend reading a good book on marine aquarium basics (for example, *The Marine Aquarium Handbook* by Martin Moe) and quarantining all your fish before putting them into your display tank!

The serious butterflyfish keeper will also want to acquire copies of the books *Butterflyfishes and Angelfishes of the World*, volumes I and II. These should be available through your local fish store, although they may have to special order them for you.

Instead of providing you with the name of a single species that is "easy" to keep, I am going to give you a list of species that are well suited for aquarium life. These are: the threadfin (*Chaetodon auriga*), Indian Ocean vagabond (*C. decussatus*), Klein's (*C. kleinii*), raccoon (*C. lunula*), black-backed (*C. melannotus*), Millet seed (*C. miliaris*), double-saddled (*C. ulietensis*), vagabond (*C. vagabundus*), yellow long-nosed (*Forcipiger flavissimus*) and pyramid (*Hemitaurichthys polylepis*) butterflyfishes, as well as the longfin (*Heniochus acuminatus*) and schooling (*H. diphreutes*) bannerfishes.

Bank's butterflyfish (*C. aya*), the Brazilian long-nosed butterflyfish (*Chaetodon* sp.) and Tinker's butterflyfish (*C. tinkeri*) are also very hardy species, but unfortunately, they are rarely found in aquarium stores and command a high price when available. I hope this gives you enough insight to be able to responsibly select a butterflyfish for your aquarium, and I



hope more aquarists are as thoughtful as you are when it comes to making such decisions!