

Fairy Wrasses

What are the fairy wrasses?

By Scott W. Michael

It wasn't that long ago that finding a fairy wrasse in a local retail store was like trying to track down a t-bone steak in a vegan's refrigerator.

Although two or three species may have been available on occasion, they were not common in the ornamental marine fish trade. Now the genus *Cirrhilabrus* (usually called fairy wrasses, but still referred to as velvet wrasses by some) has become important in the reef aquarium hobby. These fish are highly sought-after because of their bright colors, relatively rugged constitutions and the fact that they are not a great threat to sessile invertebrates.

Much has been happening in the world of *Cirrhilabrus* taxonomy, as well. Since I wrote my first article about these fish in 1995, another 12 species have been described by fish experts, while several others await a scientific binomial. That brings the grand total of described fairy wrasses up to 40 species — and counting.

We will look at some fairy wrasses that are “new” to the aquarium trade, although some of these species were available on rare occasions in the past. Thanks to new collecting stations, as well as a demand for these fish, many are now regularly showing up in fish stores. A handful of species have started to become available as recently as last year: the decorated or adorned fairy wrasse (*Cirrhilabrus adornatus*) and the Coral Sea fairy wrasse (*Cirrhilabrus bathyphilus*) for example.

I must thank my friend and colleague Dennis Reynolds (Aquamarines), because if it was not for his keen eye and enthusiasm for these wrasses, this article would not be as complete.

Decorated Fairy Wrasse

This species is known only from Sumatra and the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia. It lives on rubble slopes at depths of 30 to about 100 feet and occurs in loose groups. It is very closely related to the yellowfin fairy wrasse (*C. flavipinnis*). In fact, the females of the two species are virtually indistinguishable. The male *C. adornatus* is white to pale pink overall, with a pair of bright red blotches on the back and a red border on the dorsal fin. This is a smaller member of the genus, attaining a maximum length of about 2 1/2 inches.

This fish is available sporadically. Its small size means that it can be housed in a smaller tank (e.g., 30 gallons). You should feed this wrasse (and other *Cirrhilabrus*) at least once a day (two or three times a day is even better) to ensure it does not become emaciated and subsequently perish. Most foods will be accepted, but a variety of finely chopped fresh seafood (e.g., shrimp, marine fish flesh), frozen mysid shrimp and a good frozen prepared food will help to maintain its colors and good health. Keep only one male per tank, as they will fight. Males may also pick on females if crowded in a small aquarium. Right now, females are not readily collected because males are much more attractive and command a higher price.

Goldback Fairy Wrasse

The goldback fairy wrasse (*C. aurantidorsalis*) is now regularly seen in the aquarium trade, thanks in part to the Banggai cardinalfish (*Pterapogon kauderni*). It turns out that this *Cirrhilabrus* is found along the coast of eastern Sulawesi — the area where *P. kauderni* is collected. The goldback is a medium-size species reaching about 4 inches. It occurs on coastal coral reefs and rubble slopes at depths of about 20 to just over 80 feet. It tends to live in small, loose groups.

This is a good aquarium fish that readily acclimates to captivity. Smaller specimens are easier to ship and acclimate more readily than large males, although males are more common in the trade, due to their bright colors. Males may behave aggressively toward members of their own species and genus. Keep only one male per tank, and if you can acquire one or more females (they are less common in the trade), add them to the tank before or with the male.

Rosy Fin Wrasse

The coral sea or rosy fin fairy wrasse (*C. bathyphilus*) is a magnificent fish that was only recently described (in 2002). It has only been reported from the Coral Sea (specifically around Holmes Reef and the Chesterfield Bank), as well as Vanuatu. There are two distinct male color forms. One has a red head with the red extending all the way along the sides and back. In the other color form, the red is limited to the head (it abruptly ends right before the anal fin origin). This latter form is often referred to as the hooded fairy wrasse and will soon be described as a subspecies of *C. bathyphilus*. These

fish reach a maximum length of about 4 inches.

The coral sea fairy wrasse is a very distinct member of the genus. It has larger eyes than most others, which is apparently an adaptation to its deep-dwelling habits. Most individuals occur at depths of 195 to 715 feet. That said, it has also been observed at depths shallower than 30 feet. Like many fairy wrasses, it typically is found on rubble slopes and occurs in small groups comprised mainly of females.

Although *C. bathyphilus* is currently not uncommon in the North American aquarium trade, it is still quite expensive. However, it is usually a good investment, as it tends to be a hardy aquarium resident. It is best to add this fish to relatively peaceful surroundings, although once it has acclimated, large males can usually fend for themselves with moderately aggressive tankmates (e.g., pygmy angelfish, smaller dottybacks, small damsels). It can be aggressive toward other fairy wrasses, especially members of its own kind or similarly colored species. During such encounters, it will erect its fins and rapidly circle its opponent.

Conde's Fairy Wrasse

Conde's fairy wrasse (*C. condei*) was given a scientific name 10 years ago and is now readily available to home aquarists. It is abundant on fringing reefs in certain parts of eastern Papua New Guinea and has also been reported from the Great Barrier Reef. The males are unique in having a black margin along the edge of the dorsal fin, with a bluish-white line along the base of this fin. This species grows to 3.1 inches.

Conde's fairy wrasse is usually found on sheltered rock and algae flats and also slopes. I have also seen it near small patch reefs on mixed sand and rubble slopes. It typically occurs at a depth range of 10 to 75 feet, although it has been reported as deep as 230 feet. It often lives in loose groups that stay close to the substrate. When the male displays, the front of the dorsal fin is erected like a sail, and the overall coloration changes to a whitish-blue.

This is a hardy aquarium fish that is well-suited to a smaller reef tank (e.g., 55 gallons). Because of its small size, it tends to suffer less during shipping. Keep only one male per tank, unless your aquarium is extra large (180 gallons or more). A male can be kept with a group of females, but all members of the group should be added simultaneously. Male *C. condei* are likely to quarrel with males of similar *Cirrhilabrus* (e.g., redfinned, *C. rubripinnis*; longfinned, *C. rubriventralis*).

Yellowfin Fairy Wrasse

Although once a difficult species to acquire, the yellowfin (*C. flavidorsalis*) is now a quite common export from Indonesia (it is also occurs on Philippine reefs). It is found on fore reef slopes, over rubble and soft coral substrate, or in protected bays with rich hard and soft coral growth. It occurs at a depth range of 20 to more than 130 feet. When feeding, this species rarely strays more than 4 feet above the bottom and often intermingles with larger aggregations of Lubbock's fairy wrasse (*C. lubbocki*). It can reach a length of 3 1/2 inches.

This small fairy wrasse will thrive in the aquarium. It can be quite shy initially, racing for cover when the aquarist nears the tank, but it can become aggressive toward other small wrasses once it has been in a tank on its own for a while. For example, I had an individual that vigorously attacked flasher wrasses introduced after it had become well established. When behaving in this manner, its color will intensify (especially the banding on the body), and it will dash toward the intruder and turn abruptly when it gets very close or attempts to nip it. Keep only one male per tank. I have also found *C. flavidorsalis* to be very disease resistant. Like others in the genus, this fish is prone to jumping out of open aquariums.

Pyle's Fairy Wrasse

Another *Cirrhilabrus* been exported from Vanuatu, Pyle's fairy wrasse (*C. pylei*) was named for the intrepid fish collector and deep sea explorer, Dr. Richard Pyle. Dr. Pyle was the first to collect this deepwater fish off the coast of Papua New Guinea (it has been reported at depths greater than 180 feet). Since its original discovery, it has also been found on Indonesian reefs.

The males of this species have incredibly long pelvic fins, the tips extending back to about the middle of the anal fin base. This species reaches a maximum length of about 4 inches.

Pyle's fairy wrasse is a hardy aquarium species that should be housed with passive tankmates, such as flasher wrasses, dart gobies, firefish, razor gobies and shrimp gobies. The first individual I received ate within hours after being placed in a quarantine tank and was less flighty than many other fairy wrasse species. I have had several individuals since that first fish and have found that they readily acclimate to aquarium life. Larger males are more likely to hide and act shy when added to a tank. Just leave them alone and let them settle in. They will not hesitate to come out and feed if they are not harassed by aggressive tankmates.

Rhomboid Fairy Wrasse

The rhomboid (*C. rhomboidalis*) has a very limited distribution. It has only been reported in the Marshall Islands and is only common around the island of Kwajalein. It occurs on steep outer reef slopes over sand and dead coral, and it has been reported to depths greater than 125 feet. This fish stays closer to the substrate and is more secretive than most of the other fairy wrasses. It reaches a length of 4.7 inches.

This is a very expensive species because of its predilection for great depths and its very limited geographical range. It will readily acclimate to captivity, but does best if initially kept in a more dimly lit tank., which should also have numerous hiding places and be home to peaceful tankmates. Like other larger fairy wrasses, big males suffer more during the shipping process than smaller ones. Therefore, chances of success are greater if you acquire a female or a smaller male. The trade-off is that larger males are more spectacular in color. Once again, this is a species prone to jumping out of its tank.

Tono's fairy wrasse

Tono's fairy wrasse (*C. tonozukai*) is very similar to the more readily available whipfin fairy wrasse (*C. filamentosus*). For many years, the two species were thought to be the same. A male *C. filamentosus* has a yellow dorsal fin, while the dorsal of *C. tonozukai* is multi-colored. Tono's is only known from eastern Sulawesi (including Lembeh Strait and Banggai Island). It occurs at depths of 30 to 130 feet in Lembeh Strait, where it typically lives in rubble-sponge-algae beds with mixed large-polyped stony corals and soft corals.

This species is sometimes available in the aquarium trade. It is a smaller fairy wrasse (reaching a length of about 3 1/2 inches) that will thrive in a peaceful community tank. It will quickly adapt to its new aquarium home and will feed on any food placed in the tank. It does best if kept with shrimp-gobies, dart gobies, worm gobies, flasher wrasses and other small fairy wrasses. That said, males may fight with the males of similar *Cirrhilabrus* (e.g., whipfin, *C. filamentosus*; redfinned (*Cirrhilabrus* sp.)). Females can be kept in small groups, but only one male per aquarium. Because of its small size, it is more likely to be picked on by larger fairy wrasse species and other aquarium bullies.

This is an amazing time to be a marine aquarist! There are so many species available now that were not seen in aquarium stores in the 1990s. This includes the genus *Cirrhilabrus*. If you are not familiar with the fairy wrasses, consider adding one of these beauties to your reef aquarium. And for those of you that are already sold on the genus, keep your eyes open for even more new species at your local aquarium store.