

VICTORIAN CICHLIDS

Written by Russell McAndrews

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Victorian cichlids are much the same as other East African cichlids, that is to say their requirements vary but not wildly. Behavior and aggression levels fluctuate from one species to another and certainly, the diversity of feeding habits is astounding, but for the large part, they are polygamous, maternal mouth brooders. These fish do not form pair bonds; a conditioned female, which is ready to breed, will seek out one or more males to fertilize her eggs, upon completion of this task she will retreat from the male's territory.

Typically, in an aquarium situation only enough room exists for one dominant male, others will exhibit subordinate or sexually quiescent markings. This is not to say that a breeding group should only consist of a single male, actually, subordinate males function to distract the dominant male from his amorous but relentless pursuit of the females. Similarly, it is usually disastrous to attempt breeding these fish in pair due to the male's single-mindedness. When it is necessary to make do with a single pair be sure to provide plenty of hiding places and numerous non-Haplochromines to maximize the female's chance of survival.

Aquariums of thirty gallons or larger are sufficient for most of the species available, however, the larger genera (Prognathochromis, Harpagochromis, etc.) will require a standard seventy-gallon aquarium to be housed properly. The environment that these fish are from more often involves shelter in the form of vegetation than rocks. Consequently, they genuinely seem to prefer masses of floating plants such as water sprite, this is especially true with brooding females. Along these lines, many species seem to be experiencing an indirect problem with spawning on aquarium gravel, that is, the gravel is inadvertently picked up with the eggs and, presumably in the normal process of juggling, the eggs are destroyed. Potential solutions to this particular problem would include the omission of gravel, the use of a fine sand, or coarse epoxy-coated gravel. It is important to maintain some alternate system of buffering the pH, and often I employ an extra box-type filter with a three-layered arrangement of crushed shell, activated carbon, and polyester floss from bottom to top. Shells or anyother source of calcium carbonate anywhere in the system will do.

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Generally, these fish have relatively small eggs when compared to the Rift Lake mouth-brooders, and although the first spawn of each female is also relatively small, established breeders will produce large clutches relative to their Rift Lake counter parts. Gestation periods vary with species and temperature but for the most part all hatch in under eight days. In the interest of minimizing losses, I prefer to strip and newly hatched zygotes at this eighth day post-spawn point. Stripping is accomplished by a) waiting until the eggs have hatched, b) removing the brooding female from the breeding tank, c) holding her, head down, in a small pail of clean tank water. One hand gently holds her gills shut while a fingernail from the other hand is employed to force her lower jaw down and the mouth open. At this point, various techniques are employed to expel the fry; pumping the gills, shaking side-to-side, and dipping in and out of the water. Note, this process is stressful for the female and she should be allowed to rest/breathe frequently throughout the procedure, just hold her quietly in-hand. Do not allow her loose even while resting as often she will dash about and damage the ejected embryos. Peer into the open mouth to determine when all have been expelled. Through use of this technique I have found that the longer the female is allowed to carry, the fewer the fry. Possibly this attrition is a natural process of accommodating the growing embryos. Whatever the reason, a given female will have a maximum number of embryos immediately after hatching.

Water quality requirements also seem to vary from one species to another with the open-water species being the most discriminating. Coincidentally these open-water species are also the most threatened. Those species inhabiting the peripheries of the lake are much more tolerant of poor water quality. Two recommendations for maintaining and breeding these fishes, especially the endangered ones, are to use activated carbon in contact with the culture water and the use of at least trace amounts of salts. Although the use of salt would seem to directly contradict the use of live plants, it does not have to be so. Total salts of less than one tsp/gal and comprised of roughly 25% magnesium chloride, 25% potassium chloride, and 50% sea salt achieves a workable solution, which the most common aquarium plants will survive. Additionally, many plant species such as *Vallisneria* are salt-tolerant. The use of salt functions to give the fish's immune system a boost while inhibiting the growth of bacteria and fungus.

Unfortunately, by Greenwood's own admissions the taxonomic catalog of Lake Victoria's Haplochromines is far from complete. Fortunately, since these fishes were all considered as

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belonging to the genus *Haplochromis*, there is no overlap of specific names. Based on the above two points and in order to avoid confusion as the taxonomy is continuously revised I shall use “*Haplochromis*” even though the names of some species may have been updated.

In the following, few paragraphs I shall attempt to detail some of the species I have had contact with as well as any notable details of behavior or specific requirements.

Hap. argens: An elongate, large-mouthed, surface-dwelling zooplanktivore, once present lake-wide in large numbers now believed to be extinct in the wild. This fish exhibits no discernable colors even when spawning.

Hap. piceatus: A large-mouthed, low-water column zooplanktivore known to be undergoing severe dwarfing in the lake. Formally, of great abundance, this fish is now considered endangered. Males are black with red trailing edges to all unpaired fins.

Hap. xenognathus: Similar to *Ptyochromis*, this fish has an unusual, retrograde lower jaw and appears to be one of a complex whose male mating colors vary widely. Once frequently caught on sandy beaches of Tanzania and Kenya its numbers have been greatly reduced earning the “vulnerable” classification.

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Hap. (*Ptyochromis*) *sauvagei*: This fish is a winker, that is, it feeds by ripping snails from their shells with specialized teeth and violent head motions. This fish is considered threatened. The “Selbrink *sauvagei*”, although a snail eater as well appears not to be *H. savagei* at all but is maintained pending identification.

Hap. (*Astatoreochromis*) *allaudi*: This swamp-dwelling snail crusher uses its pharyngeal bones for crushing the snails. This species is black and gold as are the other non-Victorian *Astatoreochromis* but is identifiable by having more than three anal spines. Due to its wide-spread distribution by man this fish is in no immediate danger, however, science is particularly interested in this fish because it is molariform, (develops different teeth to exploit different food sources).

Hap. *ishmaeli*: Another pharyngeal crusher, this fish was reasonably common as late as 1985. There are two populations of this fish in country and for now, they should not be mixed. This species is endangered in the lake.

Hap. “thick skin”: This undisrupted, probably insectivorous species appears to have lake-wide distribution. In color, it matches Greenwood’s description of *H. lividus* as it is referred to by some. Also “thick skin” was incorrectly imported by Selbrink as *J. obliquidens*. This species is considered vulnerable.

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Hap. (*Prognathochromis*) *perrieri*: This pleasantly marked predator is one of the larger species in the U.S. Formerly of lake-wide distribution, this fish is believed to be extinct in the wild. This species is in the aquarium trade under the name *P. pellegrini*, which is a similar but larger relative.

Hap. "Rock kribansis": An un-described, insectivorous member of the rock-dwelling community presently in the trade as "*Astatotilapia barbara*" which derives its name from its similarity to *H. kribansis*, (an open water phytoplanktivore). Females of this species are yellow and black with mature males sporting lovely red flanks. I would like to point out that this is one of the most aggressive Victorians I have encountered. This species is considered vulnerable based on the present uncertainty but may be secure. This fish exhibit's a gradient of color along its range, less red in Uganda, more in Kenya and the most in Tanzania.

Hap. "2-stripe white lip": An un-described species close to *Astatotilapia martini* and *Harpagochromis michaeli*, probably an insectivore/predator. This fish has a been mistakenly called *Prognathochromis* "all yellow" and is in the trade under the nomen *A. Martini*. It is believed to be extinct in the wild.