

***Melanochromis trifasciata* – An Australian of Which We Should All Be Proud** – by Carol and Milton Lewis. First published in **Tank Talk**, Volume 16, No. 1 in 1992

An Australian of which we should all be proud!

Carol & Milton Lewis

Melanotaenia trifasciata (or the Banded Rainbow Fish as it is more infrequently called) is a species worthy of closer inspection by all aquarists. The colours exhibited by the many morphs of this species rival those of the rainbow from which the genus aptly derives its common name.

The species is restricted to the tip of Cape York and Arnhem Land but has recently been discovered on Melville Island to the north of Darwin. There seems to be no end to the variety found with the general trend being to observe a strikingly new colour form at each locality. At present more than sixteen different forms in a range of body colours from blue, mauve, green or yellow have been collected. Fin colours vary through all shades of yellow to red.

Society members have a number of these varieties, usually referring to them by the name of the river from which they originate. Varieties such as the Weipa, Giddy, Goyder and Claudie are all commonly kept in Canberra but there may still be specimens such as the Pascoe lurking within someone's collection. All of these varieties are beautiful but suffer slightly from the "in vogue" trends seen in many other species of aquarium fish.

The Claudie river fish are one of my favourites; not only because they are strikingly coloured but more for sentimental reasons. They are beautiful; having royal blue bodies and yellowish fins but, for me, their real magnetism arises from the journey my family and I made to Cape York two years ago.

Rainforests are special for many people and I am no exception! Cape York itself is to the greater extent very dry but along the eastern coast are patches of luxuriant Tropical Rainforest. The Claudie river flows through one of these areas in a region known as Iron Range. A National Park covers an extensive tract of this wilderness and will hopefully preserve some of its grandeur for posterity. The section of the Claudie we camped along, however, was not in the national park which made it possible not only to observe the fish but also to collect a few specimens for the tanks at home.

During the "Dry Season" the Claudie is nothing more than a slow flowing shallow creek a few centimetres deep with an occasional pond of perhaps half a metre in depth and one or two metres in width. It meanders along, underneath a dense rainforest canopy formed by huge fig trees and other tropical giants.

Very little light reaches the rainforest floor so the Claudie contains very few aquatic plants. The water is cool (22C at midday), slightly acidic and a little murky in the deeper pools. Along the bottom of the river is a deep layer of decaying leaves

while in many places along the river's edge are tangles of exposed roots.

During the daylight hours fish were difficult to observe; probably taking shelter in the tangles of debris or the murky deeper water. The night, however, was a different matter with schools of small fish in abundance around the edges of the deeper water and larger individuals (10-15cm) swimming alone in the centres of the ponds. A number of other fish species were also present during the time we stayed at the Claudie. These included: Northern Trout Gudgeon *Mogurnda mogurnda*, Sleepy Cod *Oxyeleotris lineolatus*, Jungle Perch *Kuhlia rupestris* and Eastern Rainbow Fish *Melanotaenia splendida splendida*.

Captive fish were easily transported home in plastic bags without the loss of any individuals. Once in tanks at home they acclimatised well and fed ravenously on almost anything offered. A point to remember when feeding any Australian fish is the importance of vegetable matter in their diet. All of my fish are fed cooked peas or broccoli at least three nights a week. I feel that this is one of the keys to success.

Breeding *M. trifasciata* from the Claudie river has proven to be quite simple. Basic guidelines as followed for other species of this genus are all that is required. The first and sometimes most difficult obstacle for the beginner is selecting a "pair" for breeding. Males of adult specimens usually have deeper bodies and slightly longer tapered dorsal fins. The females are often "slighter" in body form but only in fully mature fish. Colour is of little value for determining sex in this species as all individuals are similar.

Spawning occurs almost continually when the fish are in good condition with a small number of eggs being laid each day. Our procedure is to keep the pair in a separate tank during which time they are fed ample live-food (usually daphnia). The tank is supplied with masses of Java Moss into which the eggs are deposited. After a week of spawning I place the Java Moss into a fry rearing tank. Eggs hatch after about seven days and fry can be fed on any commercial liquid food mixed with "green" water. Micro-worms are offered in small quantities when the fry are a few days old. As the fry grow, larger commercial foods as well as microworms and mashed peas are given three to four times a day.

The future of species such as *M. trifasciata* or other Rainbow Fish from specific locations is tenuous. Habitat destruction by agents such as feral pigs around the Claudie, acclimatised feral fish at Lake Eacham, and human intervention everywhere have assured us of the inevitability of the extinction of many native fish.

We, as committed aquarists, must make an effort to ensure that extinction of native species can be averted! Firstly we can help by making people aware of the problems; secondly by keeping and breeding "locality specific" populations of Australian species we

are sometimes able to help if the natural populations are decimated. If it were not for a few dedicated aquarists the Lake Eacham Rainbow Fish would be gone!

