

A Doradid Duo

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Those of you who ventured to the Catfish Study Group (CSG) Convention 2001 will have been treated to an excellent array of photographs taken by Erwin Schraml. Sadly, because of bereavement, Erwin was unable to talk us through his wonderful photographs and the job was filled by one of THE names in the catfish world, Dr. Isaac Isbrücker. If you were there you would have also have heard Chris Ralph describe an expedition to South America where a number of CSG members (including the author) collected and imported Peruvian catfish. Although mostly written before the convention, by sheer coincidence this article discusses two species shown both in Erwin's slides and encountered on the Peruvian expedition.

These two species belong to the South American catfish family Doradidae, more commonly known as the talking, or thorny, catfish. The first species appears to be a fairly standard doradid (if there is such a thing) and, although uncommonly imported, is documented in most good commercial aquatic literature. The second is a real oddball and, I'm sure you'll get my meaning, is a real catfish person's catfish.

Peruvian Origins

The intertwined story of these two fish begins in Peru. Prior to setting out on our boat-based collecting expedition our party took a look round some of Iquitos' fish exporters. These all too brief visits merit a short story in themselves but suffice to say that I lost count of the number of species of fish that I saw for the first time alive. Fish were grouped roughly a species per tank, bucket, pail or pool. Closer inspection usually showed that up to 4 or 5 different yet similar species were present in each container. Catfish were everywhere. Such was the impact on the senses that I missed things. Other members of the group appeared at my elbow, tugging my arm and saying "come look at this". I had a video camera - both a blessing and a curse. A curse because I spent most of the time looking at the spectacular array of fish through a black and white viewfinder. A blessing because many of the fish overlooked at the time are now recorded for posterity on CD or website for all to see.

The collecting expedition, my first, was simply amazing. What's also amazing is how quickly you forget the bad bits. Safely home and reviewing one of the aforementioned videotapes I noticed that all was not equal in one tank of small doradids. This particular tank I remember because I bought 10 of the inch long fish within. They were purchased at the ludicrous sum of 50 US cents each - I didn't ask for a discount on numbers. Unfortunately I lost 6 of these either during or soon after return to Scotland (the return journey saw us fly with fish from Iquitos to Lima, an overnight in Lima, Lima to Atlanta, Atlanta to London and London to Edinburgh). The four survivors match pictures of *Rhinodoras dorbignyi* (Kröyer, 1855) found in Baensch (Vol. 2 p499), Sands (Vol. 4 p39) & Schaefer (p88).



***Rhinodoras dorbignyi* – Lateral profile of a 3inch (7.5cm) fish**

Wigan – The Missing Link

The second part of this tale begins in Wigan, catfish Mecca of the North. During a visit to Pier Aquatics I picked up a group of 10 larger doradids. I was interested in these fish because some looked like *Rhinodoras dorbignyi* and some did not. Those of you who gaze at shop tanks full of the same species in the hope of spotting something different will understand the excitement experienced when half the fish in there appear different.

The existing *R. dorbignyi* were joined by their conspecifics and these new oddballs in a 3ft tank all of their own because all but the acclimatised fish were very skinny indeed. Some feeding up was required and in the meantime research into what these other fish were. I had been told that my new arrivals were exported from Lima, a common point of export since direct flights from Iquitos were cancelled after Peru's main airline went out of business recently.

My search began by looking for Peruvian doradids. This turned out two things. Firstly, that *Rhinodoras dorbignyi* was described from the Rio de la Plata (River Plate) river system in Argentina / Uruguay. No where near Iquitos in Peru and, indeed, a separate river system altogether. Secondly, I stumbled across a line drawing of *Rhynchodoras xingui* Klauswitz & Rössel, 1961 in Burgess' Catfish Atlas (p205). This had to be at least the correct genus for my mystery doradid. Again, the locality didn't match at all. Both the described species of *Rhynchodoras* are recorded from the upper Rio Xingù, Brazil. Although this is the Amazon River system it's half a continent downstream and hundreds of miles upstream.

In conversation with Robin Warne, another member of the Peru expedition, I was to learn that he had observed both these fish at an outlying (floating) collection station on the river. The local collectors stated that these two fish are found together in the wild. This is a stronger fact than my video footage of them together at the exporters and their subsequent import into the UK together. These fish are definitely present together in the Peruvian Amazon. It is quite possible that the fish shown in some of the more recent publications as *Rhinodoras dorbignyi* is the Peruvian fish. Leaving the taxonomy behind we can now focus on the husbandry of these two fish.

Doradidae – A Family of Two Halves

From an aquarists point of view the Doradidae like many other catfish families can, if somewhat crudely, be halved into two groups. In one half we have the more familiar nocturnal, thorny or talking catfish types such as the evergreen *Platydoras*, *Amblydoras* or *Agamyxis* spp. They huddle together in packs during the day and cruise the aquarium, with surprising grace, after dark. They are opportunistic feeders and will eat huge amounts of virtually any food in one sitting given the chance. As I mentioned before the *Rhinodoras* or fog doradid to use its descriptively apt common name, is a typical member of this group.

The second half of the family Doradidae is less commonly encountered for sale. They often go under the common name of mouse catfish. As with their rodent namesakes, these timid catfish tend to be more active during dawn and dusk than their nocturnal compatriots. Once settled in the aquarium they can be seen for most of the day. Although both groups of doradids are very sociable animals, many of the representatives of this second group appear to actively shoal when swimming. The most commonly encountered species belong to the genera *Hassar*, *Opsodoras* and *Leptodoras* (incidentally the CSG expedition in Peru encountered representatives of all of these genera). These fish appear more smooth skinned and often have distinctive clusters of minutely feathered barbels. The best description I can think of is that these barbels resemble the tentacles of a squid.

My second species, the *Rhynchodoras*, doesn't sit quite right in either group. It does have the "squid face" of barbels belonging to the second group of doradids but also possesses the more leathery, thorny flanks of the former. Both described *Rhynchodoras* spp. have tiny eyes, the smallest I have seen on any doradid (including *Pterodoras*), again at odds with the large eye of mouse cats. Additionally their behaviour in my aquarium to date is very much that of the former group. They rarely venture forth during the day and then only for food. Their day is spent closely squeezed into whatever preferably wood-based refuge is available; often two or three individuals in an impossibly small crevice



***Rhynodoras* sp. – Lateral profile and “in hiding”**

Care of these two fish is also different. *Rhinodoras* are gregarious, easily fed fish. Some of the individuals have grown two inches or more in 6 months. Baensch lists their full grown size as 6¾ inches – a reasonably sized fish for most aquarists and one that would seem likely given the fishes growth rate to date. They have a fleshy webbed base to their barbels, similar to adult *Megalechis*. Water parameters seem relatively unimportant especially once the fish has been acclimatised. Water temperature is 74F. Currently my group is doing well in a 3ft x 1ft x 1ft aquarium with some *Corydoras* and an entirely random selection of Characins. Although initially kept successfully in a stronger water current, the current in the present surroundings is more in keeping with that expected of a *Corydoras* tank.

This brings me onto an important point. Initially I kept these two species together in a similar sized aquarium. The *Rhinodoras* prospered but the *Rhynodoras* didn't appear settled. Most of these fish looked fragile and certainly were not gaining weight. They appeared underfed on import and this situation had not changed with months of care. I decided to move out the prospering *Rhinodoras* and leave the *Rhynodoras* to themselves. A month later the *Rhynodoras* are showing signs of growth but are, if anything, even more secretive. Perhaps, being better fed, they are less desperate in their search for food. I have started feeding more heavily at night (quickly finding that flake food is ignored) mainly tetra prima and frozen brineshrimp or bloodworm. There is not trace of this in the morning.

I have no idea as to the full grown size of *Rhynodoras*. Given their current growth rate, I do not feel that they will turn out to be one of the gentle giants of the family. Again they are being kept in neutral pH at a temperature of around 75F. To me they prefer a little more current and so I have a larger filter in their 3ft x 1ft x 1ft tank.

My Thoughts.

The *Rhynodoras* appear to have a special affinity with wood. When I have watched them feed (at night) they search vertical surfaces first: feeding on the sandy substrate doesn't appear to come naturally to them. Aside from their very small eyes, perhaps the most unusual feature of these fish is a protrusion from their upper lip. Immediately in front of their barbels is an overhanging bony structure almost like a small pick. This puts me most in mind of a beaver's front bucktooth, although the structure is certainly not a tooth or teeth. Whether this is used as a pick in the search of food or simply protection for the delicate barbels in a strong current, I do not know. The fish favours eating at the intake of the internal filter. Here the fish can easily pick off trapped food; their oddly shaped mouths are perfectly adapted for the task. Perhaps in the wild these fish cruise submerged wood (tree trunks?) using their adapted mouths to search out small invertebrates? Both species have long cigar-shaped bodies and a curved dorsal spine. I also wonder about this;

perhaps indicative of their life in a flowing river rather than forest stream?



***Rhyncodoras* sp. – Close up of mouth**

Neither fish are notably expensive or cosmetically striking. That is not to say that these fish don't both merit attention. Both are intriguing and certainly worth a look should you get an opportunity to keep them for yourself. Keeping these fish in numbers is the only way we have a chance of learning more than just how to keep them alive.



***Rhyncodoras* sp. – in the search for food**



***Rhyncodoras* sp. – Close-up of head**

References:

Dr. Rudiger Riehl & Hans A. Baensch. Aquarium Atlas Vol. 2. Tetra Press

Dr. David Sands. Catfishes of the World Vol. 4. Dunure Publishing

Dr. Burgess. An Atlas of Freshwater and Marine Catfishes. TFH.

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