

THE FAMILY LORICARIIDAE

By
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The family Loricariidae covers a vast number of the so-called "Sucker mouthed Catfish", which also includes those catfish generally classified or referred to as "Plecs". The catfish that belong to this family can be found widespread throughout South America. The majority of the species available tend to be from wild caught stock, although there are commercial breeding farms in other parts of the world such as Singapore where some of these catfishes are being bred for the aquarium hobby trade. There are also some catfish enthusiasts in this country who have been known to successfully keep and spawn certain members of this vast family of catfish.

Some of the representatives of this family may be sold as good old algae eaters, although this is not entirely true as not all of these fish are herbivores. Quite a few of the catfish offered for sale are indeed omnivores, thriving best on a mixed and varied diet of plants, algae and meaty foods which will be mentioned later. For this article I have chosen five species of Loricariid to describe, and where possible advice on breeding will also be given.

Keeping and Housing Loricariids

As with all fish in order to keep them successfully, we the aquarist must first provide an environment in which our chosen fish feel safe in. What I mean by the term safe is an aquarium which is going to provide sufficient room for the catfish, with plenty of hiding places amongst bogwood and rocks, and perhaps most importantly good water quality and nutrition (see feeding section). Most Loricariid's can be kept under the following conditions:

Temperature range 22 to 25°C or 71 to 77°F (although higher temperatures may also be tolerated), with pH in the range of 6.5 to 7.2. A wide range of hardness is tolerated by most species of between 5 and 25°GH (general hardness). Most if not all species of Loricariid prefer a planted aquarium with plenty of hiding places amongst the chosen décor. The substrate chosen will depend upon individual taste, although personally I prefer to use aquarium sand instead of gravel.

Feeding Loricariids

Most Loricariids can be fed a mixed and varied diet and can be described as omnivores, although there are exceptions to every rule. Please refer to my article in the May 2001 issue of PFK on what to feed your catfish. Most of these catfish will feed on aquatic plants and algae as well as other meatier foods such as, chopped mussel, whole prawns, frozen bloodworm etc. Other vegetarian foods to consider would include peas, courgette, cucumber, spinach, and lettuce. Whilst most aquarists think that these catfish are vegetarian it has recently been suggested that wild catfish seen feeding upon algae are also feeding upon the tiny microscopic organisms that live in the algae. Other prepared foods to consider feeding to your catfish include the following:

Catfish pellets (sinking variety)

Algae wafers

Good quality flake foods

Tablet foods

Granular foods fed sparingly as they tend to have high protein content and can foul the water if overfed.

Another thing not to forget is bogwood not only for décor, but to provide an important source of lignin that these catfish require in order to be able to digest their food properly.

The species of catfish chosen for this article cover a broad range of species and price bands, which hopefully means that there is a little of something for everyone. As mentioned earlier where possible details of how to breed these fish will also be given.

The Gold Nugget Pleco

This particular species has been chosen, as it is quite often available to the aquarist, and because of its colouration tends to be very popular. The Gold Nugget Pleco is referred to as *Baryancistrus spp.* Sometimes this catfish is

offered for sale with an "L" number reference, and just to add to the confusion there are four reference numbers for this catfish, which are L018, L081, L085 and L177. The reference numbers are given to the fish and refer to the various locations in which these catfish are found in the wild. L018 is found in the area around Altamira, which is on the Rio Xingu in Brazil, and is also referred to as "Golden Nugget". L081 is found in the lower Rio Xingu region in Brazil, and is sometimes referred to as the small spot gold nugget, or the "Xingu Orange Seam Pleco". L085 is also from the Rio Xingu and is also referred to as the "Xingu Baryancistrus". L177 is found in the Rio Irii referred to as the "Irii Yellow Seam". I hope that I have and is also not confused you all too much here!

With regard to keeping the "Gold Nugget Pleco" they prefer good quality clean water with plenty of current provided. Water with a pH in the range of 6.5 to 7.5 is also preferable. These particular catfish seem to fare better at slightly higher temperatures of between 78 to 86°F. With regard to the size attained by these catfish L081 with the smaller spots only grows to approximately 7", whilst the remaining L018, L085 and L177 are thought to grow between 10 to 14". This particular catfish prefers meatier foods in its diet such as chopped mussel, bloodworm and prawns.

The Gold Nugget Pleco can be quite territorial towards members of its own kind and indeed towards other bottom dwelling fish. This aggression is probably due to the fact that these catfish are attempting to defend the best spawning cave, which could be under a piece of bogwood or under slate. The Gold Nugget has a liking of bogwood in its diet so please remember to provide it within the set-up as it contains lignin, which is vital in order for these catfish to digest their food properly. With regard to sexing these catfish the male is said to be wider and has a flatter more levelled slope to its forehead than the female, which tends to have a more rounded forehead. The female takes on a plump appearance when in spawning condition. There have been records of this particular species of catfish having been successfully spawned in an aquarium. These fish are cave spawners, and in order for them to breed successfully good oxygen supply and high water flow rate are required. Raising the fry is said to be a long process starting with feeding small foods first such as newly hatched brineshrimp and gradually increasing the size of the food as the fish grow. It may take up to six months before the fry reach 2" in length. I think that most people will agree with me that this is one of the most attractive catfish available to the hobbyist, with a variable price range of between £20 to £40.

The Zebra Pleco

This particular catfish is a particular favourite of mine and is also referred to as *Hypancistrus zebra*. When this fish was first seen it was referred to as the Imperial *Peckoltia*. There are also some other names that this particular fish has been given over the years such as the Zebra Pleco, Imperial Pleco, Emperor *Peckoltia*, L046, L098 and L173! As with the Gold Nugget Pleco this particular catfish is also found in the Rio Xingu in Brazil. There have been some recent reports to suggest that this catfish is endangered in its natural environment, which is possibly due to over-collecting. I have also heard that there are people in Brazil collecting adult fish to breed and are returning the adult fish back to the wild after spawning them. L046 is referred to as *Hypancistrus zebra* or "Zebra *Peckoltia*". L098 is referred to as *Hypancistrus spp.* or "Pseudo Zebra". L173 is referred to as *Hypancistrus spp.* or "New Zebra *Peckoltia*". The size given for this particular catfish varies between 7 to 12 cm.

With regard to keeping this catfish water with high oxygen content that is clean and warm seems to be the only real requirement. The preferred temperature range is between 80 to 86°F with a pH in the range 6.5 to 7.5. In the wild these catfish are found at depths of up to 10 metres. As with the Gold Nugget this catfish is more of a carnivore than a vegetarian and it is therefore very important to feed meatier foods to this fish such as chopped mussel and bloodworm.

When sexing these catfish the male is said to have a thicker first pectoral fin ray than the female. When in breeding condition the males pectoral fin develops small spine like projections or "odontodes". When breeding these catfish it is important to provide spawning caves and crevices in which they can breed. When breeding the male takes on the responsibility for guarding the cave and eggs. Eggs take up to seven days to hatch and after ten days the fry will have consumed their yolk sac, at which point newly hatched brineshrimp needs to be fed. It is documented that the fry will take approximately two to three months to reach 1" in length. Again this is one of the more striking catfish to keep in an aquarium. Depending upon availability this particular species is normally priced between £40 to £60.

Pygmy Sucker Mouth Catfish

There are a number of pygmy or dwarf sucker mouthed catfish commonly available to the hobbyist. Perhaps the one species that is most often seen is *Otocinclus vestitus* or the "Pygmy Sucker Mouth Catfish". This catfish as its name suggests only attains a length of 2" or 50 mm. This particular species can be found widespread throughout the rivers of Peru, Brazil and Columbia. At one of the wholesalers in Iquitos, Peru last year there were literally hundreds of these catfish in plastic bowls and shallow ponds waiting to be shipped off around the world. These catfishes are quite often described as being omnivores, in other words they feed upon detritus. In their natural habitat these catfish feed upon algae, plants and small invertebrates.

With regard to keeping this catfish it is tolerant of most water conditions and is perhaps not as fussy as the previous species mentioned. I have found these tiny catfish to be quite robust once settled in and are quite happy being kept at pH 6.8 to 7.5, with a temperature around 75 to 78°F. Being so small this species of catfish is ideally suited to small aquariums, which have an algae problem. I have found that it is best to keep these catfish well fed at all times due to the fact that they can be parasitic towards other fishes if left hungry.

When sexing these catfish the males tend to be more slender than the females. These catfish have been successfully spawned in an aquarium. The female lays her eggs on plant leaves and also on the aquarium glass. There is some degree of parental care shown to the eggs and subsequent fry. When raising the fry it is important to provide good water quality at all times and to provide them with plenty of green foods and newly hatched brineshrimp. A good quality flake should also be offered to these catfish to feed on. As this catfish is quite often available I would not expect to pay more than £1 to £2 for it.

Giant Whiptail Catfish

The Giant Whiptail Catfish is also referred to as *Sturisoma aureum*. This particular species originates from the rivers of Columbia. As its name suggests it can grow quite large up to 12" or 300mm. Although it is quite a large catfish it is a very peaceful species to keep with other community fish, in small confines they can be slightly territorial to their own kind. They prefer a diet that is varied and includes algae, other green foods and small aquatic invertebrates.

With regard to keeping this catfish it is quite tolerant of most water quality conditions, and is quite happy being kept in water with pH 6.5 to 7.5. An ideal temperature would be around 75 to 78°F for this particular species. This is one of my favourite species of catfish to keep, and it has fin extensions that are almost as long as the body. It is a fascinating catfish to watch when feeding, as it almost appears to "walk" to its food using its pectoral and pelvic fins as we would our arms and legs.

When breeding these catfish they are difficult to sex until they are mature. In breeding condition the male develops cheek spines or bristles that may be shed after breeding, hence making sexing the fish difficult once more. They have been successfully bred by a number of catfish enthusiasts over the years and are said to be relatively easy to breed. When spawning the eggs are deposited on plants and the aquarium glass. The male guards the eggs until they hatch and the fry emerge. The key to raising the fry is to feed plenty of green foods and to provide good water quality. Quite often tank-bred specimens are available for sale at aquatic outlets. These catfish depending upon availability are usually priced at £18 to £30.

Common Whiptail Catfish

There are a number of catfish that can be described by this common name and are quite often referred to as *Rineloricaria* spp. These catfish are quite commonly available at most good aquatic retailers and most are sold as "Whiptail Catfish". Most of these catfish grow between 5" and 8" in length, and are ideally suited to a community aquarium as they are usually very peaceful. They can be found widespread throughout the rivers of South America. In my experiences of keeping these catfishes they are tolerant of most water conditions, with pH between 6.5 to 7.5 and temperature between 20 to 24°C or 68 to 75°F. Like the other species mentioned they thrive on a diet that includes algae, other green foods, small aquatic invertebrates, granular foods and good quality flake.

When sexing these catfish the males tend to be more slender than the females especially when viewed from above. Fully-grown or mature males can be distinguished by the fact that they have bristles on their head and

quite often on the edges of their pectoral fins. When breeding these catfish they prefer to spawn in a cave in a hollow in a tree trunk, although plastic drainpipe provides a good alternative in the aquarium. The eggs are deposited within the cave and are guarded by the male until they hatch. The fry thrive on a diet that includes plenty of green foods and newly hatched brineshrimp. Depending upon their availability these catfish are usually priced between £6 and £15.

For those of you that currently keep Loricariid catfish, or if you are contemplating keeping them for the first time, I am sure that you will agree that they are a fascinating group of fish to keep and to observe. There are of course a number of different species available to the aquarium trade, and gradually more and more information is becoming available to the hobbyist, which helps to make it easier for us to provide the correct environment for our fishes.