



## **NEOLAMPROLOGUS PULCHER**

by Deborah Ralph

Rift Lake cichlids have never been very high on our list of desirable fishes to keep because although there are some lovely photos of them in books, most of the live ones we had seen we had really only glimpsed. For as soon as we entered a room in which they were housed and glanced their way, they darted to safety behind the rocks that were always amply provided. This shyness had rather put us off but there were other factors, namely, that most were quite vicious towards other fish and would therefore need a tank of their own; that they required rather special conditions; and that they mostly attained a large size.

However, the dwarf Rift Lake cichlids that we had seen in picture form did hold our interest and there was always the possibility that a solution to their shy behaviour could be found. We had read in a TFH magazine that one owner of a tank of Rift Lake cichlids, who had had problems with their disappearing act, was presented unexpectedly with an answer. He had asked a friend to look after his fish for a few weeks, while he was moving home and during this period, the fish-sitter remarked that they were lovely fish, that always looked so nice whenever he went into their room to watch them. Puzzled by this report, the owner came to view his fish in their temporary location and noticed that their tank had been placed in a higher position than normal. The fish were looking down at him and, not being frightened by any movements, felt secure enough to stay out in the open.

After reading this we had no good reason not to begin a tank of Rift Lake cichlids, apart from the fact that so few (and particularly dwarf ones) were available in Canberra. So a trip to Sydney was planned and our friend Doug, Rodney and myself looked forward to a 'fish-shop crawl' there. Meanwhile, we set up a 38" long, 22-gallon tank, placed on the top shelf of a 5' high stand, in readiness. This tank was provided with coarse gravel containing 50% shell-grit, to harden the soft Canberra water and keep it alkaline. Caves, nooks and crannies had been arranged by using rocks, slate, clay pipe and driftwood. Java fern and *Vallisneria* were the only plants included as few others would withstand the water conditions. A temperature of 26°C and a pH of 7.6 were attained, in anticipation of the new needs.

The trip was quite successful and we purchased a few different species of dwarf Rift Lake cichlids. However, some of the more desired ones were nowhere to be seen, while others were a bit too costly. We had most of our success at Riverside Cichlid Centre, with Norm Halliwell. Two pairs of the old favourite *Neolamprologus elongatus* (formerly *Lamprologus brichardi*), the Princess Cichlid, were expertly sexed for us, along with a pair of the rarer *Neolamprologus pulcher*. After a quick fishy chat, the 3 of us were heading for home.

These 2 species appear to be closely related. However, in the wild, *N. elongatus* is found in the northern half of Lake Tanganyika, whereas *N. pulcher* occurs in the southern half. The latter differs from *N. elongatus* in having a paler brown body colour and a larger and more distinctive cheek marking, and they appear to grow slightly larger. The females' fins attain the same length as the males' and in both sexes, they are longer than in *N. elongatus*. However, when sexually mature the females are easily recognisable by their deeper and fuller bodies.

The fish all settled well into their new home and they eagerly accepted dried and live foods. After only a few days they felt secure enough to remain visible to us, so we were only too happy to respond by watching them. Maintenance for their tank comprised a 25% weekly water change and a cannister filter to keep the water clear at all times.

A few months after the fish had settled in, we were rewarded by a terrific sight: a small number of fry. We had not noticed any odd behaviour patterns in the fish and were most surprised to have a spawning so soon. It was very obvious that the *N. pulcher* were the parents, as they were both hovering over their young. They tolerated no intrusions in their territory but luckily, the defended area was not too large to embarrass the other residents.

*N. pulcher* is a cave spawner and our pair have always found a suitably secluded hideaway. At present there are 4 successive broods happily swimming together. The parents spawn at 2-3 week intervals and the oldest group of fry appear to help guard and take care of the earlier and newest arrivals. At night all fry are bedded down together, by the ever-watching parents. It really is quite an amazing sight and has been one of the least demanding spawnings for us, as we have had to do no more than provide food for the fry and keep up the regular water changes.

Each time, the newest lot of fry have been spotted in the morning, when brine shrimp is normally provided. The adults appear to have become very trusting and they evidently realise that we are the source of food for their young. We may not observe where the eggs are laid or where the hatchlings are kept but each time so far, just as the newest batch are almost free-swimming, they are placed on a rock, close to the feeding site.

After the very first sighting, free-swimming fry were immediately given a feed of micro-worms. This the parents first tried out, before allowing their young to gorge themselves. Luckily, brine shrimp were already being hatched, ready for the next morning's feeding.

It did not take long for the adults also to anticipate this treat: they would wait for me to place the air-hose (attached to a plastic syringe) amongst the youngsters and start delivery of the shrimp and at times they would even attempt to suck the shrimp from it, before I had begun to depress the plunger. They were well satisfied when I did, and then went off quite willingly to leave the rest for their young, though not for their other tankmates, who missed out!

It really has been a pleasure to watch the family life of *N. pulcher*.