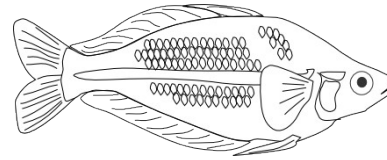


## GOOD TIMES AND BAD WITH MELANOTAENIA HERBERTAXELRODI

by Andrew Boyd



When my wife Julie and I first became involved with the C.D.A.S., it seemed that the thing to do was to keep Rainbowfishes. We joined in what was probably the Society's 'Golden age of Australian natives'. Everyone who was anyone (almost) kept natives and one could pick up 3 or 4 species of *Melanotaenia* at a club auction at reasonable prices. If one were lucky there would be some Peacock and Purple Spotted Gudgeons, or some of the more exotic Blue-eyes, or maybe the lovely Threadfin, *Iriatherina werneri*. If one put in a little effort and went to other peoples' houses, with the idea of raiding their fishrooms, there would be no limit to the number of species available. So it was that we put together our little native tank.

We had some Desert Gobies (which, incidentally, were the first fish we successfully spawned), Peacock Gudgeons, *Melanotaenia splendida splendida*, *fluvialis*, *nigrans*, *maccullochi*, *bosemani*, as well as some Threadfins and *Rhadinocentrus ornatus*. And then, courtesy of the Ralphs' safari to Adelaide, a pair of *Melanotaenia herbertaxelrodi*, the Lake Tebara Rainbowfish. We couldn't abbreviate "Lake Tebara Rainbowfish" to our satisfaction, so they christened "Mr and Mrs Herbert".

From the moment they hit the tank water, the Herberts were special to us. It didn't matter what time of day or night it was, the male never lost his golden body colour and when he began to display to the female, with the red edging his dorsal and anal fins, red tail and flashing neon head stripe, we thought about breeding them.

A 20-litre tank was placed on the kitchen bench-top, next to the 3-footer the Herberts lived in, and duly filled with tap-water and Java moss. After waiting a day for the chlorine to dissipate, we dropped them in. So pleased were they with their new surroundings, they immediately hid under the Java moss and wouldn't come out. I seem to remember that we threw in some mosquito larvae in an effort to coax them into the open, but they must have been reasonably happy, for the next day we discovered some eggs. After recovering from our astonishment, we returned the Herberts back to their home tank and about a week later (the record keeping system was pretty primitive in those days), we noticed some fry milling hungrily about the water's surface. They were given Liquifry and powdered egg-yolk but these clouded the water and about half of the fry died soon afterwards. The surviving fry were then transferred to a 27-litre tank, with a sponge filter, set at fairly rapid aeration.

The fry grew, albeit slowly, and at one month of age, there were 20 or so of them and they were just beginning to develop a nice blue line down the middles of their bodies. Disaster soon came though, for the combination of soft Canberra water and a sponge filter running without the benefit of some shell-grit, to act as a buffer, caused a slow but massive drop in pH. By the time we had diagnosed and fixed the problem, only 2 live fry remained. We had learnt yet another lesson.

If this blow were not hard enough to take, next came the death of the parents. We performed our mandatory weekly 30% water change on the 3-foot native-tank, turning the heater off as the level fell. Having refilled the tank with new water, we switched the heater back on again. Julie noted the water temperature that night and it had reached 36°, because the thermostat inside the heater had stuck. By morning, the Herberts, *bosemani*, Peacock Gudgeons, *werneri* and *Rhadinocentrus* were all dead. The Desert Gobies evidently loved the higher temperatures and the other Australian natives came through too. This brings us to Boyd's Hypothesis on the

Cooking of *Melanotaenias*. The Papua-New Guineans died while the Australians lived. Now the PNG natives tend to live in stable habitats with very little temperature variation, so the sudden temperature rise killed them. On the other hand, the Australians, coming from more exposed country, where the forces of drought and flood can cause dramatic changes in temperature, survived.

A possible flaw in this argument could be the fact that *Rhadinocentrus ornatus*, The Southern Soft-spined Rainbowfish, was the one Australian species that died. More experimentation will be needed to settle the matter, but obviously not with our fish!

We couldn't face the survivors, who were packed off to the next C.D.A.S. auction, but this may have been a silly thing to do, as we now have no idea what longer term effect the 'cooking' may have had on the fishes' fertility and health.

The 2 surviving Herbert fry are still with us and as I write, the smaller one (both are males) is swimming around the 430-litre tank in our living room, neon headstripe blazing and trying to induce some female to follow him into the Cabomba thicket. His bigger brother is resting in the fishroom, bathing in a salty (one teaspoon per gallon) mixture, the floor of his tank covered in shell-grit, in an effort to clear up his body ulcers.

The Ralphs kept a pair of the original Herberts and spawned them a little more successfully, so now we have 2 females and a male from that brood. We have had 9 fry survive their first month and will be breeding them again to ensure a wide dispersal of this lovely fish. Perhaps they will touch someone else's heart the way they have ours. Meanwhile, with the government ban on the import of New Guinean *Melanotaenia* species still in force, with no signs of a relenting (as occurred with *Glossolepis* and *Chilatherina*), and with habitat destruction almost a national pastime in much of PNG, we must all realise that once a species disappears from hobbyists' tanks, it may well be gone forever.

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