

A PIPE DREAM

by Deborah Ralph

The Pipefish Syngnathus sp. was among those caught on our last club outing to Nelligen. This unusual fish looks like a thick piece of chocolate-brown string and grows to only about 4 inches and it curls its tail around bits of plant to avoid being swept away in the current. The fins used for propulsion are very small and barely visible and the mouth is quite tiny. Thus, a close relationship with the sea-horses is evident.

The species we had may have been S. boothae - Booth's Pipefish, which is found around the N.S.W. coast. However, according to David Rentz, who helped us catch and identify the fish, there are a lot of others still to be discovered and named. We agree, as we have found very little information on Pipefish at all.

As these fish come from close to sea-water that is how they should be kept. We

tried to cut down the saltiness of the water gradually but this caused significant losses of the fish, so we settled on a mixture of 8 tablespoons of coarse salt to 5 L of water. The pipefish were quite happy in this, so sea-salt was unnecessary.

The female lays her eggs in a pouch of the male, where they are fertilised. We were very lucky to have a 'pregnant' male, so he was placed in a tank of his own, with a sponge filter, and well looked after, with meals of newly hatched Brine-shrimp that were eaten with relish. We put a number of weighted straws in the tank to give him something to cling to and he seemed quite content to use them. No plants could survive in the salty water, not even Java Moss, so we did without, apart from a few reeds brought back with the fish.

The pouch seemed to grow a little each day as the eggs were swelling - a most unusual sight in a male fish. We checked night and day for any sign of young and were rewarded 14 mornings later; it was an amazing sight. Thin little orange-brown threads about 1/2 inch in length were hanging from straws or floating around and there were some 50-60 of them. We were amazed at their length and their number - all from one father. Feeding them we thought would be a problem. We had infusoria, micro-worms and vinegar eels but were unsure how long these would live in salty water. Anyway, it was all unnecessary worry, for both dad and his babies tucked into the hatchling Brine-shrimp, although we did add some vinegar eels to keep up the food supply. The babies' little tummies were quite high up as most of their length was tail. Things progressed

really well from then on and although we substituted small daphnia and cyclops for Brine-shrimp, fearing they would need a change, they much preferred the latter.

The temperature of the tank was kept around 24°C as this seemed a reasonable compromise for coastal conditions. Water changes were by bi-weekly siphoning from the bottom. With a bare-bottom tank this was quite easy. By now, the fry were nearly 2 months old and doing well.

The holiday season was now upon us and we had 6 family visitors, so we opted for a quick water change, but forgot to mix the salt in properly and lost the entire brood. How mad we were with ourselves but at least we learned our lesson. Maybe we shall be lucky enough to find some more Pipefish, someday, and have a second chance but, on the other hand, perhaps they are better off without us. Well, we can just dream about it anyway.

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