

Spawning the Checkerboard Cichlid *Julidochromis marlieri*

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This species occurs naturally in Lake Tanganyika, which has a fairly alkaline water chemistry. Ideally they prefer a pH of around 8.2, live in and around bottom caves and feed on algae and associated life. They are not naturally carnivorous, although they will scavenge for what they can find. If disturbed they will not flee back to their caves, but hug closely to the rocks and 'merge in'.

The two fish I have vary in size. One is about 3 cm long while the other is 7 cm. My fish were this size when they spawned, but grew up within the limitations of a 16 inch tank with two others of the same species who seem to have disappeared. I have no idea which of the two is the male as the only way to catch them is to disassemble the tank.

As their name suggests, they have a checkerboard appearance in brown and white. This supposedly varies considerably between individuals and colonies in the wild, ranging from almost completely brown to 50% of both brown and white. The dorsal and anal fins are edged with sky blue, making the fish quite beautiful.

I am supposed to tell you here about all the trouble I went to in setting up the right conditions for them to spawn; unfortunately (or fortunately) I had not made any effort to encourage spawning! I upgraded the tank to a 20 inch tank, then from about September to December last year I was very busy and the tank sort of went a tiny bit unattended. So in January when I had a bit more time I decided to find out if there was anything still alive in the Checkerboard tank (I could not even see into the tank anymore because it was covered in so much algae). I cleaned some of the 'muck' off the front glass and found that there were a whole bunch of babies wandering around the tank. Needless to say, I was a tad surprised! I had done nothing deliberate to try and make them spawn (in fact I hadn't done a water change in two months!) but they obviously appreciated that and got right down to it.

After finding this spawning, I know of two more occurring (there were two more appearances of little ones), but they have not spawned in the last three months.

Technical details of the tank include:

- lots of caves for them to hide in,
- slightly alkaline conditions (pH around 7.8)
- no idea of water hardness
- absolutely no plants
- overhead fluorescent aquarium light
- one small corner box filter
- temperature about 27C (slightly dodgy heater,

but they seem to like it)

The spawning occurred in a cave in the tank (at least that is my presumption). The fish had been living in the tank for quite some time, and there appears that the overgrowth of algae may have helped them. (I have been told this is fairly standard for dwarf cichlids, but I'm not sure).

I have no idea of the courting rituals, spawning colours, egg descriptions, or the time taken for them to hatch. I have looked up a few books, but have not been able to find information on this aspect of their lives.

In my tank, the parents took care of the young and were always on constant guard against me watching the fry (it is amazing how many ways you can come up with to quietly creep up on a tank to see the fry and the parents won't let you!). At the slightest sign of my presence the parents would shepherd the fry into the caves and then sit there and watch me until I went away.

The early life stages of the fry were not observed so I have no idea how old they were when I saw them, or what percentage of the eggs were successful. The fry, by the time I first saw them, were around 3mm long and were a solid dark brown colour. Within a week of their first venture outside the caves, they started to change colour to a more mottled brown. Within 3-4 weeks they were 1 cm in length and basically the same colour as their parents, with the exception of the blue fin edging. They grew rapidly in the following two weeks and then slowed right down after reaching about 1.75-2.25cm. At this stage they were miniature versions of their parents.

During the initial stages I fed the fry exclusively on absolutely nothing! They foraged for themselves amongst the algae, feeding on the infusoria and other microscopic life. After a while I started submerging flake food for them (plus the odd Bottom Feeder pellet) and they seemed to thrive. Currently, feeding consists of a mad rush for the flake food floating on top of the water. I always love feeding time because this is about the only time that I get to see most of them together at one time.

Water changes were a rare thing in the early stages of their growth. They were so small I didn't dare change any water in case I sucked any of them out. They seemed to have no problem with the lack of water changes, so I'll do the same thing next time they breed.

I hope that many of you out there who don't feel you would have any chance of breeding fish take heart from this article. When you least expect it, fish spawn in what you think are the most unlikely circumstances. At the same time as the Checkerboards were spawning I had Mollies, Guppies, Siamese Fighters and Albino Kribensis all spawning as well, and it was totally unexpected. I still don't know why they all chose to spawn at that particular time (not ALL my tanks are neglected) but there were certainly enough of them that did. I wonder if there was something in the water?

