

Species Profile: Lamprologus ocellatus “Gold”

My first foray into the realm of shelldwellers was with *Neolamprologus multifasciatus* (Multis). But, from day one - I had my eyes on the Gold Occie! I had seen pictures of this beautiful little shellie and was convinced that I really needed some. I had to wait a bit because I had been told that they won't thrive in something as small as a 10 gallon. But I was in the process of converting my 75 gallon Malawi tank to a Tanganyikan Community tank. One of the inhabitants was going to be the Gold Occies. In the wild, *Lamprologus ocellatus* inhabits the sandy shores of Lake Tanganyika which are littered with empty shells from the snail *Neothauma tanganicensis*. They typically exist at a depth of 15 to 100 feet. Unlike the Multis who like LOTS of shells, Occies seem to do ok with at least one shell per fish. When I set up my tank, I had tall rock formations on each end with a sand bed in the middle. I placed a piece of long driftwood near one rock formation and sprinkled an assortment of shells. I used whale eye shells and white pearl turbo shells. I was planning on picking up 6 juvenile Occies so I added about 15 shells. Substrate in the tank is beige pool filter sand. I picked up my new additions from River City Aquatics and my fun began! When I first got them, they were only



Photo by Diane Tennison

about 1" long. At that size, it was impossible to determine the sex. Upon adding them to the tank, it became quickly obvious why these guys are a favorite among the hobbyists. The beautiful color is only surpassed by the spunk these guys have! They quickly took to "re-arranging" the shells to suite them. My favorite behavior has to be the "bulldozer". When they are trying to excavate around a shell - they open their mouths and plow head first into the sand. Tail is flicking and they will actually bulldoze the sand. Sand flies everywhere

(thankfully they have chosen to inhabit an area of my tank which is nowhere NEAR the filter intakes)! I am also amused at their show of force. For being such little guys, they certainly don't lack attitude. They will parade around with fins flared and if someone comes too close - they flare out their gill plates which makes their head look even larger. They certainly remind me of little bulldogs. As they matured, it became obvious that I had 3 males and 2 females (I lost an unfortunate soul in the beginning). The males grow much larger than the females and appear to have a darker coloration to their head. Also, the females have a white line on the top edge of the dorsal fin.

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Unlike Multis, who excavate a bare area around the base of their shells - the Occies will actually bury their shells so only the opening is exposed. The males have set up separate territories that have about a 6-8" circumference. If one male wanders into another's territory - all 3 will spar up for a little go round! Typically there is no damage involved - they simply flare fins and gills at each other and chase with mouths wide open. They don't even allow the females into their territory unless they are ready to spawn. One female hangs out near the tall rock formation and the other female has claimed a few shells near the other rock formation.



Spawning is very secretive and I didn't realize that it had actually taken place. I first noticed unusual action when one of the males arranged his shells in a little triangle and built a mound of sand around the whole thing. He then buried one shell completely with only the opening

exposed. Soon after this happened I noticed I was missing a female. I thought that she was dead. At least a week passed with no sight of her. Then one day I noticed a tail sticking out



Photos by Diane Tennison

of the shell that was buried. At first I thought she was stuck in the shell, but soon saw her tail move. The male hovered nearby, letting no one into his territory. Probably another week passed when I noticed that the shell seemed to have been excavated a bit. I looked closer and much to my surprise - teeny, tiny fry were swimming around the mouth of the shell! I immediately took action. One of the other inhabitants in this Community tank is a trio of Black *calvus*. *Calvus* are known as fry hunters! I plunged my hand into the tank and the fry quickly scurried back into the shell (as did the

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female). I gently dug up the shell and removed the whole thing to a floating acrylic breeder box that was in the tank. I wrapped the breeder box in a pair of old pantyhose (yes, they were clean...) to prevent the *calvus* from sucking the fry through the slits in the breeder box. As soon as the female came out of the shell, I plucked her out and dropped her back in the



Photo by Dave Hansen

main tank. I added another shell to the breeder box and waited. Within about 30 minutes, the fry began to come out of the shell. I counted about 20 fry! They were very small at this point, basically nothing other than eyes and a tail. I began feeding them freeze-dried Cyclopeeze twice daily. In 60 days, they have grown from eyes with a tail to about ¾" mini Gold Occies. At about 30 days I removed the

pantyhose from around the breeder box to allow for better water flow. They have thrived in the breeder box floating in the main tank. They are almost ready to go to a new home. I noticed the other day that the female who lives by the rock formation is hanging VERY close to a shell. The tank also has some *Julidochromis regani* Kipili (known to be egg stealers) who have taken a very keen interest in her shell. When they approach she dives in. I'm wondering if I will have new babies soon...

■ Diane Tennison