

Species Profile: *Neochromis rufocaudalis*

The lakes of the African rift contain many varied species of aquatic life. Each of these large bodies of water contain their own unique varieties of fish that have come to take advantage of particular feeding niches. Food supply is generally the key factor in determining diversity. Algae supply is abundant in these lakes and many different species of fish have evolved to exploit this food source. Not surprisingly, the true grazers of the rift valley region have similar characteristics. *Labeotropheus* species of Lake Malawi, the *Tropheus* of Lake Tanganyika, and the *Neochromis* of Lake Victoria are three such species that although have evolved separate from one another, share common traits. Specialized tooth structure, elongated intestinal tracts, and a robust torpedo shaped body structure all aid these fish in processing the food on which they feed.

The fish I want to deal with here is endemic to Lake Victoria. *Neochromis rufocaudalis*, formerly known as *Neochromis nigricans* is not one of the more threatened species of Lake Victoria. I am not certain as to how geographical variants of this species may differ, but the variety of *rufocaudalis* that we keep was exported from the Saa Nane Island region of Lake Victoria.

This is not a large fish, growing only to about five inches maximum. Females and sub dominant males are similarly patterned. A broken series of blotches along the lateral line is backgrounded by an earth brown coloration. Dominant male coloration is strikingly beautiful. Males will sport a dark blue to almost black body coloration with bright red tail and anal fins. Several jet-black vertical bars are evenly spaced along the body. The dorsal fin is a vibrant metallic blue outlined with a bright red stripe. The horizontal barring between the eyes of this beauty, commonly seen in Lake Malawi species, really sets this fish off nicely.

Dominant males will stake out a territory, usually in a

rock cave or crevice. When not chasing other fish, male *Neochromis rufocaudalis* spend their time showing off with a series of "shimmy's" to prospective females. It is a beautiful sight to see a large group of these fish grazing an algae covered rock. Reflections cast on their body glitter and gleam in the light. To keep these undemanding fish in top condition, it is

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helpful to feed a spirulina base flake in small amounts frequently. This would be a great fish for those hobbyists who feel their animals are always hungry and have the need to sprinkle food to them every time they walk by the tank. *Rufocaudalis* are not shy fish and will learn to recognize their feeder on sight. They will remain mostly in the open under captive settings, but caves and secluded places

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throughout the tank will aid in overcoming any timidity they may possess. Although these fish have spawned for me, I have as yet to observe the act. I presume that breeding is in the typical great lakes mouthbrooder manner. When keeping a group of any type of Victorian cichlid, the bigger the tank, the better. I would suggest an aquarium of no less than 55 gallons for a group of twelve *Neochromis rufocaudalis*. It is not advisable to mix any Lake Victoria rock cichlid species together in a tank due to the possibility of interbreeding; however, one may find it necessary from time to time. The *rufocaudalis* might be an exception to this rule. The very rounded, trophoeus-like head structure of this species make it easily identifiable from most other cichlids from this region. I have previously grouped a *rufocaudalis* colony with an equal number of *Haplochromis* sp. "purple yellow" and there was no damaging inter-species conflicts. Males and females of each species are readily able to identify their own and any prelude to breeding activity is kept between same species fish. If you must mix species of Victorian cichlids, try to use fish as different as possible. This includes differing body shape and especially coloration. We as hobbyists must en-

deavor to keep our fish races as pure as possible because, as Brad Harrison in his introduction to Lake Victoria stated, "there is no going back to the well"

Neochromis rufocaudalis are a peaceful fish and mix well with Malawian mbuna. Like most Victorian rock cichlids, they are not a common fish in the hobby and are an undemanding jewel for our tanks. Under a Grolux lighting scheme, dominate males sparkle and stand out very nicely. Shale rock work and artificial plants will aid in making this fish feel comfortable. Enjoy!

—by Greg Steeves