

## Species Profile: *Synodontis multipunctatus*

**Etymology:** The genus name *Synodontis* comes from the Greek words *syn* meaning together and *odont* meaning tooth. This is in reference to the closely spaced lower jaw teeth. The species name *multipunctatus* is derived from the Latin words *multi* meaning many and *punctat* meaning. This refers to the spotting on the catfish.

**Common Names:** Cuckoo Catfish

**Described:** Boulenger, 1898

**Family:** Mochokidae (Squeakers or upside-down catfishes)

**Max Size:** 16 cm (6 ½")

**Distribution:** Lake Tanganyika, Africa and the tributaries of the Malagarasi River, Tanzania. The type species was collected from Sumbu, Lake Tanganyika.

**Habitat:** Inhabits the muddy bottom down to a depth of at least 100m. (328ft.) in Lake Tanganyika. Often found in large schools.

**Natural diet:** Snails (*Neothauma* sp.) and other gastropods, eggs, insects, shrimps.

**Temperature:** 23-26°C (73-78°F)

**pH:** 7.5-9

**Description:** Body color is golden beige and the belly is white. There are black spots of varying sizes that cover the upper body and head. The body usually gets larger spots than the

head. They have large eyes. The caudal fin is forked. The black dorsal and caudal fins are edged in white. The mouth is underneath the head and has 3 pairs of feathery barbels. Males can be identified by their genital papillae.

The common name of Cuckoo catfish comes from the reproductive method of the catfish. It is similar to the way that Cuckoo birds lay their eggs in other birds nests. This is the only fish known to practice brood parasitism.

When the catfish spawns, it likes to spawn with host fish. They are mouthbrooding cichlids. When the host fish is spawning, the *Synodontis* like to rush in and spawn as well.

They steal some eggs as well, if they can. The female mouthbrooder gets in a panic wanting to save her eggs. She picks up both her eggs and the eggs of the catfish. Inside the mouthbrooders mouth, the catfish fry hatch first (approximately 3 days). The catfish fry then start eating the eggs and fry of the host fish. They will even try to cannibalize their siblings if there isn't enough host eggs/fry to eat. The host mother's instinct is so strong, that when she releases the catfish fry, she may take them back in her mouth again when danger is present as if they were her own. However, that does not mean they require hosts. They can and do spawn with just laying eggs like other fish. The hosting method works a lot better and seems to have best results.

Baby *Synodontis multipunctatus* come out

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looking like miniatures of their parents. They start off looking quite dark until they start putting some size on their bodies. It takes a long time for these fish to become sexually mature. It can take from 3-5 years before they are ready to spawn, so be prepared to wait if you have purchased small Synos for your tank.

As they are a schooling fish, they should be kept in groups. The bare minimum group is 3,



Photo by Lisa Boorman

but more is preferable. They tend to be peaceful fish, but can eat small tankmates such as fry. At times they can cruise the tank looking for meals. They do prefer meaty meals, but will accept just about everything in the aquarium. Be careful if you have to net *Synodontis multipunctatus* as they have strong spines that can become entangled in the net. They can live up to 15 years in the aquarium.

I got my group of *Synodontis multipunctatus* from a friend who imported them from the Lake. He told me they were collected at Kari-lani Island. I have 3 males and 1 female. They were full-sized already, but I don't think that

they were mature yet. I placed them into my 225 gallon tank. This tank has a light layer of sand for a substrate. There are a few rocks, and lots of clay pots and larger shells as well. My aquascaping does not get 'built up'. I keep all the decorations on the bottom of the tank. I occasionally have to catch holding females in this tank, and I really do not want to tear the tank down to catch a fish. I feed this tank with

pellets and assorted flake food. They also get crushed snails, and occasional treats of frozen foods. They get biweekly water changes of 40%. This tank is actually not heated anymore. I did not notice when the heater stopped working, and since the fish were fine, I did not replace the heater. The

temperature of the tank tends to be around 73° F (23°C) in the winter and 75°F(24°C) or so in the summer. I had no fish holding in the tank for a while. I guess they were taking a break!

After several months, I got a few mouthfuls from my *Cyrtocara moorii*. However, I never seemed to get any Syno fry in these. I started running out of room for fry, so I stopped checking the holding females for several more months. I would estimate that it was approximately a full year after I got these guys, that anything happened. I had a female Labido-

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chromis caeruleus hold. Since this was the only female I had (I had lost a bunch of larger ones earlier for some unknown reason), I figured I



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Photos by Lisa Boorman

better strip her. I was hoping again that maybe... just maybe I'd get Syno fry. Again, I was disappointed. However, a few days later I noticed that a moorii female was holding again. I figured the fry would be close to the same size so they could share a tank, so I stripped her. Out came a ton of moorii fry and 3 little catfish. I was ecstatic! That means the *Synodontis* I had were finally sexually mature and knew what to do. So, I put them in a container and fed them a few eggs from a female I stripped early, but mostly they were fed baby brine shrimp. I did lose a couple of the fry from that batch. The one survived and was placed in a small tank with some cichlid fry. He never seemed to bother them. A month or so later, I had 2 female moorii holding. One was all moorii fry, and the other had 9 baby *Synodontis multipunctatus* with some moorii eggs. This time however, I didn't lose any of the Synos and they are currently residing with the moorii fry from the other female in a small tank. They

get fed small pellets, flake and baby brine shrimp. I love how these guys eat in a bare bottom tank. They look like little vacuum cleaners scooting across the bottom of the tank. I haven't had any fry from them in a while as it seems the fish are on a slow cycle of breeding again, but since spring is coming soon, I imagine that will change. I just wish I could actually witness the spawning, but hopefully one day I can. I highly recommend keeping the little vacuum cleaners! They are a welcome addition to any Rift Lake tank.



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■ Lisa Boorman