

Species Profile: *Thorichthys meeki*

Common names: Firemouth cichlid, Firemouth, redbreasted cichlid.

Described: Brind, 1918

Synonyms: *Thorichthys helleri meeki*, *Cichlasoma meeki*, *Herichthys meeki*, *Cichlasoma hyorhynchum*

Family: Cichlidae

Care: pH range: 6.5 - 7.5; 26-30°C (78-86°F)

Distribution: Central America: Atlantic slope, in the Usumacinta River drainage, the Belize River drainage, and near Progreso, in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. There are populations that stay alive in Hawaii and Florida. This is most likely hobbyists releasing them or escapees from fish farms.

Max. size: 17 cm (6 ½")

Sexing: Sexing is difficult. Both sexes have a bright red underside that is usually more intense on males. Males will also usually have more pointed and longer dorsal fins. Males are frequently larger in body.

The preferred habitat for *Thorichthys meeki* is the lower and middle area in a slow moving river. The bottom of the river is often mud or sand covered. It will stay close to the shoreline vegetation for protection.

When firemouths are ready to spawn, they often spawn in conjunction with several

neighboring pairs of firemouths (if any other pairs are available). Males will clean the area, often a rock or flowerpot. The female then lays up to 300 eggs. This depends on the size of the female. After approximately 2 days the eggs hatch. The wigglers will stay dependant on their yolk sac for another 4-7 days. They then become free swimming. This is when they can be fed. Good food sources for baby firemouths include crushed flake, daphnia, microworms and baby brine shrimp. The parents guard the fry during this time. They also will find food for the fry if possible.

Meeki seem quite aggressive, but they really aren't. It's all a bluff! If another fish doesn't believe the threat and still goes for the firemouth, the firemouth will swim away. The firemouth does look quite intimidating to other fish. This is because of the spots on their gill covers. When a meeki flares it's gills at other fish, these spots become visible from the front of the fish, and it appears that the firemouth is much bigger than it actually is. This generally means that if your aquarium is of a decent size then you can keep tetras, and other smaller fish in with them (as long as they don't fit easily in their mouths!).

I received my fish as very young fry barely past the freeswimming stage approximately 7 years ago. They were brought to me as a special gift from my friend Juan Miguel Artigas Azas who collected the parents himself from Laguna de las Ilusiones in the lower Grijalva

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river system at Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico. They were placed in a 20 gallon bare tank with a sponge filter. I then was attending ACA after that, and no one was available to feed them, but when I got back, they were fine, and in fact had grown some. I assume they ate small creatures from the sponge filter in the meantime. After they got some real growth on them, I ended up giving some away as I didn't have room for them all. I ended up with 2 gorgeous pairs. They were in a 90g tank with several *Satanoperca leucosticta*. One of the pair spawned in there. I raised up some of these fry and sold them or gave them away to friends.

After this, I needed the 90 for something else, and the firemouths had no place to be. I then placed them into a 225 gallon Malawi tank. I only placed them in there as they were adult sized, and the 225 had nothing super aggressive in it. They spawned a few times in the tank, but as I didn't have spare room for *Thorichthys* fry, I didn't save them. Several years passed and I lost one of the original pairs. I think it was a female. The solitary male also developed a white eye. I suspect he can still somewhat see out of that eye, but not very well.

I got to thinking that it had been a long time since they spawned for me in the 225g tank and I realized how long I had them, and thought that if I wanted to continue them, I better get some more fry from them. This was about the time my outdoor pond was warm enough to put some fish in it. The pond itself is not all that large. It is approximately 150



Photo by Lisa Boorman

gallons. I caught all 3 adult *Thorichthys meeki* and placed them into the pond around the middle of July. This pond has no filter. There are lots of plants in there though. I also added a few gouramies. I added a few broken clay flower pots for them to spawn on. Within a few days, there were eggs on one of the pots. They spent the rest of the summer guarding their fry in the tank from the gouramies and the spare male. In early September, when

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the temperature was starting to cool down at night, I went and removed as many fry as I could find. I got approximately 20 of them. The next weekend I went and got the parents, and discovered I had not caught all of the fry out the first time. I got another 20 or so and they all went inside. The fry to their own tank and the parents are back into the 225g. The pond was not fed by me all summer so all the fish in the pond survived on whatever insect or algae they could find. They did not destroy any of my pond plants. The fry are now nicely growing on a diet of microworms, baby brine shrimp, small flake and some small pellets.

I highly recommend these fish, especially if you can find the highly coloured specimens. They have a good personality and do well in large community tanks. They must be first-rate fish if I've kept them for 7 years!

■ *Lisa Boorman*