

## Species Profile: *Tropheus* sp. Red "Moliro"

### The Tropheus Bug Bites

After many years of not keeping tropical fish, I decided after our move to Texas in 2000 to revisit the hobby I enjoyed as a teenager. To say that things had changed since then would be an understatement! I decided to set up a 65 gallon Lake Malawi tank and went with the multi-species of males route with a few "rogues" from other areas. The biggest tanks I had previously were 20 gallons so this was a "huge" tank for me. The family and I enjoyed the Malawi tank, however, I was harboring thoughts of a new tank.

After a visit to Armke's a few years ago with my wife, we saw some fish I had truly never seen before - *Tropheus*. These fish and the non-stop activity we saw in their tanks of *Tropheus* fascinated us. In addition, my wife found their unique shape "cute". She actually found them more interesting than I did at that time. But in discussing the fish with some of the staff and their enthusiasm for the genus, I became more interested in these fish. So the research began for me on these fish from Lake Tanganyika. I was surprised at really how little good information from experts was available. However, "The Cichlid Room Companion" is a good start (<http://www.cichlidae.com/>) along with Ad Konings' books on Lake Tanganyika. That which was available was fairly consistent in describing the general behavior and keeping *Tropheus*. You need to obtain a fairly large

number of fish to start with to address their aggressive intra-specific behavior and allow them to establish their hierarchy. It is very difficult to introduce new members later on to the colony, as the existing members will dispense with the intruders. One should have a large tank with lots of hiding areas and with ultra-perfect water conditions. Also, their dietary requirements and propensity for intestinal maladies probably present the biggest challenge in successfully keeping them. Unfortunately, there are more than a few articles that can found on the Internet that describe the agony of losing an entire colony of fish. Thus, it is for these reasons that several articles conclude that these fish are not for the "novice" and present a challenge even to "expert" fish keepers. In addition, there are so many color varieties now known that there is something for everyone. OK, so now I was really intrigued. By no means an "expert" I was really interested in keeping these fish.

### Taking the Tropheus Plunge

Last year shortly after River City Aquatics opened, I asked for a quote on an Oceanic 125 gallon set up for my *Tropheus* experiment. I figured the best way to sell the idea of a new tank to my bride was to position it as a new piece of "fine furniture" hence the Oceanic choice and she was receptive to the idea of me trying to keep *Tropheus*. Well, we got side tracked along the way opting to put in a water

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Photo by Gene Janulis

garden last summer. That is another story. However, last December I went back and asked if I could get the set up quoted again. To my surprise, Carlos Cardenas still had the original quote tacked up on his board and said it was still good. I asked him why he kept it and he said it was one of the first quotes he did when they opened. Destiny staring me in the face right there and them, I placed the tank order. However, I suspect Carlos knew I'd be back once the *Tropheus* bug had bit me.

So the decision was made I was going to set up a *Tropheus* tank but now I was faced with the decision of what *Tropheus* to procure? Also, I was unsure if I would be a "purist" and go with one species or for some variety get two

different species. This is a challenge as well because depending on what you read and want to believe there are between four to over 12 species within the *Tropheus* lineage. This posed an

interesting challenge as well. I

decided to go with two species and trust Mr. Koning' and Carlos' advice and choose one "red" species and one "black" species. This seemed safe as one is from the south side of the lake and the latter from the north side. In the event of successfully spawning the fish, I certainly did not want to run the risk of any hybrids.

So the tank was set up in early January. In addition to the 125-gallon tank (72 x 18 x 23), it was equipped with a 300-watt heater, lighting, Cherry Oak stand and canopy and an Eheim 2260 canister filter. The flow from this filter is awesome. Originally, I was going with something smaller but in the interest of obtaining optimum water conditions I decided

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to go big.

I was going to be patient and let the tank naturally cycle. I decided to add some *Synodontis multipunctatus* to get the nitrogen cycle going. Yes, I now know the method of spawning for these cats. My original decision was made to keep only fish from Lake Tanganyika in this new tank and my research did not extend to the catfish from Tanganyika I was going to add. Oh, well. The poor catfish were being tossed unmercifully around the tank due to the flow from the 2260. I put in a few pieces of small holey rock to give them refuge while I shopped for some show pieces to complete my set up for the future arrival of the *Tropheus* I had yet to decide on and order. After all, I had weeks ahead of me before the tank had cycled and was ready for the addition of 40-50 *Tropheus*.

Five days after being set up I received a call from Carlos on a "great" deal on a group of Kiriza and Moliro *Tropheus*. So much for

patience, I ordered 25 of each. Now I needed that big holey rock. I also added Bio Spira from Marineland Labs to do get a jump-start on the bacteria colony that was needed to handle this fish load so soon. Three rock showpieces (180 lbs total weight) were chosen the same day the fish had arrived. Rock was placed, fish were added and I crossed my fingers that the fish would do OK without



Photo by Gene Janulis

having the tank fully cycled. The ammonia peaked at 0.75 ppm during the first two days and was 0.00 ppm by the fourth day. Nitrite peaked at 1.00 ppm on days 4-5 and was still at 0.25 ppm a week later but was 0.00 at day 10. This stuff does work and I

recommend it for a new tank.

The biggest challenge during this period was that on day 4 the colonies had Ick. In particular the Moliro group. I did the usual. I did a water change, temperature was slowly raised to 82o, salt and Quick Cure was added. This was a particularly challenging bout of Ick

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as it took a week of Quick Cure treatments before all signs were gone. Fortunately, during these first two weeks of *Tropheus* keeping there were no fish losses.

These fish are so, so active. They are highly social and gregarious. One can spend hours watching their behavior. Watching the males stake out and defend territories and vying for the attention of the females is non-stop. If you want a place to sit quietly and meditate, sitting in front of a tank of *Tropheus* is NOT the place.

### Breeding of *Tropheus* sp. Red "Moliro"

The Moliro group averaged about 1-1 ¼ inches in length when I received them and the Kiriza group was much smaller ranging from ½ - 1 inch. So the Moliro group had an initial edge in size on the Kiriza group. They have been growing quite rapidly and now all average over 2 inches in total length. I feed them once per day. Currently they are receiving ½ tbs. of OSI Spirulina flake, 1/3 tsp. of Dainichi Veggie Deluxe (Baby - Sinking) and 1/3 tsp. of Dainichi Veggie Deluxe (Small - Sinking).

I am quite rigorous in my tank maintenance

and chemistry. I do 50% water changes weekly and use Seachem Tanganyika Buffer and Cichlid Lake Salt to maintain water parameters. Water chemistry is as follows:

pH = 8.8 (it will drop over the course of the week but it is 8.8 after the water change)  
NH3 = 0 ppm  
NO2 = 0 ppm  
NO3 = 10-20 ppm



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KH = 16-20°  
GH = 14-16°

The Moliro *Tropheus* can undergo quite dramatic and quick color variations. When in "fright" mode they show a barred pattern with

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some red, blue and green. Top males and females are dark burgundy red, almost black with some lighter red areas. They also have blue in the base of their dorsal, anal and pectoral fins. Male's eyes when interested in spawning take on a bit of yellow color, which provides a stark contrast with their nearly black heads.

Almost two months after adding the fish I observed a female Moliro holding and the next day I observed a spawning first hand. The male gets the attention of a receptive female, she lays an egg picks it up. It is fertilized as the male "dances" in front of her, the two of them forming a "T". In a week after my initial observation, I had at least four females holding. They move so much and there is so much activity in the tank that I cannot be sure of my count. The fish were less than 2 inches in length and I was surprised that they could spawn so early. I decided to let nature take its course as I did not expect that these young fish would hold the eggs long enough to strip them. In addition, I had no desire to try and capture them. I began looking for any signs of Moliro fry after three weeks. I did not observe any fry in the six weeks following my initial holding observation. After returning from a business trip I observed one fry on my return, this was seven weeks after the initial spawning. Several were still holding. No telling if this fry was from the original round. The day after I observed the first fry I spotted another and then

another. A total of five have been released since the end of April to mid-May. No additions since then although there are again some holding. They are growing quite rapidly and the largest is almost ½ inch in length. They have a hint of red but sport a strong barred pattern at this young age. It is interesting to note that even at this early age they engage in typical *Tropheus* behavior of chasing one another and attempting to lip lock to establish dominance.

Overall, my short experience (less than six months) with *Tropheus* has been enjoyable and interesting. However, there have been some bumps. There have been some skirmishes. I have lost one Moliro due to aggression and have a Kiriza sporting one eye. Those teeth that are so well adapted for algae grazing are also quite good at picking a scale off of a rival as well. Somebody always seems to have a nipped fin or two. Also, there have been a few times when I observed a sluggish fish or two at feeding time. I immediately did a 50% water change at those times and everything got back on track. Actually, they always seem more relaxed after a water change and feeding.

■ *Gene Janulis*