

## Species Profile: *Tropheus* sp. "Black" Bemba orange flame

My definition of *Tropheus* Black Bemba: WOW! Let me start by saying, "WOW"! I say that now, but I was very hesitant at first on adding *Tropheus* to my hobby. I have heard that they are not the easiest to care for. Susceptible to disease and individual losses caused by others in the group. Also losses caused by inattentive care and maintenance is a reason for concern. Did I want to commit to taking care of *Tropheus*?

After a month of "decision making" and constantly searching through the web and harassing other *Tropheus* owners for information and answers to my doubts, I decided to give them a try. Several reasons lead to this decision. I have a 75 gallon tank that was occupied by *calvus* and *compressiceps*. I enjoy this species because of their stature and regal appearance, but they did not offer much in the way of movement and activity. Cost of *Tropheus* of course played an important part of the process. Individual prices and the fact you would need to purchase a "colony" which could be any number from a eight to thirty depending on tank size. Feeding and water maintenance would be a challenge. The *Tropheus* was my answer to creating movement in the tank and the cost was answered by Robert. Those who are members of the Hill Country Cichlid Club know of Robert by his forum name of "Ripple". I was ready for the maintenance challenge even though I consider myself a novice in the hobby.

*Tropheus* sp. "Black" Bemba orange flame" is found in the northern parts of Lake Tanganyika.

The general areas include Ubwari peninsula near Magara in Burundi and in Tanzania near Bulu Point and Cape Kungwe. The climate is very tropical which suits the *Tropheus* with the warm water temperatures especially around the rocky shoreline in the 5 to 7 meter range (16 ½ - 23 feet). The algae covered rocks which not only furnish the main food source but create numerous caves and holes for safety and exploration. Knowing this information should help in the setup of a *Tropheus* tank. I normally have water temperature in all of my tanks set at 80 degrees Fahrenheit. For the *Tropheus* I raised the temperature to 82 degrees F (27.7 degrees Celsius) and have holey rock stretching from one end to the other. Not only are there rocks in front but I have a 3-D background with numerous holes which allow entry and exits to the area in back of the background. There are no plants either live or artificial occupying the tank. The substrate is small to medium gravel which is no problem for the *Tropheus* to pick up and move around the tank. The tank is filtered by two Emperor 400's which not only filtrate but create water surface movement.

I mention the maintenance challenge in keeping *Tropheus* which led me to buy my first water test kit. I keep mostly Malawi Cichlids and they can endure extreme water changes that take place over a short period of time when water maintenance is overlooked periodically. This can not be said with *Tropheus*. I have started keeping records and testing the

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*Tropheus* tank water. My other fish are fed once a day and water change of 20% every 7 days.

My feeding of the *Tropheus* is three times a day: Two feedings consisting of a veggie mix of *Tropheus* flake, pure Spirulina, and HBH Graze flake. One feeding is Dainichi Veggie Deluxe baby sinking pellets, which has now been excluded and is substituted with the veggie mix, due to the presence of fry.

All water tests results are within limits, with the exception of the nitrates. I am still high in nitrates with 70 PPM. I am in the process of increasing the percentage and frequency of the water changes.

Though still a bit high in the nitrates, the presence does increase the growth of the algae, which is a

constant food source. The fact that the fluorescent lights are on approximately 15 hours daily, may also aid in the algae growth. The fry are not feed any other special foods and receive the same as the adults, except in the form of a finely crushed flake.

The *Tropheus* maximum length in nature shows to be around 13 cm (5.1 inches), in the aquarium the length will be slightly shorter both in the male and females of which the male will be the largest. The color on the male is black from nose to tail fin. A red vertical stripe runs through the middle of the body from the belly up through the dorsal fin. The stripe varies in

width and intensity, depending on sex and ranking in the colony. The stripe in the dominant males is wide, and a solid red color. The "other's" stripe is not a solid color but varies, it may be lighter to dark and vice versa. Also it may not be a solid stripe but maybe a partial stripe or just one thin line. I am not sure in other types of *Tropheus*, but the stripe is like a



Photo by Spencer Jack

finger print, showing different designs for each fish. These designs have not changed in pattern in the small amount of time I have kept them. The dominant males do have the widest and the reddest of the stripes.

Speaking of the dominant males, which I have two in my setup: One controls

one end of the tank, behind a long horizontal holey rock and the other controls the opposite end from behind a tall vertical holey rock.

Though they control from both ends, they tend to lure prospective females behind their rocks to induce spawning. Though they control and spawn behind these structures, it does not limit them to the rest of the tank. Both of the males stretch their control to the middle of the tank. When the two tank bosses do cross paths normally in the middle of the tank, they show their dominance. They will shake and vibrate in a circular motion, showing as much red as possible. This confrontation sometimes ends in one

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nipping the other and chases him back to the other end of the tank. But other times the battle is visible by the locking of jaws with jerking and twisting of their bodies. This continues till surrender and flight by one of the combatants. Saying that *Tropheus* are aggressive would be correct. Although there is constant nipping and thumping going on, keeping the colony under control, there has not been any damage observed at this time. No scales missing, no fins nipped, nor any one forced to stay in a corner and not move. There is always movement, some more swiftly than others and some more violent than others. Because of their temperament and food requirements, they do not play well with others. Since the mainstay is vegetable matter, only a few fish might meet these requirements. I believe one such species is the *Eretmodus cyanostictus* (Goby Cichlid).

The *Tropheus* took up residence in the 75g on November 8th, 2005 and would you believe there was a female noticeably holding on November 15th. When I say noticeably I mean that she may have been holding days before. The swelling of the bugle cavity is not very large when the females are first holding eggs and was hard for me to recognize. But it is getting easier, since it appears spawning rituals takes place all the time. When spawning takes place, the male as in displaying is dominance, will display his best red stripe and vibrate his body and tail fin in an attempt to entice the female away from the colony. The reason for luring the female away is that if a spawning attempt takes place in the

open, other males create confusion by trying to get in on the act. Once in seclusion the vibrating display continues with the male laying on



Photo by Robert De Leon

his side releasing his milt which in turn is picked up by the female and thus fertilizes the eggs stored in her mouth. I have observed one of the dominant males during the spawning and when the female was chased off by intruding males, the dominant male would rub his belly alongside the rock. This was observed almost each time before he left the site. Shortly the female returned and spawning would resume. When the male would leave to chase off uninvited males, the female would pick at the rock as though she was eating. After observing this routine between the male and the female, I realized she was picking in the same line that the male had previously rubbed himself. I believe she was retrieving milt left by the male or she was eating in a spot that had a strong scent of the male. But because I have not heard of

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this type on behavior it may have been random acts of both fish. I have not observed this behavior again (yet) and am attempting to verify the observation with authorities in the trade. *Tropheus* are maternal mouth brooders and the female cares for the fry until they are free-swimming. Once free-swimming there is no parental care and she will get back in the flow with the rest of the colony.

On November 29th, she released one fry (or it escaped) and it was visible during feeding time. I was surprised to see fry, because it was visible that the female was still holding. The next day the female was not showing sign of holding any fry, but only one fry was visible in the tank. The fry appear to be close to ¼ inch long when free-swimming. The body of the fry is light brown or tan, with darker brown vertical stripes. The fry stay close to the substrate and in the rocks and only venture out during feeding time, and not very far from safety. As of December 1st only 3 fry were accounted for. The fourth fry was noticed about 4 days later.

My first assumption on the care of the fry was that the female would release and then rejoin the flow of the colony, but that has changed. I observed another female positioning herself under a small overhang of holey rock. She remained there for days and slowly would let one or two fry out and they would return back to her if other *Tropheus* appeared. In another two days she had released a total of four fry and even though they stayed close, she would not let them

back in for safety, but instead would run off intruders. After the fry had moved off from her location, she would return to her release site momentarily and then re-enter the group. Unlike some cichlids, the *Tropheus* females will continue to eat during the time span she is holding the fry.



Photo by Robert De Leon

I would not recommend *Tropheus* as a first time Cichlid to begin your hobby with. You must be very dedicated in the care and feeding of this fish. Unless you do the necessary research and gather as much information as possible and are prepared to follow through with the daily routines, this fish is not easiest to care for. I am doing water test every 3 to 4 days and changing the water every 4 days with a 30% change of water volume. I may increase the amount of water changed or cut down to twice a day feedings. Once the feeding and water changes produce a desired level in the testing of the water, and I am comfortable with the

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results, then the testing will not be as frequent.

The only thing that I have not mentioned is that before you begin: decide if this tank will be for display or for breeding. Display is for visual pleasure with no attempt in the future to retrieve adults or fry from the tank. This would be a hardship to remove and replace the structures in the tank each time a fish is to be removed. Not only stress on you, but on the fish. A change in their landscape would require them to regain control over the pecking order. If you are interested in breeding and attempting to keep the fry, then the tank setup will be very different. I have heard from breeders that there is no rock or structures of any kind, except for a few flower pots. The pots are placed on their side through out the tank. In this manner the pots can be easily removed when it is time to remove a fish from the tank. Also the information I have gathered is that once the colony has become "established" there should be no adding of more fish to the colony. This also applies to removing a female holding fry and then placing her back in the group later on. The way around this is to remove the female at night once they are all settled and when it is time for her to re-enter the group she is placed back during darkness.

You can tell by the first few lines of this article that I have enjoyed these fish immensely so far. Not only have they been very interesting, they have been amusing to watch. There are 20 Bemba occupying the tank and there is constant

movement with them keeping the pecking order in tact and spawning. I do not know if other *Tropheus* are this easy to spawn, but these are very prolific breeders.

At the time this article was started there were three fry. Now there four more with two females still holding. No matter which way you present your *Tropheus*, they are interesting, personal and fun to watch. This is still a work in progress, but I am enjoying the fish.

■ *Jim Beck*