

# The Lateral Line

Volume 2, Issue 27

November 2007



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November 16, 2007

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Cover Photo:  
*Steatocronus tinanti*  
 By Dave Hansen

**Event Calendar:**

**Upcoming Events in Texas**

**December**

Date: December 15th

Time: 4 PM

**Hill Country Cichlid Club**— Christmas Party and pot luck. Due to a scheduling conflict, the location has changed. This year’s event will be held at the **SpringHill Inn and Suites** (same location as FO-TAS). 3636 NW Loop 410. Get in touch with Diane (gryhouse) who is organizing our pot luck. Bring the entire family.

Our special guest is expected to be **Ad Konings**. He will give a talk.

Date: December 1st

Time: 7 PM

**Texas Cichlid Association** — Annual Christmas Party and Crazy Santa Gift Exchange. Ryan's Grill Buffet, 6835 NE Loop 820, North Richland Hills (817) 428-0515 (where it was last year). Participation in the Crazy Santa gift exchange is optional. If you desire to participate, bring a gift (live fish or something fishy), something nice that you would not mind receiving from someone. Cost for adults is \$9.19; and kids is \$3.99 and \$4.00. Drinks (non-alcoholic) are \$1.69.

December 8th

Time: ???

**Houston Aquarium Society**— Holiday Party at Glen’s House. Visit [houstonaquariumsociety.org](http://houstonaquariumsociety.org) for more information.

**Species Profile:*****Xystichromis phytophagus***

This beautiful little fish from Lake Victoria is my first foray into the world of endangered species. Not my first Victorian fish - but definitely the beginning of a true appreciation for the fishes of Lake Victoria. I had seen photos of this beautiful little fish and just knew that I had to have some. I was able to pick up some juvenies from Robert as BAP fish. They went into a 30 Long which had recently been vacated for the purpose of this colony. The tank was decorated with African cichlid sand (black and white mix) and a few pieces of Texas Holey Rock on one end. The other end of the tank contained a piece of driftwood leftover from the previous South American setup. Not necessarily endemic of the Lake Victoria region - but a nice piece that the fish seem to enjoy.

When I brought my group home (7 individuals) they were still pretty small and all were silver. I would say that the largest fish was probably 1 ½". They adapted quickly to their new surroundings. I noticed that one of the larger fish seemed to stake out an area near the rockwork and the others seemed to hang in a group near the driftwood. It soon became apparent that this larger fish was a male. I could see a slight green sheen to his body and he would "color up" a bit for his size. At this size - it simply meant that he would show the stereotypical (for Victorian cichlids that is) black vertical bar through the eye and a hint of almost salmon color on his flank. Other than that he remained silver. Several of the other fish had a yellowish hue and since the male didn't - I was hoping that these

were some females. Many a cichlid keeper has received a group of juvenies to use for a breeding colony - only to find out that they have an entire group of males! Wouldn't be the first time...



Photo by Diane Tennison

I brought the group home on March 16 and by April 10 I was seeing the now identifiable male doing his "shaky dance" for a large female! Less than 30 days in the tank - still only about 1 ½" - and there was signs of spawning behavior. Needless to say I was shocked! I have kept several types of fish from several African lakes and have never seen this happen with such young fish. For those who may not know, the "shaky dance" is how males court the females. It looks like they are having a seizure! In reality, they are shaking the anal fin which contains egg spots. These "egg spots" are yellowish circles on the anal fin which are meant to resemble eggs. They are

conveniently located near the male's vent - which will release milt when the time is right. He will shimmer his whole body and lay almost sideways on the sand. This lays the anal fin almost right on top of the sand. The female will pick at the spots with her mouth. They will then circle a bit and she will drop a few eggs. She quickly picks the eggs up and as she circles again - sees the egg spots and thinks that she



Photo by Diane Tennison

forgot some eggs. As she picks at the "eggs" the milt is released, thus fertilizing the eggs. I did not see the actual spawning of these fish the first time. However, on April 22 - less than 2 weeks after the first signs of some spawning behavior - I noticed the large female was hiding out under a rock overhang and she had the telltale signs of mouth brooding. Her lower jaw looked much heavier and she would occasionally "chew". Even when I noticed this I just couldn't accept that spawning had actually taken place. These fish were still only about 1 1/2"! But, it was true. With each passing day, her buccal pouch seemed to expand. After about 2 weeks, I figured it was time to take the fry. I didn't want to

risk losing any of them. I stripped the female and was amazed to get 15 fully-formed fry. No bit of egg sac was even remaining. I still do not understand how this female, who was less than 2 inches, carried 15 fry in her mouth and didn't look like a pelican! I placed the fry in a floating, acrylic breeder box and left it in the same tank. Within 12 hours I began to feed the fry freeze-dried Cyclopeeze. They took to it immediately and began to grow. I did get a scare when I had an outbreak of Ick in the tank. I lost 4 of the babies to this nasty parasite, but the remainder survived. The other observation that I made about these fish is that the fry seem to be pretty slow growing. They are fat and healthy - but not as large as I would expect for 2 months. I spoke with Greg Steeves (Victorian expert extraordinaire) about this and he said that this was his observation as well. It seems to take the fry a while to hit the 1" mark but then they seem to progress as one would expect from an African Cichlid.

This is an amazing little fish. Full of vim and vigor. I highly recommend that you give this fish a try. Besides the absolute beauty of the males (yes mine is FINALLY getting some beautiful color on him - red, green and yellow), you would be helping to save a fish that is endangered in the wild. It's a shame to think that these little guys are having a tough time in their natural habitat. But, the hobbyist who wants to also be known as conservationist - CAN make a difference.

■ *Diane Tennison*



**Species Profile:*****Ptyochromis* sp. "salmon"**

Hippo Point on the Kenyan shore of Lake Victoria is home to a large compliment of beautiful cichlid species. The striking crimson coloration of *Ptyochromis* sp. "salmon" makes it instantly recognizable. Found over sandy regions, this furu dines primarily on snails.

*Ptyochromis* as an independent genus can be attributed to Humphrey Greenwood in 1957. This was a revision of the type specimen *Ctenochromis sauvagei* Pfeffer, 1896. The name *Ptyochromis* is derived from the Greek "ptyo" which means "to spit out" (Greenwood, 1957) and relates to crushing shells orally and then disposing of the inedible fragments. Interestingly, although other members of this genus employ this feeding strategy, I have observed *Ptyochromis* sp. "salmon" actually tapping a hole in the shell of Malaysian trumpet snails, *Melanoides tuberculata* and orally extracting the meat by "sucking

it out". This snail is notorious for being tough and it may well be that the *P.* sp. "salmon" has developed this feeder mechanism for dealing with this particular snail species.



Photo by Spencer Jack

Growing to a length of 14 cm, males show a slightly larger adult size than the females. The cranial angle is steeply sloping and convex. Thick lips are positioned low in the jaw. Both mandibles protrude equally. The mouth is down-turned and lined with recurved slender and strong bicuspid (mostly) teeth.

Older *P.* sp. "salmon", like most other furu, develops a great number of unicuspoid teeth. It is not uncommon for an individual to have as many as 8 rows of teeth with 5-6 being the norm.

Male coloration consists of a steel grey base marked with blotches of red. This red brilliance continues onto the flanks

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with the final 1/3 of the body (along the caudal region) a lime green. The caudal fin is transparent. The anal fin is also translucent but



Photo by Greg Steeves

adorned with a small number of very well evolved ocelli. These egg spots are lined between the fin rays and have well defined orbits. The pectorals are black while the dorsal fin is mostly clear with a blue sheen. Female coloration

is an unassuming tan color with a well defined thin black mid flank line stretching from the caudal peduncle to the gill plate. In the aquarium, the brilliance of the red coloration denoted dominance amongst the pack. As the males age, the luminance dulls so that the most attractively colored fish will be those in their breeding prime. To show this attractive fish off at its best, it should be housed in a species only tank or with very submissive fish. It is an easily bullied species and will fade in color when not the prominent species in a community.

In a species only setup, *P. sp. "salmon"* males will all color and retain their brilliance. Spawning comes especially easy when housed in this manner as well. It is when they are not able to display dominance (usually in the presence of other species) that maintenance of this species becomes problematic. Simply put, *P. sp. "salmon"* are easily bullied by more aggressive fish. One should avoid the *Pundamilia*, *Neochromis*, and *Astatotilapia* genera when choosing compatible tank mates. Some of the peaceful *Xystichromis* species such as *sp. "flameback"*, *sp. "day glow"* or *phytophagus* may work, but as stated before, to show this fish off best it really should devote a spe-

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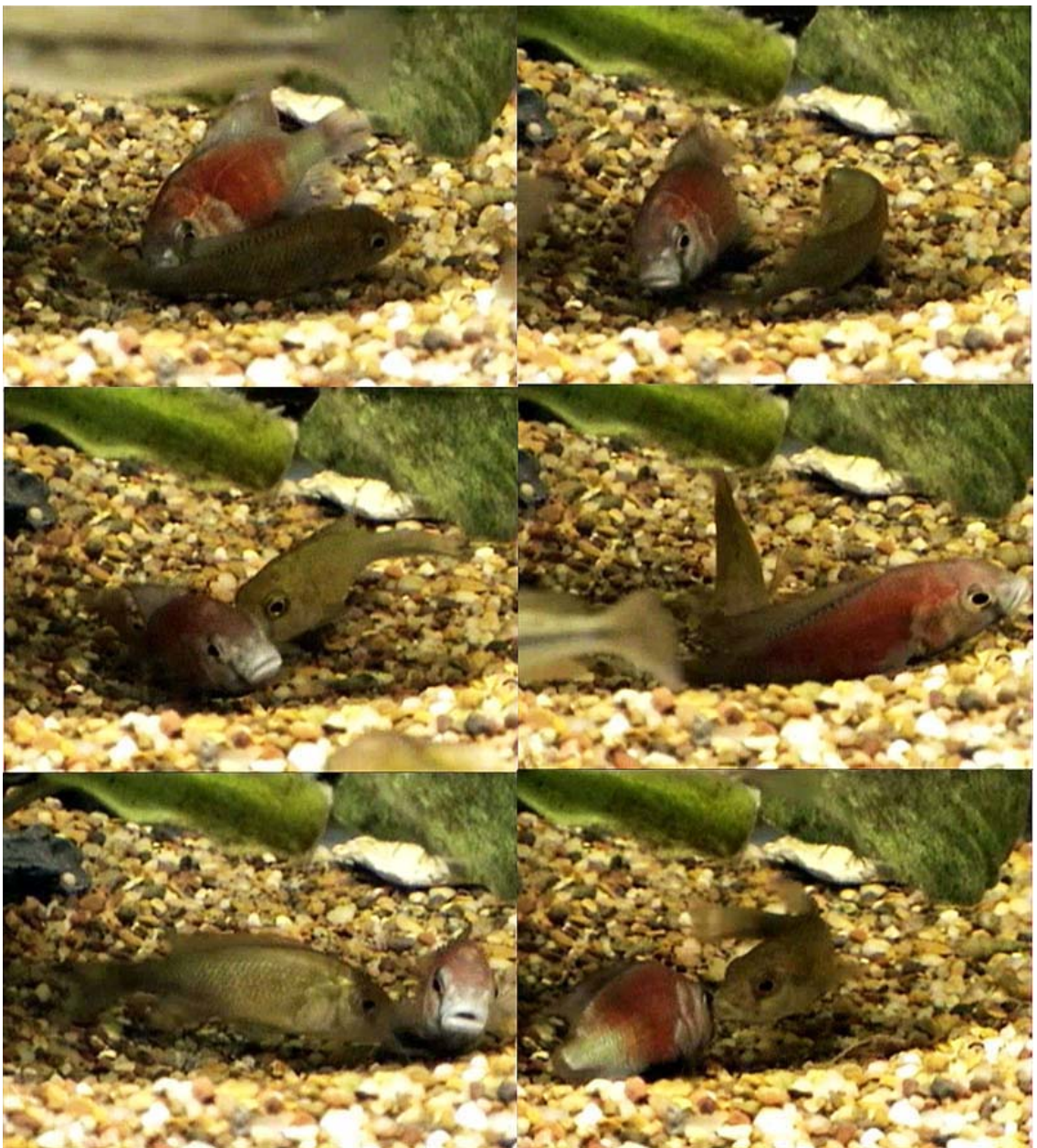


Photo by Greg Steeves

cies only tank to their habitation.

It is best to house multiple males with at least twice the number of females. In this configuration the males will exhibit their brilliant coloration consistently. *P. sp. "salmon"* is not an overly territorial furu, in fact; aggression is confined to the actual breeding area. The dominant male will choose an area consisting of a flat surface or a depression he has excavated, as the spawning location. From here he will defend this area from all other fish darting from the area and hurrying back to display for the female. When the female accepts the male's advances, she joins in the territorial defense of the spawning area. Spawning takes place in the typical haplochromine manner. Once spent of her eggs, the female retreats to a quiet area to begin the brooding process. The male will generally not bother with the female once the act of spawning has ceased. Instead, he will immediately refocus his efforts into trying to attract another ripe female to his spawning site. Oral gestation is 18 days at which time the female will begin to release her fry. At the first sign of danger she will scoop the young back into her buccal cavity. This maternal care can last as long as three weeks at which time the young are left to fend for themselves.

Feeding *Ptyochromis sp. "salmon"* is not a challenge in the least. It will readily accept all fares from flake to live food and do quite well on all. Keeping in mind its natural feeding niche, some protein should be incorporated into their diet. This could come in the form of daphnia, brine shrimp mos-

quito larvae or anything else of common aquarium use. Young grow quickly when fed baby brine shrimp and crushed quality flake.

Many of the molluscivores have not fared well in Lake Victoria since the Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) upsurge. This is most likely due to the habitat which these fish live and feed. Often sandy stretches are exposed open areas. This makes an easy target for the voracious Nile perch. Other mollusk eating cichlids as *Platytaeniodus degeni* are believed extinct. Recent surveys of the Hippo Point area and the fate of *Ptyochromis sp. "salmon"* are unknown but based on the fate of similar cichlids, it stands to reason that this fantastic and interesting furu must be guarded.

■ Greg Steeves

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**Species Profile:*****Limbochromis Robertsi*****Fish Information:**

The *Limbochromis robertsi* is a dwarf cichlid from the intermediate river areas of western Ghana. The natural habitat is along the fast moving water areas with little to no water vegetation. The banks of the river are heavily planted and offer heavy shade with the occasional drooping of plants into the river.

The food source of the *robertsi* is primarily micro organism found in the sandy substrate of the river bed. I have not witnessed the wild caught *robertsi* eat anything that I feed them from flake to brine shrimp, they just sift through the sand and pick up what falls to the bottom. The fry have been raised on Hikardi First Bites and graduated to high quality crushed flake.

The sexes are easily distinguishable due to the coloring of the fish. The female is the brighter more colorful fish in the species sporting a bright orange blaze across the dorsal fin. The female will also have a pink belly and a large horizontal black bar against a tan body. The male, plainer in appearance has red tinting in the dorsal fin with a fainter black horizontal bar. The males will grow to about 3.5" in length and the females about 3" in length. The standard brood is unknown as this species is rarely bred in captivity. Out of the 2 broods that I had, one was 42 and the other was 15 so I would guess average broods should be somewhere in the range of 20-45 fry.

**My story:**

I have had the pleasure in observing this fish over the last 6 months. I acquired a single pair of wild caught *robertsi* from Dave's Rare Aquarium Fish in May 2007 out of chance, not really knowing what the fish was or how much I would like it. When they came in, the male was injured and

didn't live through the night. This is what happens when you ship one adult female in the same bag as one juvenile male. Dave was kind enough to order another male for me which he obtained in July. The male again was a lot smaller than the female.

I set up a 40 gallon breeder with a 36" x 18" footprint for these fish and I put them in with 13 yellow Congo tetras (*Phenacogrammus inter-*



Photo by Dan Schacht

*ruptus*). Within two days, I had three dead tetras and the male was injured. As a result, I removed the female and I placed her in timeout. (10 gallon tank alone) I waited a couple of weeks for the male to recover, which he did, and then I returned the female into the 40 gallon tank (around late July). To my surprise, the male was now larger than the female and he instantly began to shake and dance for her. I found this interesting because just two weeks earlier, the same male was hiding in the corner of the tank from the same female.

The female instantly began to take notice of the male, and together they dug a large hole under the limestone rock that I have in the aquarium.

They piled the berm up so high on the sides of the tank that I was unable to see the fish. I found this to me annoying so I almost ruined the entire thing by removing some gravel. I removed all of the berm from the tank so that I could see the fish. During this time, the male hid on the opposite side of the aquarium, but the female never left the cave they had made. One week later, I spot free swimming fry in the tank venturing out of the cave.



Photo by Dan Schacht

On August 26<sup>th</sup>, I noticed free swimming fry. I never did have the chance to witness the spawning of the fish or of the eggs. By the time I saw the fry, there were no egg sacks left. They were extremely small fry, but still were powerful swimmers. After 4 days, the fry would swim the entire tank slowly grazing for food. They would approach the filter intake and easily swim away from the intake. I used no sponge filter or pre-filter on the power filter to protect the fry. The mother spent lots of time pulling the fry away from the filter or they would swim away on their own.

I left the fry in the main tank with the parents for three weeks before I emptied the tank of rocks and removed the fry. I counted 41 fry that I re-

moved from the tank, and one fry that I missed. *Robertsii* fry are born with a natural instinct for avoiding fish nets. It took almost 2 hours to catch 41 fry. A thorough cleaning later and replacing all the rocks, I released the parents back into the aquarium. The female immediately began to challenge and fight with the male, locking mouths and snapping at the males sides. This worried me slightly, but after a few hours, the female went to one corner of the tank and sulked for the next ten days.

About three weeks later, the female was holding. The first spawn was accomplished via substrate spawning, but this time, the *robertsii* had spawned again and the female was holding as a normal mouth brooding species would. She was also being chased continuously by the male. About one week later, I noticed that the male was now holding the fry and the female, looking weak and colorless was hiding in the opposite corner of the tank. Another ten days and the male was herding a small group of about 15 fry around the tank and still chasing the female when ever she came too close. The male herded the fry around until the last week in October and then the fry disappeared. The fry were still half the size of the first batch of fry when I removed them from the tank.

The male and female again built another berm that was tall enough that I could not see into the cave. I was forced to destroy this work just after the third spawn that I received because I needed to relocate the *robertsii* and tetras into a new tank. They are still in a 40 gallon tank with the ten tetras and 2 bristlenose plecos. The female spit the partially formed eggs during the transfer and I was able to gather 15-20 of the eggs and place them in an emergency tumbler. I hope to salvage some of the spawn. The fry from the first batch are being distributed among various club members in the hope to make these fish more readily available to other fish keepers and

reduce the need to catch the fish in the wild.

### My setups:

**Original:** I kept the *robertsi* in a 40 gallon breeder (36" x 18" x 16") from the beginning. I used a thick bed of blasting material (50/50 blend of black beauty and blasting sand) in the tank along with lots of rocks. I used a variety of rocks from Baja rocks to petrified wood to create a dense series of caves. The original set up was designed for display of the fish, but after the near



Photo by Dan Schacht

deaths, I rearranged the tank to better suit escapes from a perusing aggressive fish. This new layout worked well as the *robertsi* liked the cave network that was established.

For filtration I have an Emperor 400 hanging on one end of the aquarium. The flow is used to create some current flow across the tank in order to help stimulate an environment similar to the one that the *robertsi* experience in their natural river habitat. I also used an under gravel jet system to simulate the more direct water flows. I had the under gravel jet system on a timer to run on a 12 hour on, 12 hour off cycle. The jets were on during the first spawning until I noticed the first free swimming fry. At that point I turned off the jets for fear that the fry would get sucked into the intake. They have been off ever since.

**Current:** Due to the construction of a new stand I relocated the *robertsi*. They are still in a 40 gallon breeder and the decoration is the same. The only two differences are now, they have pool filter sand as a substrate, and the under gravel jet system is no longer in the tank. We will see how they like their new home.

### Recommendations for housing *robertsi*:

**Tank:** I would use nothing smaller than a 36" aquarium for a pair. If keeping more than a pair, I would recommend a 48" long aquarium minimum. The *robertsi* do not use the height of the tank, so it doesn't matter if the tank is 12" tall or 30" tall, they will not care. The only time I have seen them near the top of the tank is when the male and female were sparing.

**Decoration:** The tank should be cluttered, especially when dealing with adult fish. Even the fry do not like to be watched excessively. I also recommend a deep sand bed as the fish are substrate sifters naturally. They will also use the extra sand to build privacy barriers when they need them.

Plants are not necessary, but I do believe they occasionally eat pieces of the Val grass that I have in the current setup.

**Water:** I use standard tap water with parameters of about 8.0 pH and a temperature of about 77 degrees F.

**Tank mates:** I would not house these fish with any aggressive mbuna, but less aggressive tank mates would be fine. The yellow Congo tetras that I have used have worked great. Whatever fish you do house these with they should be a top water column species that will not compete for the floor space with the *robertsi* and they would have to withstand the abuse of the aggressive fish.

■ Dan Schacht



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Official Publication of the  
Hill Country Cichlid Club