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Bewani Rainbows
Oddballs from Africa
The Pastel Cichlasoma

BEWANI RAINBOWS

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Chilatherina axelrodi is a delicately marked species of rainbowfish that Dr. Allen discovered back in 1979. Unfortunately, none of the specimens collected at that time survived the trip back to Australia, but this collecting trip proved more successful in that respect. This is a young male 8 cm in total length.

It had taken three years, but at last I was on the way to Bewani. As we bounced along in the 4-wheel drive pick-up truck I fondly recalled memories of the first trip to this remote outpost in Papua New Guinea. That was in 1979, during the course of field studies on rainbowfishes (family Melanotaeniidae). On that particular outing I was accompanied by Brian Parkinson, a commercial shell collector. After several hours over incredibly bad roads, we encountered a pristine jungle stream just south of Bewani Village. We had collected several creeks along the way, catching virtually the same common species at each stop, and by this time I had sufficient samples and was ready to call it a day. We still had many miles of driving ahead, but I finally decided to make a few quick scoops with a shrimp seine before returning to Vanimo. The first attempts yielded absolutely nothing; however, I caught a fleeting glimpse of what appeared to be a rainbowfish darting upstream. I next scooped in a small pool at the base of some rapids and succeeded in catching a single silvery female recognizable as a rainbowfish. I scooped again and this time could hardly believe the incredible beauty of the two male rainbows that wriggled wildly at the bottom of the net. The specimens were about 7.5 cm (3 inches) in length and overall light silvery blue with a series of dark crossbars along the sides and brilliant yellow fins. My pulse quickened as I shouted excitedly to Brian. I had not seen anything like it before! As a result of previous studies on rainbowfishes I was very familiar with the approximately 40 species known at that time, and clearly this represented something new. We quickly unpacked a larger seine and dragged it through a 10-meter-long (33 feet) pool a short distance downstream. This haul was a bonanza, yielding more than 50 specimens, with some particularly large, vividly patterned males. We also netted two other rainbows, the northern New Guinea rainbow (*Melanotaenia affinis*) and the silver rainbow (*Chilatherina crassispinosa*). Although beautiful in their own right, these species seemed ex-

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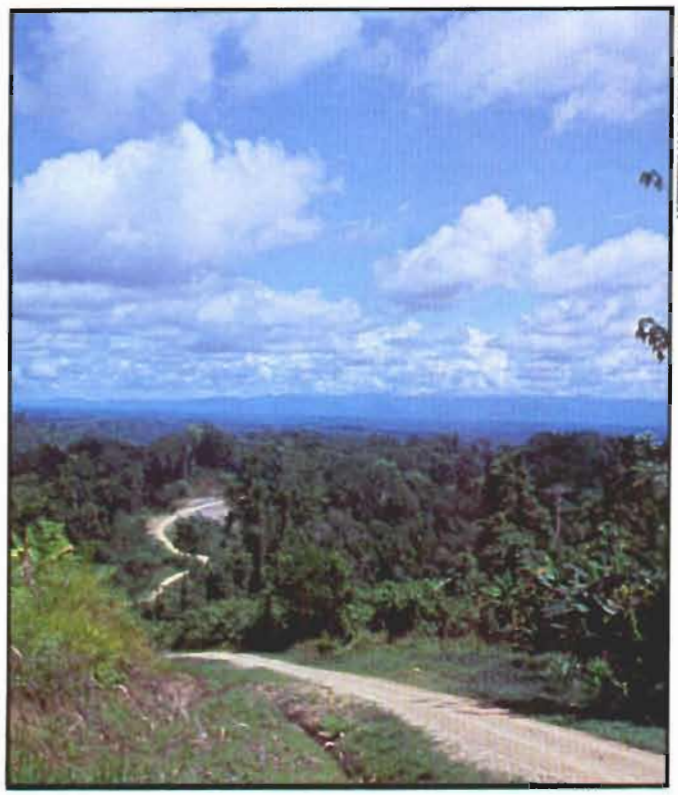

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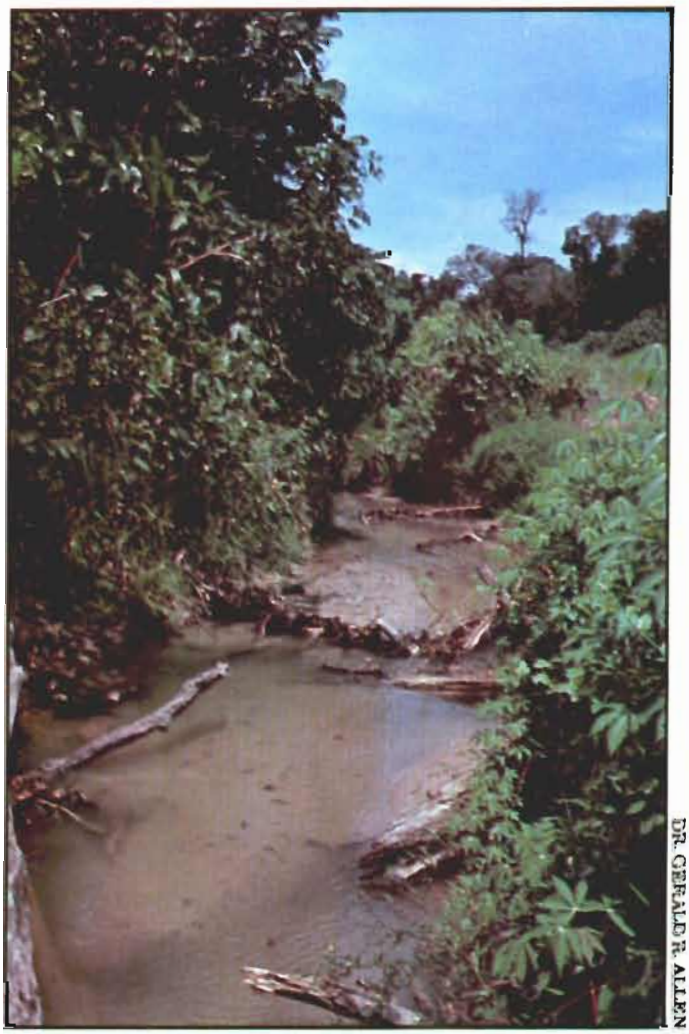

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Top left: This stream near Vanimo (Papua New Guinea) contained a number of rainbow species. **Top right:** The Bewani road cuts through lush rainforest. The Toricelli range lies in the background. **Bottom right:** *Chilatherina axelrodi* was discovered in this stream near Bewani. There are undoubtedly a number of undiscovered rainbows in this remote region. New species may become commonplace as the area opens up to various industrial operations.

ceptionally drab compared to the new discovery. I preserved most of the catch but was determined to get at least a few specimens back alive. Sadly, though, all of them succumbed on the long trip back to Australia. I eventually named the new rainbow *Chilatherina axelrodi* in honor of Dr. Herbert R. Axelrod for his generous support of my research over the years. The description of this species appeared in the January, 1980, issue of *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*.

After the unsuccessful attempt at transporting live specimens of *C. axelrodi* back to Australia, I resolved to collect more at the first opportunity. It was now early November of 1982, and at last I would get that chance. My work on a field guide to New Guinea freshwater fishes had taken me to Vanimo, a picturesque town of 5,000 inhabitants nestled on a narrow peninsula in the extreme northwestern part of Papua New Guinea, only 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Bewani.

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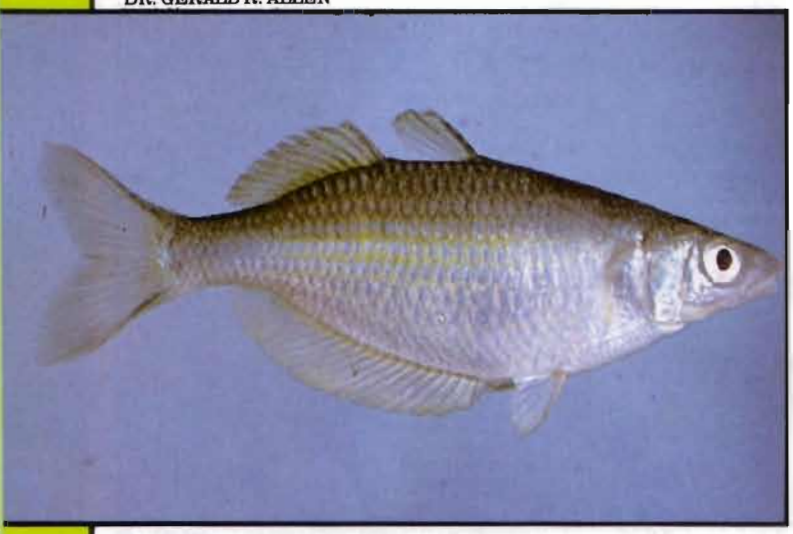

G. SCHMIDA

Top of page: *Chilatherina crassispinosa* was collected near Bewani along with *C. axelrodi*. **Immediately above:** *Melanotaenia affinis*, the northern rainbow, was considered drab next to Axelrod's rainbow when captured in the same net. **Below:** *C. bulolo* from Lae was erroneously thought to be *C. crassispinosa*, but after careful examination Dr. Allen discovered it was indeed a distinct species.

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I recounted the experiences of the first visit to my host John Patton, a government fisheries biologist, and his friend Frank Lewis, an engineer with the Public Works Department, as we drove along the steep grade just outside Vanimo. The road ascends rapidly for about 18 kilometers (6 miles) with magnificent panoramas of the Pacific Ocean. Once over the coastal escarpment there is a series of jungle-clad foothills with the Toricelli Mountains providing a spectacular backdrop. Beyond the Toricellis lies the Sepik, one of New Guinea's largest rivers. The road had scarcely improved since the last visit, and it took nearly three hours to reach our destination. As we approached the stream, I worried that afternoon shower activity over the last few days might have resulted in flood conditions, thus making it impossible to collect. Therefore, on our arrival I was greatly relieved to find the stream even lower than during the previous visit. We immediately walked down the streambed to the large pool that had proved so productive in 1979. The water was exceptionally clear, and we spotted several schools of fish showing the characteristic barred pattern of Axelrod's rainbow. The plan was to employ a large seine to catch live specimens. John and I made a series of drags that each yielded a bounty of prize "bows," so it didn't take long to fill our holding containers. I meticulously inspected the catch, eventually selecting about 40 specimens for transport back to Australia. I also saved several nice pairs of *Chilatherina crassispinosa*. I had previously collected this species in the foothills and mountains near Lae, approximately 750 kilometers (450 miles) southeast of Bewani. However, the Bewani specimens and those collected from the nearby Sepik system seemed different from the Lae fish. They were generally larger, had a more pointed snout and larger eye, and lacked the vomerine teeth that are generally present in specimens from Lae. Subsequent laboratory examination revealed other significent differences, and I now realize that two distinct species are involved, the true *C. crassispinosa* collected at Bewani and *C. bulolo* from the vicinity of Lae.

The day following the trip to Bewani I greeted Heiko Bleher, a successful aquarium fish importer from Frankfurt, Germany. Heiko and photographer Wolfgang Tins would be my travelling companions over the next three weeks in Irian Jaya, the Indonesian portion of New Guinea that occupies the western half of the island. Largely thanks to Heiko's expertise in handling live aquarium fishes, I succeeded in transporting the specimens safely back to Western Australia. While in Vanimo, Heiko carefully made periodic water changes and administered a strong dose of sulphur drugs and tetracycline to prevent bacterial infections. The fishes were shipped to holding tanks at Port Moresby just before our departure for Irian Jaya, and three weeks later they made the final leg south to Australia. They are still thriving in captivity, but breeding attempts thus far have been unsuccessful.