A Neglected Beauty— *Chilatherina sentaniensis*

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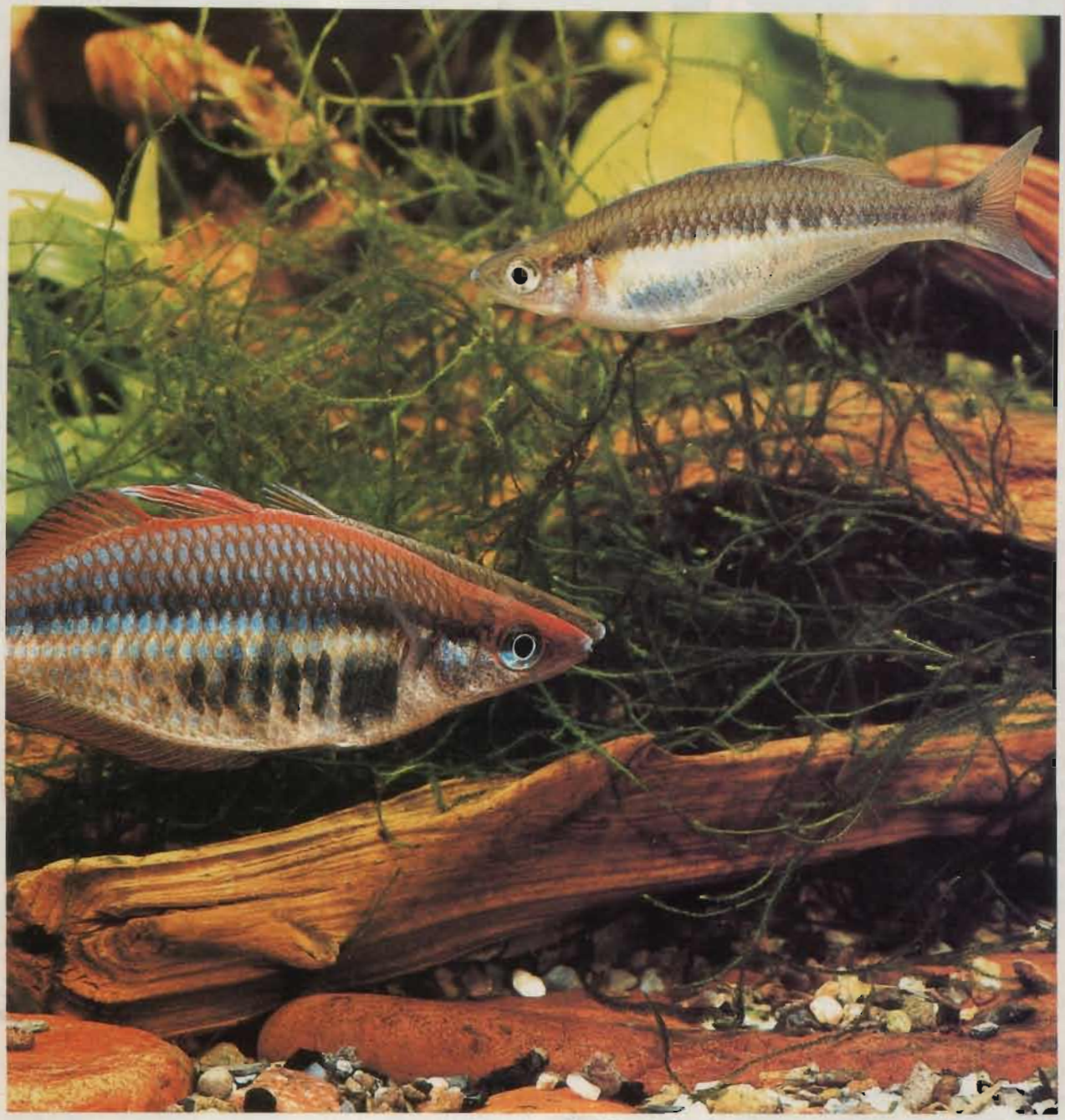

Above: Two male *Chilatherina sentaniensis* square off in a ritualized battle for the female above them. **Facing page:** *C. sentaniensis* is a beautiful fish that is, unfortunately, kept only by a relative few rainbowfish specialists. Photos by the author.

Above left: Female *C. sentaniensis*. **Above right:** A sexually quiescent male. **Below left:** As spawning approaches the male's colors intensify and darken. **Below right:** The pair together. Photos by the author.

Above left and right: The pair before spawning. **Below left and right:** Note the intensification of color when the fish are in spawning condition. Photos by the author.

RAINBOWFISHES

Rainbowfishes have really always played a minor role in the aquarium. For a long time, the only species found, now and then, in aquariums were *Melanotaenia maccullochi, M. splendida fluviatilis,* and *M. s. inornata.* This situation changed almost overnight, when the first *Glossolepis incisus* were introduced and photographs of it were published. However, this glowing-red fish did not hold interest for long.

After the initial demand, many breeders decided not to keep them any longer, for various reasons. First, there was the fact that the offspring, insignificant in size, are positively dull little fellows, and it was difficult to get dealers or aquarists to take them. Breeders and dealers who, thinking they saw a good business opportunity, had immediately pounced on these fish, could not sell them once the initial demand was satisfied. The only solution was to keep the fish until they began to show their color, but that would have meant keeping them for six months or more. The expenses (for food and tank space) were way out of proportion to the price the fish would bring, which had in the meantime fallen sharply. Thus, as the situation stands today, there are only a few of the creatures to be found in aquariums, and the continued existence of this rainbowfish is only barely assured.

The very appealingly colored *Melanotaenia boesemani,* from New Guinea, also had its heyday. This beautiful fish has always had its admirers. Because a few breeders continued to propagate this fish despite the expense of keeping it until the color showed, specimens in excellent condition and coloration are still to be found now and then at pet shops. Availability of a limited quantity at a relatively reasonable price has kept demand almost constant.

To round off a discussion of the problem, I mention still another rainbowfish in which interest seems to have diminished. *Iriatherina werneri,* also a very attractive fish when properly cared for, was for years overpriced; it also lost interest for aquarists after a short time. Once it was introduced and large numbers of it had been raised, demand fell off swiftly.

It is really too bad that often the search for novelties causes not just rainbowfishes, but many others as well, to disappear from the scene. This is almost incomprehensible with regard to rainbowfishes, particularly because their often extremely beautiful coloration could be an adornment for every aquarium. To experience the full magnificence of these fish, one should see a large community tank containing the various species of rainbowfishes early in the morning. I think such a sight would inspire many aquarists to begin keeping these fishes once again.

I think this somewhat roundabout introduction is important because something can be learned from it that applies to the increasingly difficult problem of preservation of species.

Now, on to a rainbowfish that also deserves to be better known, *Chilatherina sentaniensis.* As the photographs show, this fish even in its normal coloration is quite handsome, but its full glory is seen only early in the morning, during courtship display. Even when the display is for other males, the coloration is very attractive.

Therefore, as with all rainbowfishes, it is a good idea to keep a small group of six to ten fish. By so doing, there will always be at least one male in display coloration. One difference between males and females is body size—males grow to 4 inches and females considerably less; another is the males' intense coloration. The males have a red-brown color at the

Above left: The male is much larger than his mate. **Above right:** The male attempts to entice the female to spawn. Photos by the author.

Above left and right: The male has selected a clump of Java moss to which he tries to lure the female. **Below left and right:** The fish often swim in a parallel formation when spawning. Photos by the author.

middle of their bodies, which the grayish females lack. It is noteworthy that as the males display, this color intensifies considerably, and spreads to the fins, which turn dark brown; the cross-stripes on the lower half of the body become very prominent. In addition, a light red stripe stretching from the snout all along the back becomes clearly visible.

These fish come from Lake Sentani in Irian Jaya, on the island of New Guinea—the part that belongs to Indonesia. There they can be caught in places with sandy to muddy bottoms p:rtially covered with water plants. Lake Sentani, southwest of Jayapura, is about 18 miles long and ½ to 1½ miles wide. *Glossolepis incisus* is also caught in this lake. In 1908, Max Weber described these creatures as *Rhombatractus sentaniensis*. The genus *Chilatherina* was put forward by Regan in 1914.

Keeping these fish presents no problems at all. A fairly large tank should be used, one that is longer than it is deep, especially if the advice given above is followed and a small group of these fish is kept. A 30-gallon tank would do nicely. Fine gravel, with a grain size of up to 3 mm, can be used for the bottom covering. The background can be thickly planted and in the open swimming area in front of them, we set up a driftwood root overgrown with Java moss.

According to my experience with these fish, almost any tapwater can be used provided that it is drinking-water quality. The temperature of the water should be between 73 and 82°F; it can fluctuate within this range with no problem. Almost any commercially available food can be used. Daphnia, cyclops, and mosquito larvae, as well as dried or frozen food, are readily accepted.

If you want to observe spawning, you should sit by the tank when the first light strikes it, for example, in the summer at dawn. Then you can see how the conspicuously colored males flit around the females to incite them to spawn. Again and again they head for the Java moss, the place where the eggs will be deposited. If a female ready to spawn follows the male, he positions himself at a slant above the spawning place and waits quivering while the female looks for the most suitable place in the Java moss. When the female finally stays motionless in one place, the male goes to her immediately and presses up against her flank. The two remain in this position for a moment and then swim apart suddenly, as the eggs are expelled. The female then makes a few lightning-fast turns, stirring up the eggs, which then fall slowly into the Java moss, where they are caught in the little sticky filaments. Well-fed fish pay no more attention to the spawn, but poorly fed ones sometimes eat it.

In a tank that contains several females, the male will spawn again after a while, unless the females' attention has been caught by other males. Each female, however, spawns only once. Sometimes these fish also spawn a second time, toward evening. The next morning, the whole thing can be observed all over again, for these fish are continuous breeders. If you want to raise the offspring, it has proven helpful to change the Java moss daily right after each spawning, placing the moss with the eggs in another tank, one without gravel or plants. The fry will hatch about fifteen days after spawning and must be fed immediately. Either cyclops or *Artemia* nauplii may be given. The offspring grow quickly during the first week and then more slowly thereafter.

I hope this article will encourage aquarists to keep and breed this neglected beauty!