

Species Profile–*Microctenopoma ansorgii*

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The Ornate Ctenopoma

Three or four years ago (ok, make that decades ago), I was new to the hobby and bought a great big, thick book by Innes on tropical fish. It was the second edition, gaudy in its yellow cover, and full of information for an enthusiastic young aquarist. I must have read that book over a hundred times, cover to cover. The color pictures were really black and white pictures that were colored in. I guess since my TV was black and white that seemed fully acceptable!

I kept guppies, sword-tails, and kribensis, mainly, but I was struck by one “color” picture, the Ornate Ctenopoma. Elongate in shape, with fins like a cichlid and vertical bars of black and red the entire length and the entire height of the body and fins, this fish definitely made a lasting impression, especially since I was not to see one for over 30 years!

Fast forward to lastsummer at the American Cichlid Association Convention (2008) in Sacramento, California. Looking over the fish that were to run in the annual fund-raising auction (for conservation,) I noticed a familiar name long before I saw the fish. As I searched the tank full of active cichlids, I found one, a small grey pencil-shaped fish sitting on the bottom. It was definitely not happy, and it did not look like the picture I remembered. I managed to get four of the fish at the auction, one of which died before it was time to leave for home.

Once at home I placed the 1.25 inch long fish and a large clump of Java moss in a small quarantine tank where they could be observed, or so I thought. I couldn't find the fish the next day and had no more luck the following day! By the weekend, I decided to take apart the tank and found them all, deeply buried in the Java moss. More than once, I've removed Java moss to find no fish in the tank and the Java moss moving! Unfortunately, one had developed a bad case of fungus and didn't live past the next day. Deciding that this was my last chance at a pair, I separated the last two to be sure that each was safe from the other. I had no idea if these were a pair, and the information available on their care was so scarce that it was obvious that few had ever really kept this fish, much less bred them!

I kept them in their one-gallon jars complete with sponge filter and java moss. After six months, they were about two inches long and higher in body. They did well on black worms, and I never did see them eat flake food.

I eventually lost one right after the fires in San Diego. I'm not sure if that was coincidence or not, it was the only fish I lost. Being labyrinth fish, they may be more exposed to airborne pollutants I suppose.



Photos by Tony Pinto from <http://www.bostonaquariumsociety>.

Now I had one left. When the remaining fish was happy, his colors came through with clear distinct black and red bars. Feeding and displaying brought out his colors. “Cool fish,” I thought and wished I had more.

Art North, when we were talking at one of the COAST club meetings, referred me to a wholesaler/retailer in Texas. Sure enough, he had the fish! By the time we had exchanged several emails, the seller was out of the fish and for several months never received more of the fish. Apparently these were all wild caught in Africa! Eventually I gave up, then a month later found the fish on Aquabid, from the same seller!

I bid on and won a dozen of my prized Ctenopoma. Through a great number of frustrating email delays, I finally got the order straight and bumped the total order to 25 to help defray the shipping cost. The fish arrived the next day, well packed and in excellent condition. They settled in well, and I had no losses.

They were placed in a 20 gallon long tank with three sponge filters and some leaning pieces of egg crate to give shelter to fish who might want to get away from the rest. I fed black worms and a small pinch of flake food each time. I still couldn't see them eating the flake food but I didn't see any collecting uneaten either.

Eventually I went to move them to a 40-gallon tank I had just cleared out. It was then that I found the heater in the tank was set to barely the low seventies, and the water was cool. Apparently this was causing them no problems. I placed several 6-inch plastic plants throughout the new tank. Several guppies were added to give them a sense of security and the occasional live food.

After the Ctenopoma became more comfortable in their new setting, I started to observe their behavior. The fish began to color up, and the more colorful ones started displaying to one another. No damage occurred as a result of their interaction. They do like to “sit” on and around plants much of the time but are instantly up and around at feeding time. They showed an interest in flake food and started eating it as it fell and as it sat on the bottom. They're not a problem feeder as I had been prepared to expect.

The research I have done shows them to come from shallow water around Stanley Pool in West Africa. They reach just over three inches in length, prefer water temperatures in the upper 70's to low 30's range, a neutral pH, and low hardness. The fish is peaceful as long as its cohabitants are too large to fit in its mouth. It should be kept with fish that do not have an aggressive temperament. Males may have slightly longer anal and dorsal fins with white edges.

They have no problem living in cool water for short periods of time. In addition, they're perfectly comfortable in hard alkaline water. Whether or not they'll breed in hard water remains to be seen. I've found only one article on breeding this fish; it is from a fellow ACA member. Ctenopoma apparently are bubble nest breeders, and their babies are extremely small, requiring the smallest of foods. Water conditions in the low 80's, soft water and a slightly acid pH appear to be the right combination of factors for breeding. I have only just started to learn about these fish. They aren't difficult to keep, and they appear to be relatively hardy. I'll continue to share information as I learn more. If anyone else is interested in keeping and breeding this fish, please feel free to contact me. The Ornate Ctenopoma is a fascinating fish, well worth the 30+ year wait!