THE EMPEROR TETRA, Nematobrycon palmeri

by Chase Klinesteker

Male Emperor Tetra

DESCRIPTION

The Emperor Tetra, Nematobrycon palmeri, is one of our hobby's most attractive fish, with a neon-blue eye and upper body coloration, yellow on the back and the edging of anal fin, and 3 long filaments extending from the tail of the male. This fishes' most striking marking is the broad purple/black band from behind the eye all the way through to the tail and its mid filament. Dark substrates and low light allow them to show off their subtle colors best. The wild fish were first collected by Axelrod in 1959 in the Rio Atrata area of western Columbia. The wild fish were less colorful than the variety now cultivated. They were found in clean, soft, slightly acid water of small streams with bushy plants. Sexing is easy, as males are larger, have more slender bodies, and have tail fin extensions. Females have yellow coloration in their eyes, as apposed to the neon blue of the male.

These fish are peaceful, shy, and reserved, preferring plants and darker environments. Males can get scrappy with each other some, but they are not aggressive with other species, and they get along well in community tanks. Fast-swimming more aggressive fish might not make good tankmates. They are somewhat slow and easy to catch and they lay one egg at a time, reminding me more of a killiefish, than a tetra. They eat most all foods, but a varied diet of frozen, live, and dry foods should be provided for optimal health. They are quite hardy, but clean water is important for best maintenance. Artificial or live plants in the aquarium are important to keep them happy. 75 to 80 degree temperatures seem best for them. They can reach up to 2 ½ inches in length, and may live as long as 6 years.

BREEDING

Dr Eduard Schmidt-Focke was probably the first to breed this fish. Emperor Tetras are fairly easy to breed, although they are not prolific, likely because they lay only one egg at a time and are very successful at eating them, even to the point where they are grabbing eggs as I chase them down with a net when finished! Some report that a portion of the males may be sterile, so I like to group spawn 3 males and 4 females in a tank with

heavy plants to get enough eggs. Spawning and egg hatching seems to be better in rain or RO water. I am lucky to get 100 eggs from a spawning. The eggs are very tiny, clear, and non-adhesive. They take 1-2 days to hatch and when free swimming, the fry hide in the plants and gravel so it is difficult to know how many have survived. They are quite sensitive to water pollution at this stage. The hiding continues for 1-2 weeks, and then they venture out more, although they still stay close to the bottom or plants. Removing the plants may allow the fry to better obtain food at first. The fact that the fry need infusoria for a few days before they can take baby brine shrimp makes them somewhat difficult to raise. I use Liquifry formula, microworms, then newly hatched baby brine shrimp, and add plenty of snails and do water changes to keep down the pollution. Growth is a little slow at first, but after a month or two they seem to grow faster, and their appetites are very good. They reach maturity in about 5-7 months.

I highly recommend the Emperor Tetra as a very beautiful and peaceful species that is a slight challenge to breed and raise.

Pair of Emperor Tetras, female on right