

Species Profile: *Astatotilapia aeneocolor*

The 2003 FOTAS (Federation of Texas Aquarium Societies) convention in Houston, Texas was a most impressive event. World class speakers, a fish show, and best of all, a huge auction combined for a most enjoyable weekend. The FOTAS auction presented many fish, especially killies and cichlids, that are not entirely commonly in the hobby. One of the many finds we happened upon here was the lacustrine hap, *Astatotilapia aeneocolor*.

Astatotilapia aeneocolor hails from East Africa; more specifically, Lakes George, Albert, Edward and their tributaries. Wild populations are usually found near the water's edge in such evasive areas as submerged tree roots. *Astatotilapia aeneocolor* is an opportunistic omnivore and undemanding in regard to food in captivity. Adult males reach nearly three inches, with females slightly smaller. Reproduction begins when the fish are still under an inch in length. It is amazing to see a tiny female brooding. Her buccal cavity full of eggs is disproportionately huge when compared to her body size. One wonders how the fish can remain buoyant. Female aeneocolors are excellent at holding a brood. I have netted females immediately after spawning and transferred to a holding tank without them spitting the clutch as many other mouthbrooders will. After 18 days of brooding, our small females release around 10 tiny fry. The fry grow quickly on Cyclopeeze and crushed flake. In five to six months, young *Astatotilapia aeneocolor* reach maturity and will begin spawning. As size increases, so does the number of fry a female will incubate. Although we have never had a huge spawn, I am told that broods can reach in excess of 50 young.

Our first *Astatotilapia aeneocolor* spawn occurred when our small group was housed with some small *Pundamilia nyererei* Igombe Island. The two dominant males of each species constantly displayed to

each other for control of the tank. This power struggle never got horribly physical. The colors that the males displayed made for a stunning display. Fearing that the 20 gallon tank these colonies were in was a



bomb waiting to explode, I moved the *Astatotilapia aeneocolor* group into a 55 gallon with a group of young *Pyxichromis orthostoma* from Lake Nawampasa. This seemed to be a good mix until one evening, while trying my hand at some photography, I peered into this tank and noticed one of the *P. orthostoma* with a tail sticking from its mouth. Unable to believe what I was seeing, I netted this fish out and manually pulled the meal from its mouth. It was a female aeneocolor almost the size of the Lake Nawampasa piscivore. Lesson learned, never house anything with *Pyxichromis orthostoma* that is smaller than they are. The amazing twist to this story was that not only did the female aeneocolor survive, she spawned in a new tank the next day!

Astatotilapia aeneocolor is undemanding with regard to aquatic decor. They do seem to feel more relaxed with rock caves and plastic plants. In the aquarium

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Astatotilapia aeneocolor spends most of its time in the open, but I believe aquascaping relaxes them and shows this species off to its best. I do not believe that *Pundamilia nyererei* is the best choice as a tank mate as haplochromines from this region are capable of hybridization. I would recommend housing *Astatotilapia aeneocolor* with some of the smaller Malawian *Auloncara*, or much differently colored smaller Victorian cichlids. Others I have spoken with that keep *Astatotilapia aeneocolor* reportedly house their groups with mbuna, *Julidochromis* and some *Neolamprologus* species.

Whatever setup you may choose or what tank-mates you may choose, *Astatotilapia aeneocolor* is an easy-going colorful little fish that is certain to become a favorite.



Pundamilia nyererei and
Astatotilapia aeneocolor
Photo by Greg Steeves

— by *Greg Steeves*