

## Species Profile: *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck"

The genus *Harpagochromis* was erected in 1896 by G. J. Pfeffer. The *Harpagochromis* name is rooted in Greek. "Harpage" means robber while "chromis" denotes color. The basic cues which differentiate *Harpagochromis* from other cichlids of haplochromine lineage include body shape, dentition, and feeding strategies.

The *Harpagochromis* contains a number of species and all are piscivores. Many *Harpagochromis* species are now listed as extinct in their native waters while captive *Harpagochromis* stocks are not at all abundant. Members of the *Harpagochromis* group can be found in Lake Victoria, Lake Edward, Lake George, The Victorian Nile, Lake Kyoga and Lake Nawampassa.

*Harpagochromis* are deep bodied cichlids. They can attain a length of 20cm which is substantially larger than most other haplochrominis from the Victorian basin. A deceptively large mouth is angled upward. The lower jaw extends past the upper. The outer teeth are bicuspid and sometimes unicuspid in larger members of the genus. Between one and five inner rows of unicuspid and/or tricuspid teeth line both jaws.

*Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" is native to Lake Nawampassa, Uganda. It was first introduced to the aquarium hobby by a Laif DeMason of Old World Exotic Fish. *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" is one of the

smaller members of the genus attaining a length of 15cm. Female and immature or subdominant males display a creamy-colored underbelly that joins the mid-lateral horizontal black band and runs the length of the body from the caudal peduncle to the gill plate. Another black horizontal line runs along the upper lateral line. Base coloration of the body is a dull gold color. Dominant male coloration is completely jet black. Varying stages of coloration exist from the subdominant to the dominant bloom. Two or three bright orange ocelli spot the anal fin. The anal, dorsal and



Photo by Greg Steeves

caudal fins range from translucent to jet black, varying with body coloration.

*Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" is deceptively peaceful in a community tank. It can safely be housed with docile cichlids of similar size. It will however, as a piscivore, engulf any fish it can fit into its large mouth. Catfish of the *Synodontis* genus make suitable

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tank mates. *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" is a substrate spawner employing the common haplochromine method of the female circling the male, dropping eggs, and quickly turning to pick them up. In between the females' turns, she nuzzles at the outspread anal fin presumably thinking that the ocelli are her own eggs. The male releases his milt fertilizing the eggs. Spawning occurs on the substrate with no effort going into creating a bower or nest.

Holding females are not harassed by the other members of my *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden



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duck" colony. My tanks hover between 75F and 85F generally, and I stripped the holding female 17 days post spawning. At this time the fry had completely absorbed their yolk sac and were free swimming. I found the fry to be very hardy in the twenty gallon tank they were placed in. This tank is filtered with a Dirt

Magnet® sponge filter. My first spawn of *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" yielded 23 hardy fry.

I feed my *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" colony basic commercial staple flake as their main source of nutrition. Supplementary feedings of live *Gambusia* and frozen adult brine shrimp are heartily taken as well. The fry are being raised on a diet of crushed flake and powdered Cyclop-eeze®. *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" fry grow quickly reaching 2cm in 60 days.

Tank décor consists of native rocks fashioned into caves sitting on a larger grain sized sand substrate. I feel that *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" males do not stake out much of a territory and the rockwork is for the benefit of the other tank inhabitants (*Synodontis flavitaeniatus* and *Haplochromis* sp. "red back scraper"). It's been my experience when dealing with piscivores from the region, specifically *Pyxichromis orthostoma*, a gravel substrate can cause problems with females holding fry. Females will sometimes pick up a small rock or two with her eggs and in the course of tumbling destroys the embryos, hence the choice of a finer substrate. My colony of ten *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck", containing three males and seven females, are housed in a 55 gallon tank. The tank is filtered by a Hagen® 300 power filter and a small "hang on the back" canister filter.

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*Harpagochromis* sp. "Pallisa black slick" is not a fish for your community setup of tetras. Dominant males are attractive, but for the most part they are not superficially colorful fish. If however, you are interested in trying a species seldom seen in the hobby, or perhaps concerned with species survival and propagating threatened cichlids, you may discover that dedicating a tank to rearing *Harpagochromis* sp. "Pallisa black slick" most rewarding.

### Additional notes:

I was fortunate to obtain my group of *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" from James Gib-



Photos by Greg Steeves

bons, a fellow hobbyist who has been working with the species for some time. When I first observed my group of *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" reaching adulthood, I was reminded of another species I had seen but never kept, *Harpagochromis* sp. "Pallisa black slick". I believe it probable that *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" and *Harpagochromis* sp. "Pallisa black slick" to be one in the same.

A friend in Europe informed me of a discussion which took place among German hobbyist and concerned the topic of whether *Harpagochromis* sp. "Pallisa black slick" and *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" were the same fish or not. It was determined that the two were indeed different species as the female "black slick" is a silver fish, and the "golden duck" wore more a golden color. It was also noted that the "golden duck" is found in shallow water close to shore while the "black slick" is an open water species found in deeper strata.

Admittedly, I have not been able to ascertain whether *Harpagochromis* sp. "Pallisa black slick" and *Harpagochromis* sp. "golden duck" are distinct species, or if the female difference in coloration noted by German aquarists, is intra-species color differentiation. I have not been able to locate reference (with certainty) to the niche they occupy within the Kyoga drainage. Wild caught specimens are stored at Harvard University. Perhaps one day someone can investigate the samplings in detail and perhaps arrive at a definitive answer.

### References:

- Greenwood, P.H. 1981. "The Haplochromine Fishes of the East African Lakes". p 726-730.
- Seehausen, Ole. 1996. "Lake Victoria Rock Cichlids". p 207-214.
- <http://www.petermaas.nl/> ■ Greg Steeves