

Species Profile: *Protomelas taeniolatus*

Protomelas taeniolatus or Red Empress is a maternal mouth brooder common through out Lake Malawi. It is found in sediment free rocky shoreline no deeper than 10 meters (30 feet). The tropical climate keeps the water surface temperature between 23 to 28 degrees Celsius with a pH of 7.8 to 8.5. I obtained three (1m/2f) *P. taeniolatus* from my nephew, who purchased them from a small fish store in San Antonio called Malawi Cove.

When I received these fish the male was 4 inches and 3 inches for the females. Males can achieve a size of 19 cm (7 1/2 inches) and have a blue face, reddish body with a distinctive dorsal fin that has a white horizontal line on top with a highlight of black just below it that fades into a bright red.

Females achieve a size of 15 cm (5 1/2 inches) and have a black horizontal line running from gills to tail, centered in the middle of a white body. Another black stripe is located between middle and the top of the body running parallel with middle stripe. Another black line in the form of dashes is along top of body underneath dorsal.

The fish bred in a 55 gallon tank which con-

tained small gravel and contained only rock work and no plants. It was also occupied by other breeders which were "Lemon Jakes" and Leleupi. The tank was filtered by an Emperor 400 Bio-Wheel and had a water temp 80 degrees Fahrenheit. The pH is unknown for this tank. I performed weekly water changes equal to 20% of the tank volume. I used fluorescent lighting for duration of 15 1/2 hours each day.

The fish are feed a combination of HBH "Seafood Lovers" and "Veggie Lovers" flakes. No special breeding diets were attempted.

When spawning, the blue color of the male's face intensifies as so does the red fins. Females do not show much change in coloration. My male

clears out an area in the substrate and begins a beautiful "Peacock" display of his fins. Once the enticed female is near, she follows the male in a very close circle. During the circling she will drop eggs, retrieve and then fertilize them in her mouth by nipping at the male's anal fin, collecting the sperm. If interrupted, she will leave and then be enticed back for same sequences over and over until all eggs



Photo by Spencer Jack

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are fertilized. She then retreats back to the harem for safety.

The pair laid approximately 30 eggs. After spawning, the female retreated to the harem of females and remained in tank for 16 days. I moved the female then to a divided 10 gallon fry tank. Once moved the female continued to hold for a total 21 days. Even after release she remained very attentive and continued to care for fry till she was placed back in breeding tank. No further care on my part. Approximately 30 eggs representing 100% of the total hatch were viable and hatched after 21 days. The free swimming fry appeared to resemble females and were a little over 1/8 of an inch. The female will hold onto the fry until they are ready to eat for themselves or get to large to hold. Normally 21 days the fry are ready to go, so if you're impatient, you can safely strip her at this time. Or you can wait, she will eventually release them.

The fry didn't require any special care on my part. I left them in the 10 gallon tank after moving the female to breeder tank. The tank used a sponge filter for filtration. Once the female released the fry, she would allow them back in to prevent any harm. She would do this until fry were too large or she was relocated. I started the fry off on Cyclop-Eeze & fine crushed flakes. After nine days I started feeding larger size crushed flake food. The fry grew fairly quick.

When breeding the males dance is very impressive. He is very persistent even when the female is scared off by others. After spawning the male will continue to chase female. As I have said before, the female is a very attentive to the care of her fry. I guess I have enjoyed these fish immensely because it has been so easy. The male retains his color and spawns frequently. And the female is excellent in caring for fry. I definitely would recommend these fish because of their coloration, ease of breeding and successful fry rate. I am not sure if the location they are from, Namalenje Island has much influence on the fact that the males stay rather small at 5 inches and the ratio of males to females in fry batches so far as been 2 to 1 or as high as 3 to 1. Also when the males were maturing into their colors, the fish were very bright and had very distinctive lines. This fact lead me to investigate their origin or if they were "Super Reds". The owner of Malawi Cove advised they were from Namalenje Island.

No matter what your tank's décor, a small area should be left open, not only for breeding but also for "sand sifting". Tank size should not be smaller than a 55 gallon. If located in a community tank, you may get by with just 1 or 2 females. If you're breeding for fry, I suggest the more females the better,. I have 8f to 1m ratio. The above program has worked well for 3 years and I am not going to alter any procedures at this time. ■ *Jim Beck*