

THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

Beware the Green Sunfish

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Beware the green sunfish. Like all members of the *Lepomis* sunfish clan, green sunfish (*L. cyanellus*) are very territorial. Aggression reaches its peak at spawning season, among nesting males. Greenies and other *Lepomis* sunnies are also tough on each other under nonspawning conditions. The more aggressive members of the group—both males and females—establish a dominance hierarchy over their less aggressive tankmates. Arguably, though, greenies are the toughest of an already tough group. If you're planning to keep them, you should afford them the same care and respect as you would any large cichlid.

The green sunfish is often one of the first sunfishes beginners encounter. State fish and game departments have stocked these fish far outside their original range. Like other *Lepomis* species, male greenies stake out a nesting territory in the spring, which they defend fiercely against all comers. It's during this time that male *Lepomis* reach their peak colors. As their name implies, green sunfish are an olivaceous color. Adults have a dark spot at the rear edge of the dorsal and anal fins. These fish also have yellow or orange edges on the dorsal, anal and tail fins. Males and females have iridescent green wavy lines on the gill covers, with males usually having brighter lines than females.

My first experience with *Lepomis* ferocity was in 1995. I brought back three full-grown pumpkinseeds (*L. gibbosus*) from the Catskills. The fish were gorgeous—fins etched in cornflower blue, yellow-orange undersides—and each had the characteristic blood-red dot on the edge of the gill flap. I hoped to see them spawn, so I put them in a 65-gallon tank I had bought just for that purpose. Like all male *Lepomis*, my male pumpkinseed began shimmying like a mollie, creating a big wake with his caudal fin. With this vigorous motion he soon dug a small pit in the gravel. But instead of spawning, he battered the females, which soon died from their wounds.

It's possible to spawn *Lepomis* indoors, but you need to take precautions. Green sunfish can reach a foot in length. If you can't set up a 100-gallon tank for the big ones, you can set your sights a little lower. Peter Rollo reported spawning fairly

small green sunfish in *American Currents*. The fish were too small to inflict major damage on each other. In an overcrowded pond, *Lepomis* may reach only 3-4", a manageable size for hobbyists who wish to spawn them indoors.

I later bred longear sunfish (*L. megalotis*) in my 65-gallon tank. These fish usually only grow to about 4-5". I kept six in the tank and fed them lots of soaked cichlid pellets. I believe that *Lepomis* females need to eat a lot before their eggs start to develop. Since several 4-5" fish produce a lot of waste when they're fed heavily, I did 50 percent water changes twice a week and a 75 percent water change on the weekend.

Eventually, the male let the egg-bound female enter the spawning site. The two began circling the nest, their ventral openings almost pressed together, releasing eggs and sperm. Right after spawning, the female left the nest. For their safety, I removed the female and the other fish from the tank. The eggs hatched in a few days and in about a week the fry had absorbed their yolk sacs and were feeding on brine shrimp.

Many people believe that sunnies need a few weeks of cold temperatures before they spawn. If you don't have a garden pond, you might try keeping a few outside in a large picnic cooler for a few weeks. Below 40°F, the fish will only need a small bite of food about once a month. When you bring them indoors, it may also help to bring up the temperature from the low 60s to the high 70s over a two-week period. Similarly increasing the photoperiod from eight hours of light to about 12 hours may also help to put them in the spawning mood.

Now, the reason you should beware the green sunfish:

Once, I brought a quarter-sized green sunfish home and put him in my minnow tank. He thrived on the cichlid pellets and grew to about three inches in about a month. I noticed I didn't have as many redblip shiners as I had a few days before. Had they jumped out of the tank?

The green sunfish yawned, revealing a disproportionately larger mouth than all of the other sunnies I had kept. That gaping maw, apparently, was more than capable of inhaling minnows that were nearly the fish's size.

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