

BLENNIES: EASY-TO-KEEP MARINE FISHES

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Many an aquarist has been impressed by the brilliant colors and odd shapes of tropical marine fishes. The cost of buying these fishes and difficulties in keeping many of them also impress aquarists. Is it possible, perhaps, to collect your own saltwater fishes, even if you live far from the fabled coral reefs? Sure. Why not start with a blenny?

Fishes of the blenny family (Blenniidae) are mostly bottom-dwellers. They are distinguished by a fleshy structure (the cirrus) above the eye, long dorsal fin, short, small pelvic fins, and blunt head. Many are colored with blotches or spots, and blend in well with their background. Blennies are common in shallow water, where they can be found in tide pools, on jetties, among oyster shells, and in shells of barnacles. They are very hardy, and live in a wide range of temperatures and salinities.

Blennies become more diverse in the southern, warmer parts of the United States. On the West Coast, the Bay Blenny (Hypsoblennius gentilis) ranges north to Monterey Bay, California. This species and the Rockpool Blenny (H. gilberti) are abundant in southern California. The Feather Blenny (H. hentzi) can be found from New Jersey to Florida and in the Gulf of Mexico. The Redlip Blenny (Ophioblennius atlanticus) ranges from North Carolina southward and into the Gulf of Mexico. Other species occur off Florida, on offshore reefs and oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, and along the coast of Mexico.

Blennies are easy to catch with a dip net, though some even have been taken on hook and line. They acclimate quickly to an aquarium. It is wise, however, to allow artificial sea water to circulate and mix for at least 48 hours before introducing blennies or any other fishes to the aquarium. The fish prefer to hide among overhanging rocks or under shells in the aquarium. They soon learn to take food--large flakes of canned food; pieces of fish, clam, or squid; brine shrimp (live, frozen, or preserved); shrimp; or smaller fishes. Many will learn to swim to the surface to grab flakes. These easy keepers will last a couple of years with a minimum of care.

Blennies can be aggressive toward smaller fishes, taking nips out of their fins. Be careful about putting small crabs, shrimp, or other such animals in the tank; blennies will stalk and bully them. Blennies, however, make interesting additions to a tank due to their alert appearance and habit of perching atop shells, rocks, or other objects, or diving in and out of holes. Blennies can learn to watch you!

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Blennies lay eggs in nests guarded by the male. Hatching takes place in 5-18 days, resulting in larvae that drift in the open water. An aquarist might succeed in raising blennies if the difficulties in keeping the larvae could be overcome.

If you're interested in starting your first tank with native marine fish or setting up an educational display, why not try a blenny? Easy to catch and keep, these entertaining fish can be good pets.