

Elassoma: Great Fish for Small Quarters

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I started keeping aquarium fish relatively late in life. Unlike a lot of aquarists, it wasn't until college that I set up an aquarium. A friend gave me an old copy of Innes' *Exotic Aquarium Fishes* and, like everyone else who is just getting started, I wanted to try a little of everything, from *Corydoras* species to dwarf cichlids.

One day, I came upon a photo of *Elassoma evergladei*. I immediately decided that I had to have one. After pestering all of the local pet shops and always getting told they didn't have any, I decided to try to find some on my own. Eventually, and with the help of others, I found some in my local waters and pygmy sunfishes have remained favorites ever since.

The pygmy sunfishes of the genus *Elassoma* are some of the more interesting and beautiful of all North American native fishes. Their diminutive size makes them great candidates for even the smallest quarters, and their stunning color and ease of breeding make them highly sought after.

There are six named species of pygmy sunfish, with possibly one or two more to come. These include *Elassoma alabamiae* (Alabama pygmy sunfish), *E. boehlkei* (Carolina pygmy sunfish), *E. evergladei* (Everglades pygmy sunfish), *E. okatie* (bluebarred pygmy sunfish), *E. okefenokee* (Okefenokee pygmy sunfish), and *E. zonatum* (banded pygmy sunfish). Of these, *E. boehlkei*, *E. okatie* and *E. alabamiae* are either state-protected or listed as species of concern.

Pygmy sunfish are found in stagnant or slowly flowing tannin-stained water. They're almost always found in or near dense submerged vegetation. This type of habitat—roadside ditches and borrow ponds—is susceptible to run-off pollution since there is little turnover of available water. Other fish that are normally found with them include your standard fare of “swampy” fish, such as topminnows, mudminnows, smaller sunfishes, darters, and pirate perch, among others.

All *Elassoma* species have the same captive care requirements. Fortunately, *Elassoma* habitat is easy to replicate in the home aquarium. They do best in smaller tanks of 10 gallons or less—great for desktop or countertop aquariums. Substrate can be whatever you like. Sand works well, but leaves or gravel, or even just a bare-bottom, work fine also. Java moss and hornwort are ideal plants for *Elassoma*, are easy to grow, and require no special attention.

Breeding *Elassoma* is quite simple if the tank is set up properly and the fish are well fed. Their tanks should be heavily planted, enough so that the fish do not have a lot of room to swim around and can barely see each other. This helps prevent territorial disputes from arising. A sponge or box filter works well in these tanks, and an aged sponge filter will provide first foods for the new fry.

Feeding the adults, however, it is a bit more labor intensive. *Elassoma* species will only take live foods at first. Later, they may learn to accept frozen bloodworms, daphnia or brine shrimp. Common live foods that they seem to relish include blackworms, mosquito larvae, whiteworms, grindal worms, and daphnia. Initially, the fry will be too small for baby brine shrimp and should be fed infusoria for the first couple of days. The fry will also pick at the sponge filter, so it's not a bad idea to leave it a little dirty while they are still small. After they get a little larger, they will then eagerly take microworms, vinegar eels and baby brine shrimp. They can be raised with the parents as long as the parents are well fed.

I hope this account has raised some interest in these unique fishes. They were the first native fishes I maintained and spawned, and to this day remain my favorite. If you have a small empty tank lying around, give them a try. They may become your favorite as well. ←