

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER MUDMINNOW? The European Dogfish
(*Umbra krameri*)

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Mudminnows are a cult item. Once the aquarist has kept the Eastern Mudminnow and the Central Mudminnow, he lusts for the Olympic--hard to find, requiring a state permit--or even the Alaska Blackfish, *Dallia pectoralis*. There's another mudminnow, of course, found in Central & Eastern Europe. NANFA mudminnow fanatics have been trying desperately to obtain it. What's it like? Member Vernon Hunt once kept it.

The European Dogfish is a native of Central Europe and is found in small numbers in the peat bogs and reed bogs of the Middle and Lower Danube systems and lower Dneister. It is called the Ribahal in Hungary, the country mostly associated with this species.

It appears that the Dogfish prefers soft, acid water. As a result, it may be advisable that aquarists in hardwater areas make the necessary adjustments in their aquarium water in order to breed the species successfully. On the other hand, American aquarists have managed to breed the Eastern Mudminnow (*Umbra pygmaea*) of the U.S. Atlantic Coastal Plain in hard, alkaline water, even though it, like its European cousin, originates in soft, acid, peaty water. Moreover, in the area of Portsmouth, England, where the hard, chalky water approaches 350 ppm, I have on two separate occasions successfully induced spawning; however, on neither occasion did any fry hatch.

The Dogfish is ready to spawn in early spring. The male--never greater than 3½" long) gyrates its body in "S" movements in front of the female, a much larger fish (5½-6" long fully grown). The female follows the male's lead, and after a while, the pair disappear into a funnelled thicket of water plants (prepared by the female) for spawning. After the spawning has taken place, the male is driven out and the female takes sole responsibility of guarding the nest, maintaining it, and looking after the youngsters when they hatch. Woe betide any fish that ventures too near. A female Dogfish can do considerable damage; indeed, the ferocity with which the Dogfish strikes is not limited to the breeding season. I have kept them with sunfishes, and in the course of arguments over food, there has been real trouble. They coil and strike almost as snakes do. If a sunfish was unlucky enough to receive the full force of the impact, an ugly wound would result. I lost two Rock Bass that way.

there is little to choose between the sexes, though there is supposed to be a pronounced reddish line in the area where the lateral line would normally be; in this species no lateral line exists. This color characteristic, however, has never been apparent in any of my charges.

The Dogfish, as opposed to some beliefs, is tremendously hardy. It tolerates extremes in temperatures and is quite capable of surviving in conditions which would be fatal to most other species. I had three large females in a tank that was 12"x8"x8". During my absence from home for a week, one of them, for no apparent reason, died. When I at long last discovered the bereavement, the smell emanating from the aquarium was enough to turn my stomach. Fearing the worst, I picked up a net to fish out the bodies. It turned out to be quite difficult to catch the two remaining fishes; they were as lively as crickets. The secret to their survival was the species' possession of an accessory air-breathing system in their bodies. It is therefore totally unnecessary to keep this species under artificial aeration or filtration. This fish seems to revel in dirty conditions. Provided the Dogfish is housed in a fairly well planted tank with a limited amount of sunlight, there should be no problems at all. One great advantage the Dogfish has is resistance to disease. On the other hand, it may generally have a short life span, but I would not be surprised by five years or a little more.

On the subject of feeding, I feel it necessary to warn any would-be Dogfish enthusiast that the diet is a completely carnivorous one. The bigger the live moresel, it seems, the better the Dogfish likes it--alive of course. It readily eats earthworms and any aquatic insects and worms. The station in the aquarium does not matter--top, midwater, or bottom, though it prefers the bottom.

The trouble with the Dogfish as a feeder in the aquarium is that it tends to "study" its prey before it attacks. As a consequence, a Pumpkinseed Sunfish or other aggressive feeder dives in and snatches the food from under the Dogfish's nose. The Dogfish's reaction to such a liberty is often quick and the offending sunfish receives a bite. A good alternative diet is the blow fly, which is readily taken at the surface.

The Dogfish gets its name from the alternate paddling movements of its pectoral and pelvic fins when it is stationary in mid-water, reminiscent of a dog paddling.

Thus concludes my observations of the European Dogfish, European Mudminnow, Hundfish, or Ribahal, whichever way one wishes to name it. It is a fish best kept by itself, as you no doubt will have observed.