

THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

A Fragile Jewel, the Blackbanded Sunfish

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Imagine a fish that looks like a cross between an angelfish and a tiger barb, but with a gentler nature than either. This fish really does exist, and can be found, among other places, in New Jersey.

The blackbanded sunfish (*Enneacanthus chaetodon*), has a compact body with a striking array of black bands on a white background, and ventral fins etched with orange.

In their haste to possess this fragile jewel, however, many beginners often set themselves up for failure and end up killing these delicate creatures. But anyone who has successfully kept and bred discus probably also will succeed with these charming little fish.

To survive, blackbandeds need soft, acid water with no discernible hardness. They refuse flakes, pellets, and other prepared foods until they starve to death. These demure little sunfish also are susceptible to ammonia waste and will sicken in the absence of good filtration and regular water changes. Unless you can consistently meet these conditions, you are predestined to fail with these marvelous animals.

The blackbanded sunfish I've kept have done best in very soft water with a pH no higher than 6.5. My friend Pierre Gagne keeps them in brightly lit tanks, injected with CO₂ and planted with *Valisneria spiralis*. With CO₂ and intense lights, the *Valisneria* grow like weeds, in the process soaking up the fish's nitrogen wastes and absorbing calcium carbonate from the water.

At first, wild-caught blackbandeds will eat only blackworms and other moving live foods. However, if you first pour frozen offerings through the filter stream to simulate movement, blackbandeds will greedily accept frozen brine shrimp, bloodworms, glassworms, and finely chopped cooked shrimp. Pierre keeps his blackbandeds with guppies. With a continuous supply of newborn guppies, the blackbandeds remain well-fed.

If you don't have naturally soft, acid water coming from your tap, it will probably be best to either buy a distillation

apparatus or begin collecting rainwater. I've had no luck with ion exchange pillows. They merely exchange calcium carbonate and other dissolved solids for sodium chloride, which blackbandeds can't tolerate either.

Blackbandeds breed like other sunfish. The male stakes out a nest site among plants or other cover. Females lay their eggs in the site, and then the males will drive them off. Males guard their eggs until hatching, and perhaps for a week after, until the fry are free swimming. After absorbing their yolk sacs, the fry can take newly hatched brine shrimp.

Some hobbyists maintain that, before they will spawn, blackbandeds need to be kept at low temperatures for two or three months, to simulate winter. I've kept three or four in a picnic cooler in my back yard over the winter months. At about 40-50°F, blackbandeds don't need to eat much; I've found that 4-5 blackworms monthly per fish will keep them healthy.

Many states do not allow blackbanded sunfish to be collected. Before you collect them—or any other species—check the regulations with local natural resource officials.

Blackbanded sunfish occur in scattered pockets along the East Coast, from the New Jersey Pinelands southward. Although I've collected them in the past under the terms of a scientific collection permit, I no longer remove this species from the wild. Populations often are fragmented, and taking just a few can negatively affect a whole population.

Larger aquarium stores sometimes carry blackbanded sunfish, often bred from captive stock overseas. They are sometimes available from private breeders on the Internet.

Before starting off with blackbandeds, it may be a good idea to try your hand with a similar species. Both the banded sunfish (*Enneacanthus obesus*) and the bluespotted sunfish (*E. gloriosus*) are slightly more hardy and more numerous within their ranges. With striking green or gold spots, both species are beautiful in their own right and allow you to try your hand with a fairly demanding fish without first risking failure with the rarer and more delicate blackbandeds. 