

## THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

## The Gawky but Graceful "Airplane Fish"

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ore than 10 years later, I still remember the first longnose dace I ever caught. I was collecting alone, in a small feeder stream. I lifted a rock from the streambed and took a swipe beneath it with my hand net.

A brownish cylindrical fish writhed in the net. At first glance, I thought it was a fantail darter, which were common in the stream. After a closer look, I saw that it was different from any darter I'd ever seen. For starters, it had a forked tail. Its snout, long and fleshy, tapered to a rounded point. Its eyes, too, seemed just a tad too big for its head.

Taken together, the eyes and the rounded snout gave it a gawky, cartoonish appearance, like Opus the penguin or Big Bird from Sesame Street. In the aquarium, however, my newly acquired fish was anything but gawky.

The fish didn't try to hide, but headed straight into the filter outflow, its long fins outstretched, barely moving, and gliding gracefully into the onrushing water. It reminded me of an airplane gliding, and I started calling it the airplane fish.

The longnose dace (*Rhinichthys cataractae*) is the most widely distributed of all the North American minnows, with naturally occurring populations from the east coast to the west coast, from the Arctic Circle to northern México.

Like many darters, longnose dace are superbly adapted for life in the riffles of a fast-flowing stream. Its torpedo-shaped body and downward pointing snout allow it to hug the bottom, keeping it from being swept away by the fast current.

In fast current, the longnose dace's swimbladder is small, almost rudimentary. Under such conditions, a well-developed swim bladder would be a detriment, and the fish would be carried away by the current. However, populations of longnose dace from a less turbulent environment—such as those living in lakes—have a larger swim bladder to provide them with the necessary buoyancy.

In the aquarium, longnose dace are peaceful, moderately active, and take almost all types of frozen, live, and prepared foods. The longnose dace in my tanks thrived on soaked cichlid pellets.

In the wild, longnose dace hold against the current by hiding under rocks and other cover. Because they aren't out in the open, collecting them can be a challenge. If you're by yourself, you can collect them by propping a seine open just below a riffle. Weigh the bottom down with a few small stones to keep fish from getting under it. Kick and shuffle toward the seine. With any luck, you'll dislodge a few dace and they'll drift down into the net.

In captivity, longnose dace have comparatively few requirements other than lots of cool, clean water. A large outside box filter or even a powerhead can provide the necessary current. A few strategically placed rocks, placed just downstream of the current, will provide them with a convenient resting place.

Longnose dace are gravel spawners, scattering their eggs on the bottom before swimming away. In the wild, males sometimes develop striking colors during spawning season, getting a yellow or reddish cast to their fins, red snouts and lips, and a mid-lateral stripe of rust-orange or orange-brown. Unfortunately, however, these colors usually fade after the fish is introduced to the aquarium.

I've never been fortunate enough to have this fish spawn in my aquarium, but available accounts recommend a cooling period to simulate winter conditions. Short day lengths of eight hours or so may also help. Over a period of two to three weeks, feed the fish heavily, and do frequent water changes. Gradually increase the temperature and the day length until the fish begin to spawn.

Although it may not be the most attractive fish, the longnose dace is easy to care for, and its quirky, oddball grace makes it a nice addition to a show aquarium. 