

FOR THE LOVE OF GAR!

by Tom Fulton, Newark, Ohio

As a collector of native fishes for many years, I have always been fascinated by the gars. These long, torpedo-shaped fish are covered with thick, diamond-shaped (ganoid) scales, and the jaws are elongated into a beak. There are many sharp teeth, and, as the appearance would suggest, these fish are predominantly fish-eaters. Coloration is greenish above and light underneath. Dark spots and blotches and the length and width of the snout vary by species. They are a primitive fish dating back to the Cretaceous, and can be found from southern Canada to Central America in large, fast rivers and quiet, weedy lagoons. Although usually freshwater fish, gar can be found in brackish and salt water. There are five kinds of gar found in the United States: the Long-nosed (Lepisosteus osseus), Short-nosed (L. platostomus), Spotted (L. oculatus), Florida (L. platyrhynchus), and Alligator (L. spatula). They range from 2½' to over 9' in length. They can top 250 lbs.

Spawning takes place in the spring (maybe later, depending on the climate and region) at the edge of riffles over vegetation. The eggs are scattered randomly and adhere to plants. Floating vegetation seems to be important to fry and very small young, as they appear to be absent from areas of open water. There is an adhesive pad on the tip of the snout of young gar. This is used to adhere to vegetation off the bottom. Very small gar eat a variety of invertebrates, and by the time they are a couple of inches long, their diet is mainly fish. Growth is very rapid. It is said that gar grow as much as six times faster than other North American fish. Females have been known to live to be 20 years or more, whereas males seldom live past 11 years.

Large schools of gar can often be seen basking at the surface of the water. They have the ability to use atmospheric oxygen, and periodically replace or freshen the air in the swim bladder.

Gar eggs are reported to be poisonous to most animals, even causing death in small ones. Fish, however, seem to eat them with no ill effects.

Gars are quite tolerant to varying water conditions, and are hardy, interesting fish. They eat a great deal, so anyone interested in keeping them should be prepared to house them in as large a tank as possible. In the wild, gar feed on minnows, frogs, crayfish, and occasionally small rodents. Usually they only eat live foods, but often eat carrion. They can be fed goldfish or minnows, but are easily conditioned (we know they're trained, don't we?) to eat smelt, beefheart, or other substitutes.

Many **people** who don't usually pay much attention to fish tanks have become interested in the hobby after spending an evening watching my gar tank. The gar are always hungry, and when we walk into the room and sit down, they will watch us like spoiled puppy dogs waiting to be fed. They hang in the water like blimps, moving only their fins and tail ever so slightly. It's neat how they sink to the bottom or rise to gulp air without any noticeable effort.

My tank is made of fiberglass with a glass front, and measures 48"x24"x24". The filter is a homemade undergravel unit made from plastic "egg crate" light grid. There's one large-diameter lift-tube powered by an Aqualogy 600 GPH power head. I vacuum the gravel and change 30% of the water about every week or ten days. I use Novaqua to condition the new water. I have kept various kinds of fish in this manner for years and have never had any problems. Even when the gar jump out onto the floor (they are great jumpers, so be sure and keep your tank covered), I found no reason to medicate them. Actually, no matter what kind of fish you keep, the tank should always be covered. I've had gars find holes no larger than 2"x2" around the edge of the cover and end up as **fuzzballs on the floor!**

References

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